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Expanding Audience and Impact
Nonprofits Communicating Data to External Audiences

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> *"The value of an idea lies in the using of it."*
> *Thomas Edison*

The ways that nonprofits use data are as varied as their size, population served, and mission. Technical and capacity barriers often keep nonprofits from collecting and integrating important program data into their daily work, and additional challenges keep them from communicating that data with external audiences. Nonprofits report that communicating data is difficult because they lack (1) time to produce quality content, (2) an adequate budget for direct expenses, (3) a clear strategy, and (4) high-quality data to present (Idealware and NTEN 2012).

Mindful of the real constraints that smaller nonprofits experience in collecting and using data, this brief provides insights on how to present data to audiences outside of the walls of the nonprofit. The brief provides examples of communicating program data with external stakeholders that include policymakers, funders, and clients. It begins with current data practices in the nonprofit field, introduces the opportunities that can come from communicating data to three different audiences, and concludes with some potential strategies to effectively do so.

What Data Are Nonprofits Collecting, and How Are They Currently Using Data?

Most commonly, nonprofits track financial and operations data as required by funders. Some nonprofits use those data to make internal decisions about budgeting or programs. Further, they often include summaries of those data in annual reports, on websites, and in messages to donors. Less often,

nonprofits are measuring program and outcome data (data on the changes or benefits that result from the program) for their clients. Least often still, nonprofits report tracking data to measure the effect of their activities and progress toward their mission (Idealware and NTEN 2012).

A national survey of nonprofits found that the organizations communicate data for three main purposes: (1) to acquire new donors, (2) to engage their community, and (3) to promote brand awareness. Nonprofits also identified donor coverage, thought leadership, and media coverage as additional goals for reporting data (Nonprofit Marketing Guide 2014).

Communicating data to external audiences can have great value for a nonprofit and can be well worth the investment and effort. The three key audiences addressed in this brief are policymakers, funders, and clients. First, sharing data with policymakers can lead to beneficial changes in the operating environments of the nonprofits. Second, sharing data effectively with power players such funders can increase funding opportunities. Finally, communicating data to the affected community not only provides the opportunity to engage those served by the nonprofit and involve them in the work, but also can yield better program data to inform and improve services.

How Can Data Be Used to Raise Community Awareness and Influence Policy Decisions?

Data are a powerful asset in any effort to influence policy or to raise awareness of an issue in the community. If communicated well, data can elevate the importance of a problem and rally support around a proposed solution. Data can be used in written reports for a variety of interested parties, in testimony prepared for policymakers, or in news releases (Community Research Institute 2006). Communicating data to raise awareness for an issue or advocate for an intervention can have influence at both the national and local levels.

For example, when InConcert Sierra, a local arts nonprofit in Nevada City, California, shared survey results about the demographic trends of its classical music audience with the local newspaper and community, the group was able to increase the community's awareness of its programming and mission. Publicizing the survey result that children are interested in the nonprofit's music programs made local teachers aware of the classical music opportunities offered by the nonprofit that were suitable for their students. That external communication led to increased participation in the nonprofit's concerts and programming by teachers who brought students as a reward or a fun activity.

Beyond raising community awareness, a nonprofit can share data with the public and policymakers at the local level to help advocate for ordinances and to address issues of concern. For example, an environmental policy nonprofit partnered with the Cleveland Tenants Organization to document lead- and asthma-related environmental health hazards. The partners then used their data and survey results in their testimony at a city council hearing, ultimately resulting in an ordinance that designated lead paint hazards in residences, schools, and day care facilities a "nuisance" subject to city code enforcement, among other protections (Scott 2005).

The following are strategies to effectively present data to raise community awareness and influence policy and to focus on clearly conveying a meaningful story:

- **Present data in a simple format that is clear and concise**. The goal is for the audience to quickly capture the message; therefore, keep graphics simple and present statistics in easy-to-read bullet points, tables, or graphs.

- **Include quantitative and qualitative data.** People respond to both the legitimacy of hard numbers and facts and the emotional connection of story and narrative.

- **Use data to illustrate the extent of your issue.** Data can quantify the scope of the issue you are addressing. For example, the audience sees that 67 percent of the population is affected compared with just one or two households. Also, use a number for comparison from a previous year or related geographical area. That strategy helps the nonprofit's audience see why the situation being addressed is unusual and needs action (Community Research Institute 2006).

- **Include data in all communication.** Data should be used in communication with all audiences and not limited to formal or specific advocacy communication (Community Research Institute 2006).

Q and A with Nathan Smith, public policy manager of GLSEN, Washington, DC. GLSEN, Inc., the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network, is a nonprofit that conducts research, programming, and advocacy to fight against bullying and discrimination of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students and to ensure that comprehensive and inclusive safe schools policies are considered, passed, and implemented.

What is your primary purpose for sharing data outside of your organization?
Communicating data for advocacy drives the rest of the work that we do to educate the public about the school climate for LGBT youth and to help build the reason for our programming.

I use data for two things when talking to policymakers: first, to help them understand the experience of LGBT youth [the clients] and set the landscape and second, to show the effectiveness of enumerated antibullying policies. I use data to show that it makes a difference.

How do you present or communicate data?
We have a major research report, which is pretty comprehensive. But for advocacy, I pull compelling statistics from the research. I don't get down into the weeds, and I don't talk about methods. If people are interested, I direct them to the broader research.

Brevity counts for a lot, so I include major statistics that are relevant.

For legislators, I usually present a one-pager that includes some of our data and some government data. I don't give them too much information or charts.

Stories are super helpful to match the data. What is most effective is actually bringing in constituents, parents, or students, to add a face to data. Seven out of 10 LGBT youth are bullied is a meaningful statistic, but it is detached. Ideally having a person there really makes a difference.

What are the major challenges in presenting data outside of your organization?
Policy is so centered on statistics and data, people's eyes glaze over; so a challenge is presenting it in a way that is brief and thorough, presenting it before they tune out.

Sometimes you find people who are really into it—direct them to more information or follow up. But mostly people just want the major takeaways, so you have to get it out quickly.

A problem is having comparison populations. Our data are only on the program population, and we have to rely on that incomplete data to make a point. So it has its limitations.

What is the value, the positive outcome of presenting data outside of your organization?
Value is showing that there is actually a problem. Without data, you won't ring alarm bells. Having numbers underscores the enormity of the problem. Data can show importance and a sense of urgency.

How Can Data Be Used to Help Increase Funding?

Most nonprofits operate on the funds they receive from individual donors, philanthropic organizations, or government contracts rather than from bringing in their own revenue. Accordingly, it is critical to understand the most effective ways to use data to communicate with specific donor communities to influence donor behavior. Research on donor behavior has shown that a nonprofit's performance and impact are important—although not all-determining—factors affecting donors' funding decisions, and therefore they should be communicated effectively.

A report on donor behavior and preferences found that individual donors want nonprofits to present program and impact information in addition to metrics of financial stability (such as fundraising and overhead costs); individual donors pay particular attention to how nonprofits are using best practices and innovative approaches; and individual donors are interested in standard indicators that allow comparison of performance across multiple nonprofits or services (Root Cause 2013). Additionally, donors expressed a high interest in receiving information in multiple formats that are simple to read, such as a one-page fact sheet that includes side-by-side comparisons of the nonprofits benchmarked against a list of metrics and a fact sheet on a social cause or issue that includes context and key metrics (Root Cause 2013).

Different types of donors have different data they prefer to receive from nonprofits when making funding decisions. In a separate study, Hope Consulting (2011) found that foundations want more information and are focused on impact, whereas individual donors and advisers (people who advise donors) want assurance that the organization is legitimate. For individual donors and advisers, their first priority is information on financials and then effectiveness. Comparatively, for foundations the first two data priorities are anticipated impact and the organization's past performance. Trends suggest that all nonprofits are being asked to provide bottom-line data regardless of the specific type of funder.

Whereas the focus of presenting data for policy and advocacy efforts is on conveying a story, the emphasis for funders is on using data to establish the legitimacy of the organization and its program impact. Some suggestions for sharing data with funders are as follows:

- **Use data to illustrate the effectiveness of programming**. Funders want to give to a nonprofit that produces effective outcomes. Thus, nonprofits should focus on presenting documented results consistent with their mission.

- **Make the case for the importance and urgency of the organization's mission**. Data can be used to show the severity of the problem or issue that the nonprofit addresses and why that particular nonprofit should be funded instead of one addressing a less pressing issue. Use data to put the size and immediacy of the problem in context. Provide data that tie the issue being addressed directly to the community and locale in which the nonprofit operates.

- **Use a variety of data points and formats**. Highlight important data in a variety of ways. Graphics, photos, narratives, and direct quotations all are useful ways to present information.

Q and A with Eleanor Borelli, communications manager at UrbanFuture. UrbanFUTURE is a nonprofit that works with students from Saint Louis public schools to foster academic achievement, character growth, and career preparation through tutoring, mentoring, and career connection. The following is a conversation with the communications manager about communicating data to funders.

What level of detail is appropriate to communicate outside of your organization?
For funders, I do try to provide enough compelling detail without overdoing it. I get some data in there to drive the point home, in a clear and quick way.

What method of data communication is most effective for funders?
Individual donors love our success stories, and a great photo. For example, we just finished our big fundraising push for a student trip to [Washington,] DC, and everyone who donated got to see pictures and hear the stories of the kids who participated. This connects the funders with the program, which is the children.

What is the value, the positive outcome of presenting data outside of your organization?
If they are the right data, not only are you creating a reputation in the community for doing the work, you are showing that you are effective, leading to a growing reputation, acquiring more funds, volunteers, and community involvement.

What are the major challenges in presenting data to funders?
There are quite a few after-school programs and nonprofits in the area, and it is hard to stand out and be different and have our voice heard by both foundations and individual donors. It is a challenge to grab funders' attention when there are others vying for it. To grab attention, we use data and testimonials to show that our program works, since donors want to make sure that their money is being used effectively. Another challenge is gaining access to comparison data, since there is little sharing and it is harder (without data) to make the point that our program is effective.

How Can Data Be Used to Increase Feedback to Clients?

Nonprofits often struggle to set priorities for data collection among the many other important tasks required to deliver services to those in need. Similarly, individuals served by nonprofits can experience the burden of data collection. Clients may be asked to fill out multiple surveys or to hand over private, personal information such as test scores or nutritional information to support nonprofits' efforts to measure the success of their programs. Once data are collected, few nonprofits consider how to share the lessons learned from this information with the clients. Clients are most affected by the outcomes measured, but they are often the least likely to see formal reports or presentations because the communication is not shared or written in an accessible way.

Communicating data with clients provides an opportunity to complete a feedback loop with clients, avoiding a one-direction process in which nonprofits collect information from clients and use the data

to report on programs to other audiences, such as potential funders. Sharing data with clients can help bring them into the process of improving, developing, or adjusting programs, thereby increasing client investment and engagement in their own outcomes. Another possible benefit of communicating data with clients is that they can provide nuance to the findings, helping tell the story behind the data.

It is important that a nonprofit not only presents clients with data but gives them the opportunity to react and respond in a way that acknowledges their contribution to and ownership of the data. For example, a case worker can have a conversation with a client about the follow-through of a referral and incorporate the information about success or barriers into case management and programming. Engaging in a feedback loop requires interactive and ongoing strategies, in contrast with more passive methods of data dissemination such as e-mail blasts and program newsletters.

Sharing data with clients is an emerging practice and requires a shift in traditional approaches and data use. Keystone Accountability, an organization headquartered in London whose mission is to improve the effectiveness of social purpose organizations, emphasizes that "nonprofits can bring constituents' voices systematically into their planning, measurement, and reporting—and when they do this, they dramatically enhance their performance".[1] Strategies for making this connection with clients are as follows:

- **Communicate data in a way that resonates with and is of interest to the clients.** Make sure that the data the nonprofit communicates are accessible and easy to understand and reflect relevant expectations and commitments.

- **Establish a culture of data communication that is ongoing.** To create a feedback loop with clients, a nonprofit must have in place a structure that provides for information to be easily distributed and responses to be encouraged and collected. To do that, a nonprofit may have a data communication component that is built into programming and exists from entry throughout the life of a client's involvement. Processes could include a monthly written summary or oral check-in, additional feedback sessions, or a comments box.

- **Provide real-time discussion.** The best strategy to communicate data to clients is to illustrate that their voice and perspective matter. Therefore, each effort at collecting and communicating data should be accompanied with a plan to incorporate findings into programming and a mechanism to convey that the clients' views have been heard.

DATA USE IN ACTION

Two examples illustrate ways to share data with clients. In the first example, the organization used a real-time data presentation to help collect responses to a survey. Old North Saint Louis Restoration Group, a nonprofit community development corporation, wanted to collect information on social capital among its clients to evaluate and inform programming. However, the nonprofit staff members feared that community members were tired of responding to surveys because they lived in a frequently studied neighborhood and rarely saw the results of previous studies. In response to the concern, the Old North Saint Louis Restoration Group collaborated with a community development intermediary to survey neighbors at a community activity. At the community event, staff members from the intermediary used tablet computers to collect data from clients on social capital and then presented these data to respondents in real time. The data were projected on a screen for everyone to view and were presented in the form of Geographic Information System maps, network analysis webs, and a time-lapse chart of neighborhood residence and connectivity. The nonprofit staff members talked through the data, and clients asked questions and discussed the implications of the findings with the nonprofit. The neighbors enjoyed seeing the presentation and appreciated the exercise.

Another example of communicating data to clients is a "data walk." UCAN, a resident service provider in Chicago, wanted to present baseline survey and administrative data to clients to better understand the clients' experiences with services and perceptions of program performance. UCAN was working with the Urban Institute on a demonstration project to evaluate the services in public housing, and the organization collaborated to communicate data to the resident community. For the data walk, the evaluation team printed charts and graphics that presented the information in a user-friendly and engaging format and placed them in a room. Clients (residents) were given a chance to tour the room to view the posted findings and received explanations from nonprofit staff. Afterward, the team held focus groups and encouraged discussion about clients' thoughts on the data. The data walk was held in a convenient location for clients, with arrangements provided for food, child care, and transportation. In the focus groups after the data walk, clients communicated that they liked the opportunity to become better informed about their community and to provide feedback about what surprised them or made sense. Further, the nonprofit used the data walk to learn about effective programming from the perspective of the clients.

Conclusion

The work accomplished by the nonprofit sector is so important that it cannot afford to be stunted by a lack of data sharing with important audiences outside of the organization. Although this brief outlined specific ideas and strategies for the three different communication methods and audiences, a few cross-cutting themes apply to all efforts to communicate nonprofit data. First, know the audience and tailor the content and delivery to match their expectations, interests, and level of understanding. Second, use a variety of data and formats (e.g., narratives, charts, and graphics) to increase the odds that the

nonprofit's message resonates with more people. And finally, invest in nonprofit capacity to share data. The challenges that nonprofits face—lack of affordable information systems to track activities and lack of funding, training, and staff—are real but surmountable constraints. Nonprofits can build capacity to communicate about data if they build data-sharing goals into the strategic plan, seek funding opportunities to enhance the collection and communication of data, partner with other organizations to leverage common performance measures or evaluation frameworks, and close the feedback loop with the true owners of nonprofit data—the clients they seek to serve.

Resources for Nonprofits

General Strategies for Sharing Data

- Data in Head Start and Early Head Start: Digging into Data: Sharing Data[2]

  Digging into Data is Head Start's online training module that uses lifelike scenarios that Head Start and Early Head Start leaders typically face to build the program leaders' data-use skills to address these and other situations.

- Communicating Data to External Audiences

  Crittenton Women's Union presents a discussion on communicating data to external audiences that includes tips and examples.

- Charting Impact/Five Questions[3]

  Charting Impact is a common framework that can be used by nonprofits to enable staff members, boards, stakeholders, donors, volunteers, and others to work together, to learn from each other, and to serve the community better. Answering the five questions helps nonprofits create a concise report about their plans and progress to share with key stakeholders, including the public.

- Data Sharing for Out of School Time Programs

  This document presents a systems wide approach to sharing data.

- Seeing Is Believing: A Guide to Visual Storytelling Best Practices

  This report that grew out of a research project by Resource Media to better understand and address an imbalance in visual communication shares findings and recommendations on telling a story visually.

- Nonprofits and Data: A How-To Series

  Community Research Institute authored five guides on using data for five different purposes. The first tutorial is on Using Data to Support Grant Applications and Other Funding

Opportunities and the third is on Using Data to Disseminate Information to Engage Community and Policymakers.

Resources for Communicating Data with Clients

- Using Walk-throughs to Gather Data for School Improvement

  Walk-throughs—a practice in which a school principal informally observes a teacher instructing for 3 to 10 minutes and then provides detailed written observations to begin a dialogue—are a valuable source of instructional data for teachers and administrators. The observer is collecting and sharing data with the teachers to encourage teachers to assess and improve their practice. Additionally, the data can be shared with other stakeholders to focus curricula and professional development.

- Keystone Accountability[4]

  Keystone Accountability is an organization whose mission is to improve the effectiveness of social purpose organizations. They offer analysis, theory of change, tools, and services to help social purpose organizations to realize benefits using the Constituent Voice tool.

Resources for Communicating Outcome Data

- Tips and Recommendations for Communicating Results

  This document provides tips and recommendations for communicating results to both internal and external audiences.

- Strengthening Nonprofits: A Capacity Builder's Resource Library—Measuring Outcomes

  This guidebook on measuring outcomes is part of the series Strengthen Nonprofits and provides strategies for measuring outcomes and communicating results. (Compassion Capital Fund National Resource Center, n.d., 37–9.)

- Using Outcome Information: Making Data Pay Off

  This Urban Institute guide offers practical advice to help nonprofits take full advantage of outcome data; it identifies a variety of ways to use the data and describes specific methods for pursuing each use. (see Morley and Lampkin 23–6).

Resources for Communicating Advocacy Data

- Now Hear This: The Nine Laws of Successful Advocacy Communications

  This guide, produced by Fenton Communications, outlines a nine-step process for effective policy and advocacy efforts using data.

Notes

1. "Our History," Keystone Accountability, accessed June 19, 2015, https://www.keystoneaccountability .org

2. "Data in Head Start and Early Head Start: Diging into Data," US Department of Health and Human Services, last updated March 3, 2015, accessed June 19, 2015, http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/operations/data/data2/act6/activity6.html.

3. "Charting Impact: The Five Questions," Independent Sector, accessed June 19, 2015, https://www .independentsector.org/charting_impact.

4. See note 1 above.

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