

GEORGIA CENTER
FOR NONPROFITS

GEORGIA NONPROFITS: Spreading the News

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GEORGIA CENTER
for NONPROFITS

In the Center of the Industry

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I. Introduction

Mother Theresa once said, “Facing the press is more difficult than bathing a leper.” Indeed, the power of the media can be intimidating, and many organizations shy away from the press because they are unsure how to attract the coverage they want, or how to deal with the attention that they don’t want. But news coverage is an invaluable tool for nonprofits — it can help raise awareness of an issue, build trust in an organization, and attract volunteers and donors. Further, research shows that journalists do find much of the work of the nonprofit sector to be newsworthy.¹ In other words, the news media present nonprofits with a critical opportunity. This study re-affirms that opportunity and provides Georgia nonprofits with specific information about how to increase news coverage of their efforts.

Atlanta-area editors for print, radio and television were surveyed to determine what issues and angles specific to nonprofits they believe have the most news value. They were also asked how nonprofit organizations could improve their media outreach. Over 60 news editors participated in the study. Their responses provide a useful roadmap for bridging the gap between Georgia nonprofits seeking to inform and engage the public and local news organizations that want and need compelling stories to tell every day.

Motivation

A 2001 survey commissioned by The Community Foundation for Greater Atlanta about charitable giving in the metropolitan area demonstrated that the public doesn’t fully understand the work of nonprofits. Only 6 percent of respondents identified nonprofits as the organizations responsible for providing public goods and services. Another 30 percent attributed this responsibility to “other organizations,” which often turned out to be nonprofit organizations. In addition, the poll revealed that the public doesn’t get very much information about the sector from the mass media. Only 15 percent of respondents said that newspapers and magazines served as important sources of information on nonprofits, and only 14 percent cited television and radio as important. At the same time, respondents claimed that media coverage was one of the most effective vehicles for soliciting donations. Over half said they would respond positively to a story on TV or in the newspaper with an appeal to give.²

Based on these findings, the report recommended the development of a sector communication plan to increase the visibility of Georgia’s nonprofits. This study was designed to contribute to such a plan by helping nonprofits better utilize the news media, or “free media,” as news coverage has been called. In order to do that, nonprofit professionals need to have a practical understanding of how decisions are made in newsrooms.

There has been a good deal of research directed at ascertaining what types of stories make the news, but until recently there has been very little about the news value editors assign to stories about the nonprofit sector.³ In 1997, Tom Martens, a nonprofit consultant and former newspaper editor, began an extensive research project, sponsored by The Aspen Institute, about how California newspapers cover nonprofit organizations. The study included a content

analysis of nonprofit newspaper stories, a survey of California newspaper editors, and a survey of nonprofit executives to assess their media relations efforts.

Martens found that the most prevalent communications need for nonprofits was getting more stories and public service announcements placed in the press. But the study also revealed that most organizations were not very well equipped to reach out to the media. More than half had no employees assigned to media relations, and the majority of nonprofit staffs had not participated in any media training in the previous two years.⁴ A more recent survey of 50 international humanitarian aid organizations found a similar lack of resources for media relations.⁵

Given that most nonprofits have very limited capacity for media cultivation, it is essential that they use their resources efficiently. Organizations can better determine when to devote time and money to seeking news coverage by understanding what journalists consider newsworthy about their work. The purpose of this study is to provide Georgia nonprofits with specific information to use in developing successful strategies for attracting local news coverage.

The survey of news editors is based on Martens's work in California. While that study focused exclusively on newspaper coverage, this investigation encompasses print, radio and television news organizations in the Atlanta-metropolitan area. Gathering information about broadcast media is important because research shows that, while 41 percent of Americans read a newspaper regularly, 57 percent watch their local newscast and over 40 percent listen to radio news.⁵ The study was limited to local news organizations for two reasons: One, most Georgia nonprofits work on local issues; and two, there is a media food chain — national media often get story ideas from local media and consider previous coverage of an organization a sign of legitimacy.

Challenges and Opportunities

In his 1999 report, “Nonprofits and the Press: Strategies for Making News in California,” Martens identifies several issues nonprofits face in generating more newspaper coverage. He describes how both the organizational structure of newsrooms and the nature of what journalists consider “news” pose challenges for nonprofits. For example, most newsrooms traditionally have some kind of “beat” structure that assigns individual reporters to different areas, such as government entities, geographic areas, or broad subjects like business or education. The nonprofit sector, in all its variety, doesn't fit into a traditional journalistic beat. In addition, journalists are in the habit of focusing their coverage on government and the for-profit sector and have been slow to recognize the increasing role nonprofits play in our society and our economy. But, perhaps more basically, as Martens notes, a lot of news coverage tends to be event-oriented rather than issue-oriented, and many reporters are not trained to cover the nuanced social issues that constitute the work of nonprofits. Plus, Martens points out, nonprofits are themselves concerned about the negative publicity that often results from journalists playing their “watchdog” role.⁶

These issues remain relevant today, but there are also trends in the news business that present opportunities for nonprofits to raise their profile in the media. In particular, the proliferation of cable and satellite channels and the rise of the Internet over the last 10 years have created more distribution outlets for news and information than ever before. More distribution has meant a broader definition of “news” and more diverse content. “According to State of the News Media 2004,” a comprehensive study of American journalism across all media, “Network news, news magazines, and newspaper front pages carry a wider range of topics.”⁷ Another result is that local news organizations have been trying to find their “niche” in an increasingly competitive environment, and industry research indicates that their future success will partly depend on better coverage of community news and issues relevant to people’s daily lives. This is particularly true for newspapers.

For example, “Leveraging Newspaper Assets,” a 2000 study of media usage habits done by the Newspaper Association of America, found that readers ranked “local community/neighborhood news” and “news and information that help your local community deal with problems” as top areas of interest. In fact, readers ranked these issues number two and four out of 23 different subjects covered by newspapers. The report concludes, “If we contrast the interests of Americans with their satisfaction with newspaper content, we can identify those areas where newspapers fall short — areas where interest levels are greater than satisfaction levels. These are continuing areas of opportunity for newspapers and include: Local news, particularly news and information that help local communities to deal with problems.”⁸

Similarly, a 2003 public opinion survey about local television news done by the Radio and Television News Directors Foundation (RTNDF) found that local TV news directors think they’re doing a much better job of providing useful information about their communities than the public does. The report cited this finding as one of the major disconnects between local TV news organizations and their viewers. The survey also found that “two-thirds of the respondents (66.3 percent) agree that the news media have done a better job lately of reporting news in the community,”⁹ an indication that local news organizations are responding to the demand for more community coverage.

As for radio, critics contend that the unprecedented consolidation of radio ownership in recent years has diminished local news coverage and made radio content more generic. Syndicated programming has replaced locally produced programming in many cases. Yet the public looks to radio for local news. The most recent RTNDF study of the radio news audience found that 93 percent of respondents felt that “an important function of radio news is to inform people about community events,” and 78 percent said that, “radio should help identify community problems.” The report concluded, “Although the public has an appetite for local news and information on radio, the effects of industry consolidation may not always play to radio’s strength in that area. “The study suggests that there is room for more local news and information on radio, perhaps through partnerships with other news media, such as newspapers and television.”¹⁰

Nonprofits in the business of grappling with community issues and providing community services are uniquely well-positioned to help local journalists cover stories the public cares about, at the same time raising the profile of their own work. And journalists need the help. The fiercely competitive media marketplace has meant cost cutting for most news gathering organizations. As the “State of the News Media 2004” reports, “Much of the new investment in journalism today — much of the information revolution generally — is in disseminating the news, not in collecting it. Most sectors of the media are cutting back in the newsroom, both in terms of staff and in the time they have to gather and report the news. While there are exceptions, in general journalists face real pressures trying to maintain quality.”¹¹

A recent paper published by Ascribe, a national newswire that services the independent sector, says that the scarcity of newsgathering resources can be advantageous for nonprofits: “Newsrooms are under great pressure to do more with less. As a result, news organizations are more willing than ever to use reliable, balanced information presented to them in news releases.”¹² In other words, news organizations and nonprofits can develop mutually beneficial relationships, but nonprofit organizations need to reach out to the media with solid, engaging information. They shouldn’t wait for the media to come to them.

The paper also notes that by distributing news releases digitally via the Internet organizations can bypass news editors altogether in delivering their message to the public — both through their own Web pages, and through other online information services and search engines that distribute news releases verbatim. “For many Internet based new media channels the function of the news release is not to *invite* coverage, but to *provide* coverage.”¹³

The Internet will most certainly continue to change the nature of news, but traditional media outlets still reach the largest audiences, including online. About 25 percent of Americans get news online regularly, and the majority of the most-visited news sites are run by traditional media companies that use their Web pages as another distribution platform for their content.¹⁴ According to “State of the News Media 2004”, “At least for now, online journalism appears to be leading more to convergence with older media than replacement of it.”¹⁵ Local news organizations are also capitalizing on brand recognition to attract people to their sites.

The remainder of this report is dedicated to helping Georgia nonprofits improve their outreach to traditional media — local newspapers, television and radio news outlets, many of which also distribute news online. The observations and recommendations that follow are based on a survey of the editors who ultimately control what does and does not make the news.

II. Survey Methodology

A 70-question survey was sent to news editors for print, radio and television in the Atlanta metropolitan statistical area. The media list was compiled by Bacon's Information Inc. and included daily newspapers, weekly and community newspapers, and local television and radio stations with a news director or news programming. Wire services and bureaus for national news organizations, like the New York Times or ABC network news, were not included in the sample.

For daily newspapers, surveys were sent to the main and/or managing editor, and, where applicable, to the local news or city editor, the business editor, and the features/community editor. (Not all daily papers had editors for each category.) For the weekly and community papers, surveys were sent to the main editor; for radio stations, to the news director; and for television stations, to two top news editors at each organization.

Sixty-one editors from the valid sample of 130 completed the survey, making the response rate 47 percent. Overall, 43 percent of the respondents are from broadcast media and 57 percent are from print.

Table I. Breakdown of Respondents by Media Type

Type of Media	Number in Sample	Number of Respondents	Percent of Total Respondents
Radio Station News Editors	37	18	30%
TV Station News Editors	10	6	10%
Daily Newspaper Editors	38	15	25%
Weekly/Community Newspaper Editors	42	20	33%
Other*	3	2	3%

*This category includes community cable news and information outlets.

The survey was designed to explore the following research questions:

- **What nonprofit issues and angles do local television, radio and print editors consider most newsworthy? Are there distinctions between these outlets?**
- **How can Georgia nonprofits improve their media outreach individually and collectively?**

Most of the questions in the survey were taken from the news editors survey used by Tom Martens for the Nonprofit News Project in California.¹⁶ Others were edited or added by the author. The survey instrument was reviewed by journalists, academics and communications professionals and then pre-tested on one print, one radio and one television news editor before being mailed out in January of 2004. The survey implementation process was guided by Don Dillman's Tailored Design Method.¹⁷ Results were analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Science. Several editors also provided additional comments and suggestions, which are interspersed throughout the report.

Limitations of the study

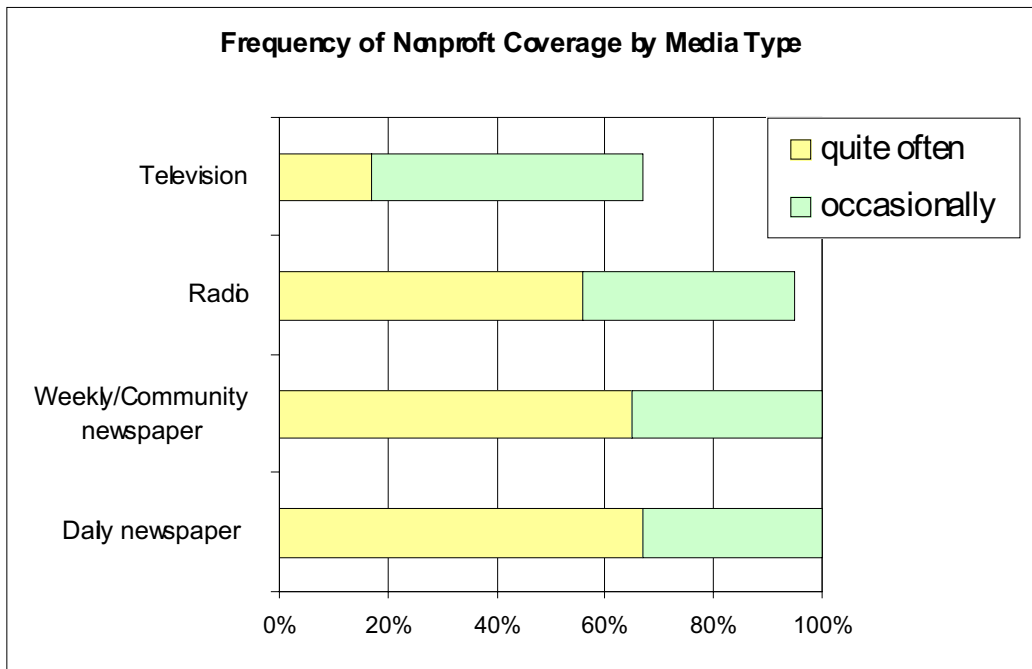
In the summary that follows, some results have been broken down by media type when there was a statistically significant contrast. These findings are exploratory because of the small number of respondents in each sub-group, particularly in the case of television news. Although 60 percent of the television news editors participated in the survey, there are far fewer television news organizations in the Atlanta metro area and in general than print and radio. In addition, community broadcasters in the "other" category are not included in the television station sub-group.

It should also be noted that the respondents to this survey represent a broad array of media outlets with different audiences and varying amounts of coverage allotted to news and public affairs, even within each media type. For example, there are community newspapers that are published monthly and others published weekly. The mission of the organization as well as the amount of coverage it gives to news and public affairs will almost certainly influence what it considers newsworthy. What constitutes "news" for a Hispanic community newspaper may be quite different than for a local business publication.

Ideally, nonprofits seeking coverage for a particular story or issue should tailor their messages to media outlets that will reach their desired audiences. Nevertheless, the data show a remarkable consensus among editors on many questions concerning nonprofit news, and there are some broad themes that emerge from this study that should prove useful for nonprofits interested in improving their media outreach.

III. Survey Findings

The majority of Atlanta area news editors in the study said they cover nonprofit news “quite often,” and a full 95 percent reported covering nonprofit stories “occasionally.” Only 5 percent said they do so “very seldom.” Television editors reported more infrequent coverage of the sector than print or radio editors



Overall, the editors found many types of nonprofit stories newsworthy, but they expressed very clear preferences about which nonprofit issues and angles have more news value than others. Their choices are, for the most part, consistent with those of California newspaper editors who participated in a similar survey in 1998. The results that follow are divided into four sections:

- How Atlanta editors view the **issues** in which many nonprofits are involved
- How they view specific nonprofit **story angles**
- What **news elements** they believe add value to a nonprofit story
- What types of **media outreach** they say would be most effective

Issues

Editors were asked to rate how interested they believe their audience or readers are in various issues. Some were broad social issues, others more community oriented. They were given a four-point scale: “very interested,” “somewhat interested,” “not very interested,” or “not at all interested.” Table II ranks the issues by the combined total of editors who said their audience/readership was either “very interested” or “somewhat interested” in the issue.

Table II. Rankings of Social Issues by Percentage (n=61)

Issue	Very/Somewhat Combined*	Very Interested	Somewhat Interested
1. Education	97%	77%	20%
2. Economic development	97%	67%	30%
3. Infrastructure & transportation	97%	66%	31%
4. Public safety	93%	61%	33%
5. Children's issues	90%	57%	33%
6. Health care	87%	57%	30%
7. Housing & community development	77%	43%	34%
8. Environment	72%	20%	53%
9. Senior citizens' issues	71%	33%	38%
10. The arts	64%	31%	33%
11. Welfare & social services	64%	16%	48%

* Because of rounding, combined percentages may be one point higher or lower than the sum of individual percentages

Atlanta editors believe their readers, viewers and listeners are most interested in news about education, economic development, infrastructure and transportation, and public safety. As a group, they said there is far less interest in the environment, issues involving senior citizens, the arts, and social services. These contrasts are most apparent in the percentages of editors who believe their viewers or readers are “very interested” in these subject areas. California newspaper editors gave very similar rankings to these issues in 1998. However, Atlanta editors generally ranked transportation and infrastructure higher than California editors, (not surprising given Atlanta’s traffic problems,) and senior citizens’ issues lower.

In terms of the community issues, both groups of editors expressed a clear preference for “people solving community problems.” The results for Atlanta editors are summarized in Table III.

Table III. Rankings of Community Issues by Percentage (n=61)

Issue	Very/Somewhat Combined	Very Interested	Somewhat Interested
1. People solving community problems	82%	38%	44%
2. Changing role of local government	69%	23%	46%
3. Balancing city and county budgets	67%	33%	34%
4. Declining sense of community	62%	23%	39%
5. Your organization's community service role	61%	25%	36%

There were some pronounced differences on the issues between media types. As a group, television editors had stronger preferences and said their viewers were “very interested” in fewer topics than other editors. (The fact that local TV news editors were more selective about subject matter makes sense, given the relatively small amount of news coverage they generate compared to newspapers and radio.) Print editors thought their readers had a strong interest in a broader array of issues, particularly the issues toward the bottom of the scale. For example, all 15 editors for daily newspapers said their readers are “very” or “somewhat” interested in “housing and community development,” while only one out of six television editors found that issue of audience interest.

Below is a breakdown by media type of issues where the data indicate significant differences. These findings are exploratory, since the number of respondents in the subgroups is not large.

Table IV. Selected Issues by Media Type (n=59)

Percentages represent editors who said their audience/readership is “very interested” or “somewhat interested” in the issue.

Issue	TV	Radio	Daily Paper	Weekly/Community Paper
Housing and community development	17%	67%	100%	85%
Environment	17%	78%	73%	80%
The arts	0%	50%	73%	85%
Declining sense of community	20%	56%	60%	85%

Story Angles

“Our audience connects best with personal stories and doesn’t respond well to the feeling of being “sold” the nonprofit.” —radio news director

To get a better idea of which nonprofit story angles editors prefer, they were asked to rate the newsworthiness of various types of nonprofit organizations and activities. For organizational types, they were asked if information about each organization was “very newsworthy,” “somewhat newsworthy,” “not very newsworthy,” or “not at all newsworthy.” Editors found private nonprofits the most newsworthy, followed by nonprofits that supplement government services. In terms of foundations, they gave the highest ranking to community foundations, followed by private grant-making foundations. The findings are summarized in Table V.

Table V. Rankings of Nonprofit Groups by Percentage (n=61)

Organization Type	Very /Somewhat Combined	Very Newsworthy	Somewhat Newsworthy
1. Private nonprofit organizations	84%	21%	62%
2. Nonprofits that supplement govt. services	75%	30%	46%
3. Grant-making community foundations	72%	18%	54%
4. Grant-making private foundations	67%	13%	54%
5. Grant-making corporate foundations	62%	12%	51%
6. Nonprofits that conduct research	61%	15%	46%
7. Associations of nonprofits	48%	10%	38%

The editors were also asked to rate their audience/readership interest in various types of nonprofit stories. Again, they were given a four-point scale: “very interested,” “somewhat interested,” “not very interested,” or “not at all interested.” Table VI shows how the editors ranked different nonprofit story angles in terms of audience interest.

Table VI. Rankings of Story Angles by Percentage (n=61)

Story Angle	Very /Somewhat Combined	Very Interested	Somewhat Interested
1. The work of nonprofits in your community	84%	36%	48%
2. Unique services provided by nonprofits	80%	33%	48%
3. Success stories of those receiving nonprofit services	74%	26%	48%
4. Grassroots efforts to change public policy	74%	25%	49%
5. Efforts by volunteers at nonprofit organizations	71%	21%	49%
6. Community leaders working with nonprofits	64%	18%	46%
7. Results of studies conducted by nonprofits	57%	12%	46%
8. Grant-making work of philanthropic foundations in your community	57%	7%	51%
9. Financial contributions to nonprofit groups	57%	3%	54%
10. Funding needs of nonprofit groups	56%	8%	48%
11. Policy changes that affect nonprofit services	43%	3%	39%
12. Ways nonprofits work with local government	41%	10%	31%
13. Collaborations between nonprofit and for-profit organizations	40%	5%	35%
14. Management changes at nonprofit organizations	21%	0%	21%

Overall, the editors showed a clear preference for stories about the activities and impact of nonprofits in the community. They felt news about nonprofit policy changes, management, finances, or collaborations with other types of organizations is of less interest to the public.

California editors showed similar preferences in ranking many of these story angles in 1998. And Atlanta editors' choices are consistent with another finding from that study. Researchers conducted a detailed content analysis of 347 nonprofit newspaper stories from six different California papers of varying sizes. They examined these articles from several perspectives. One measure they applied was whether the stories "dealt primarily with a nonprofit organization, e.g., formation, dissolution, structure, funding, etc., rather than with an issue on which the group works." They found that only 9 percent of the stories were about "organizational news"; the rest were focused on issues.¹⁸ Most of the story angles that received low rankings from Atlanta editors fit the description of "organizational news," and the ones that got high rankings describe how nonprofits work on issues.

By and large, editors for different types of media rated the story angles similarly. There were, however, a few significant differences. Only 50 percent of television editors rated "the work of

nonprofits in the community” as “somewhat interesting” or “very interesting” to their audience, as compared to 78 percent of radio editors and 94 percent of print editors. Also, both television and radio editors felt their audience is less interested in “financial contributions to nonprofit groups” than print editors did. While 71 percent of print editors believe this type of story is “somewhat interesting” or “very interesting” to their readers, only 42 percent of broadcast editors thought these stories were of interest.

News Elements

“Think local, think local, think local.”
—weekly newspaper editor

Some of the survey questions were designed to explore what news elements editors look for in nonprofit stories, regardless of the subject being covered. Dennis Corrigan, a communications researcher, developed the seven categories of news elements used for these questions. Corrigan did a content analysis of more than 900 front-page stories from two national and two regional newspapers. He found that there were certain “news value elements” common to these stories that appeared in the “lead” or beginning of the story — like conflict, human interest or a local angle — and “that these are the story aspects sought out by reporters and emphasized in news write-ups about any type of event.” In fact, Corrigan found that 98.8 percent of front-page leads focused on news elements like conflict, human interest or a local angle, and many had multiple elements. He also found that stories with the most elements got the best placement on the page.⁹

Atlanta editors were given a list of the seven news elements identified by Corrigan and asked to rate their importance in determining the newsworthiness of a nonprofit story. They were given a four-point scale: “very important,” “somewhat important,” “not very important,” or “not at all important.” Following are the news elements as they were described in the survey. Because all of these elements are, by definition, newsworthy, it is most useful to look at which elements the majority of editors found “very important” for nonprofit news.

Table VII. Rankings of News Elements by Percentage (n=61)

News Element	Very Important
1. Proximity —The story has a local angle.	77%
2. Consequence —The story involves specific effects or changes for a large segment of the population.	66%
3. Significance —The story involves a precedent, an upset, or an extensive change.	54%
4. Human Interest —The story emphasizes the unusual or sentimental, especially hardship.	51%
5. Vitality/Conflict —The story involves death, violence or confrontation.	43%
6. Timeliness —The story provides an update on a continuing story or issue.	39%
7. Prominence —The story involves well-known or authoritative people.	34%

The presence of a local angle (proximity) emerged as the most important element for a nonprofit story. More than half the editors also gave high priority to consequence, significance and human interest. Less than half thought that vitality/conflict, timeliness and prominence were “very important.” The importance of a local angle was also emphasized by a number of editors in their comments. One radio news director wrote, “Our main focus is on local news. This often covers a wide range of stories and allows for a broad scope of stories as long as they are current and local.” An editor for a community paper outside the city wrote, “Give me a local angle. Let me know how the nonprofit is helping my community — not Atlanta.” And an editor for a bilingual newspaper advised nonprofits pitching stories to “list any Latino contacts/efforts for growing Spanish-language community.”

Researchers for the California study also used Corrigan’s news value elements for their content analysis of nonprofit newspaper stories. Like Corrigan, they found that nearly all the stories featured these news elements. For nonprofit stories, proximity was by far the most common news element. Proximity was the lead element in 38 percent of the nonprofit stories, followed by human interest (18 percent) and significance (16 percent). Well-known or authoritative people (prominence) was by far the least common news element, emphasized in only 3 percent of the stories, which is consistent with the ranking this news element received from Atlanta editors. It is also interesting to note that vitality/conflict, which encompasses a lot of “negative news,” was the primary news element in only 10 percent of the California newspaper stories about nonprofits, and Atlanta editors gave it a relatively low ranking as well.²⁰

Outreach Strategies

“The best advice I could give when dealing with newspapers is to have well-written press releases. Nine out of ten poorly written releases we get in go straight to the garbage.”
 — daily/weekly newspaper editor

The editors were asked to evaluate which media outreach strategies, like press releases, news conferences or media events, would prove most effective for a nonprofit organization with limited resources. They were given four choices in rating each strategy: “very effective,” “somewhat effective,” “not very effective,” or “not at all effective.” The findings are summarized in Table VIII.

Table VIII. Rankings of Media Outreach Strategies by Percentage (n=58)

Strategy	Very /Somewhat Combined	Very Effective	Somewhat Effective
1. Generating compelling news releases	90%	45%	45%
2. Pitching appropriate story ideas by phone, fax or email	88%	43%	45%
3. Providing credible spokespeople in a timely fashion	85%	47%	38%
4. Cultivating ongoing relationships with journalists	81%	40%	41%
5. Creating an informative Web site with a “press” link for journalists	79%	45%	35%
6. Providing video or photographs to illustrate stories	58%	26%	32%
7. Organizing news conferences to announce major studies, initiatives or changes by the organization	57%	21%	36%
8. Staging unusual or sensational “media events” to publicize a program or issue	50%	9%	41%

Editors’ top picks for media strategies were compelling news releases, pitching appropriate stories to reporters by phone, fax or email, and providing reporters with credible spokespeople in a timely fashion. As a group, they felt that providing visuals to journalists, press conferences, and media events were considerably less effective ways to attract coverage. The importance of news releases and accessible spokespeople was also reflected in their comments. One newspaper editor wrote, “Don’t give up sending in releases. You never know when an editor has a slot to fill. Ninety-nine percent of the time, I grab the easiest story right in front of me.” Another suggested, “Provide reporters with the names and phone numbers of people who

benefit from the nonprofit, so the reporter can personalize the story.” And a third added, “Provide specific contact information and relevant data (from studies) in press releases so that potential interviewees can be contacted.”

The only major differences between media types had to do with the effectiveness of media events and press conferences. Broadcasters gave media events higher ratings, with 68 percent of radio and TV editors designating them “very effective” or “somewhat effective,” as compared to only 38 percent of print editors. News conferences received higher-than-average marks from radio editors — 82 percent saying they were at least “somewhat effective,” as opposed to 40 percent of television editors and 44 percent of print editors. These distinctions can be explained by the different requirements of the media. Media events give TV and radio reporters useful audio and video for their coverage; and press conferences, while of limited visual interest, provide useful “sound bites” for radio stories.

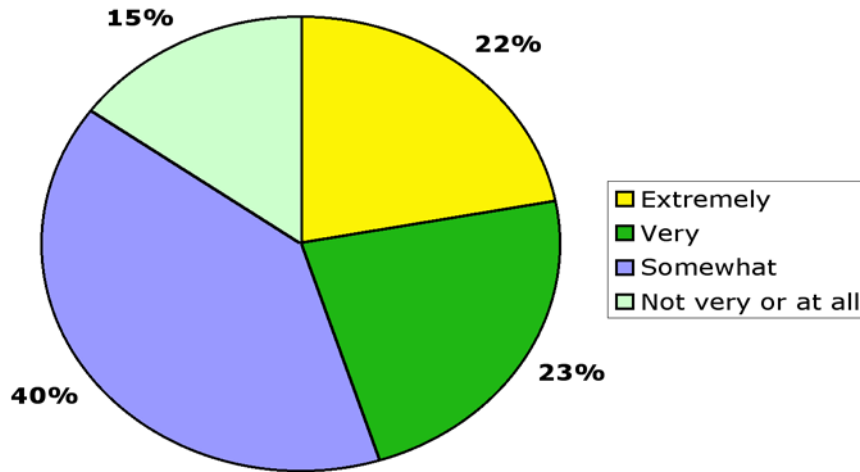
Collective Outreach

“One good thing about Atlanta is we have so many nonprofits — but the downside is we news editors are sometimes overwhelmed by information. Keep it simple. We can decide for ourselves what we can use.”— radio news director

One of the recommendations that came out of the nonprofit news study in California was the need for a nonprofit news service, “to generate and distribute its own sector-wide stories and distribute those generated by California’s nonprofit organizations.”²¹ A centralized news service would presumably be both more cost effective for nonprofits and more time efficient for journalists.

When Atlanta-area editors were asked how interested they would be in a Georgia nonprofit news service, they expressed a good deal of interest. In fact, 85 percent of respondents said they were “somewhat interested,” “very interested” or “extremely interested” in a nonprofit news service. The following chart shows the breakdown.

How interested are you in a nonprofit news service?



Editors were also asked to rate various services that a nonprofit news organization could provide: Were they “very interested,” “somewhat interested,” “not very interested,” or “not at all interested” in each service? The following table shows the services that captured the interest of more than half the editors.

Table IX. Rankings of News Services by Percentage (n=61)

Service	Very/Somewhat Combined	Very Interested	Somewhat Interested
1. Regular updated lists of news source in nonprofits in your community	84%	36%	48%
2. Regular updates on new and existing nonprofits in your community	80%	34%	46%
3. National/state news stories that could be easily localized	80%	28%	53%
4. Easy-to-use, unbiased background on nonprofit issues	79%	20%	59%
5. A list of grants that philanthropic foundations are making in your community	75%	28%	48%

6. Newsletters and other communications delivered electronically into your newsroom	72%	25%	48%
7. Locally sponsored roundtables where editors and reporters can meet nonprofit news sources	54%	10%	44%
8. Journalism school interns who could generate stories about nonprofit programs and issues	54%	10%	44%

As a group, editors expressed the strongest interest in updates on nonprofit activities, current lists of nonprofit news sources, national and state news stories that they can localize for their community, and unbiased background on nonprofit issues. In addition, the majority indicated they would like to have this information delivered to their newsrooms electronically. One editor commented, “Well-written news-style pieces with visuals delivered electronically are the best way to get my attention.”

By contrast, fewer than half of the editors were interested in the following: getting information about the ways in which other news organizations cover nonprofits or participate in community service and civic journalism projects; and attending educational seminars about how to cover nonprofit issue.

IV. Conclusions and Recommendations

The consensus among the Atlanta news editors who participated in this survey on many questions regarding nonprofit news indicates that news judgment is not random. Georgia nonprofits can predict, to a large extent, the kinds of stories that will appeal to editors and frame their outreach to news organizations accordingly.

Of course, getting news coverage is only one part of a communications plan, and should always contribute to broader strategic goals. There are some messages that can be delivered to their target audience more effectively by other means. Once an organization has decided to seek news coverage, however, it makes sense to approach journalists with stories they will find newsworthy. News organizations do a good deal of market research to determine what their readers, viewers and listeners want in terms of information. This study provides a window into their collective thinking. Below are the issues, story angles, and news elements Atlanta editors identified as most newsworthy.

Top issues:

- Education
- Economic development
- Infrastructure and transportation
- Public safety
- Children's issues
- Health care
- People solving community problems

Top story angles:

- Work of nonprofits in your community
- Unique services provided by nonprofits
- Success stories of those receiving nonprofit services
- Grassroots efforts to change public policy
- Efforts by volunteers at nonprofit organizations

Top news elements:

- Proximity—The story has a local angle.
- Consequence—The story affects a large group of people.
- Significance—The story involves a precedent, upset or big change.
- Human interest—The story emphasizes the unusual or sentimental.

Nonprofits can use this information to choose which stories to take to the media, and the most effective way to frame their “pitch.” For example, a story about a change in state welfare policy will probably get more attention if it can be framed in terms of its effect on poor children. Editors generally believe that children's issues are of greater interest than welfare issues, and humanizing the story adds news value. Similarly, a corporate foundation might more effectively promote its efforts by publicizing the work of its grantees, since most editors find stories about the work of private nonprofits in the community more newsworthy than information about corporate foundations.

The editors provided some valuable information about how nonprofits, particularly small nonprofits, should prioritize their media outreach efforts. Clearly, distributing compelling news releases is extremely important, but it is not enough. Editors say the one-on-one approach is highly effective and believe nonprofits need to pitch stories to individual reporters and develop ongoing relationships with journalists who cover their area. News conferences and media events can also be effective, particularly for attracting radio and television coverage, but these approaches are time-consuming and expensive compared to picking up the phone and calling a few reporters.

Editors also place a high priority on improving access to nonprofit news sources. This was apparent in the high ranking they gave “providing credible spokespeople in a timely fashion” as an outreach strategy and their strong interest in receiving updated lists of news sources at nonprofits.

The findings also emphasize the importance of providing information digitally. About three-quarters of editors said a Web site with a special link for the media is an effective outreach tool, and that they would like communications from a nonprofit news service delivered to their computers. Finally, more than eight-in-ten editors showed interest in receiving updates on individual organizations and the sector as a whole from a centralized news service.

Recommendations based on this study are as follows:

1. Individual nonprofits may wish to review their communications strategy with the findings from this study in mind. Organizations can also augment this research with a more specific investigation of how their particular issues are being covered in the media. There are a number of good books available to help with developing a communications plan, including a Jossey-Bass guide, *Strategic Communications for Nonprofits*, and *Making the News*, by Jason Salzman.
2. More research is needed to determine the viability of creating a Georgia nonprofit news service to facilitate media coverage of the sector. Research areas could include a communications needs assessment of Georgia nonprofits; an analysis of different business models that could make the service self-sustaining; and an exploration of design models that would make it effective for reaching both traditional and “new media” channels.
3. The survey findings point to several useful functions a news service could undertake.
 - Producing a daily digest of news releases and media advisories from Georgia nonprofits and delivering it electronically to journalists for print, radio, television, wire services and online news outlets through a Listserv. This digest could be organized by “beats,” or coverage areas, common to news organizations and linked to a Web site. It could also include a summary of national and state nonprofit stories that could be easily localized.

- Creating and maintaining a Web site that would provide journalists with further resources, including the full text of news releases in the digest, an archive of past news releases, updated lists of grants made by local foundations, biographies of issue experts and spokespeople at nonprofits, and links to other news coverage and research resources.
- Maintaining up-to-date media lists for nonprofits to use for media follow-up.
- Providing resources and training to nonprofits for developing communications materials and identifying and briefing spokespeople to work with the media.

There are many types of nonprofit stories that will attract media attention. The challenge for nonprofits is to frame their messages in a newsworthy way and deliver them to the media in a useable form. Georgia nonprofits can increase the visibility of their work by focusing their media outreach on issues, angles and news elements that journalists value and by distributing information to news organizations through a timely and efficient mechanism such as a nonprofit news service.

Notes

¹ Tom Martens, “Nonprofits and the Press: Strategies for Making News in California.” Washington, D.C.: The Aspen Institute, Nonprofit Sector Research Fund, Working Paper Series, 1999, xii.

² David Van Slyke and Arthur Brooks, “The Power of One: 2001 Report on Personal Charitable Giving in Greater Atlanta.” The Community Foundation for Greater Atlanta, 2001, 16-18. Accessed online on 8/15/03 at <http://www.atlcf.org/NewsEvents/Publications.aspx>.

³ Martens, “Nonprofits and the Press,” 2.

⁴ Ibid, xv.

⁵ Steven S. Ross, “Toward New Understandings: Journalists & Humanitarian Relief Coverage.” Fritz Institute and the Reuters Foundation, 2004, 3. Accessed online on 4/22/04 at <http://www.alertnet.org/thefacts/reliefresources/107832661891.htm>.

⁵ Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, “Public’s News Habits Little Changed by September 11.” Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, 2002, 1. Accessed online on 4/22/04 at <http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=156>.

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⁷ Project for Excellence in Journalism, “The State of the News Media 2004: An Annual Report on American Journalism.” Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, online document link: Overview, Content Analysis. Accessed online on 4/22/04 at <http://www.stateofthenewsmedia.org/>.

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¹⁰ Radio and Television News Directors Foundation, “The American Radio News Audience Survey.” Radio and Television News Directors Association, 2000, Executive Summary, 2. Accessed online on 4/22/04 at <http://www.rtnda.org/radio>.

¹¹ “The State of the Media 2004,” online document link: Overview, Eight Major Trends.

¹² “Building a National Newswire for Education and the Independent Sector.” Ascribe, 2003, 2. Accessed online on 4/24/04 at <http://www.ascribe.org/education>.

¹³ Ibid, 4.

¹⁴ The 25% figure for regular online news users come from the 2002 Pew report cited in note 5, p.2. Information about online news sites comes from, “The State of the News Media 2004,” cited in note 7, online document link: Online, Intro.

¹⁵ “State of the News Media 2004,” online document link: Overview: Eight Major Trends.

¹⁶ Questions were adapted from “Nonprofits and the Press: Strategies for Making News In California,” Appendix B, with permission of the author.

¹⁷ Don A, Dillman, *Mail & Internet Surveys: The Tailored Design Method*, Second Edition, John Wiley and Sons, 2000.

¹⁸ Martens, 74.

²⁰ Martens, 62.

²¹ Martens, 126.