

# Bridging the Gap

Connecting Strategic  
Communication  
and Program Goals

FINDINGS FROM IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS  
WITH U.S. FOUNDATION STAFF AND AFFILIATES

April 2003

Prepared with generous support from  
The David and Lucile Packard Foundation



# Bridging the Gap

Connecting Strategic  
Communication  
and Program Goals

FINDINGS FROM IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS  
WITH U.S. FOUNDATION STAFF AND AFFILIATES

April 2003

Prepared with generous support from  
The David and Lucile Packard Foundation



# BRIDGING THE GAP:

## Connecting Strategic Communication and Program Goals

### INTRODUCTION

In recent years, foundations have become more focused on the topic of philanthropic effectiveness. How to ensure the more effective use of philanthropic resources, how to strengthen grantee operations and performance, and how to measure success are all questions that are attracting increasing attention among funders, academics and sector observers.

All too often, however, the conversation about philanthropic and nonprofit effectiveness leaves out a critical element: the role of communication—and, more precisely, a strategic approach to communication—in achieving the sector's goals.

*In Bridging the Gap: Connecting Strategic Communication and Program Goals*, we report on a series of conversations over the past six months with a cross-section of foundation leaders and program staff. Our goal was to elicit perceptions from program staff about the relationship between strategic communication and program goals and to find out how foundations use communication in their grantmaking.

While many interviews revealed a high level of sophistication and innovation, as many others revealed significant confusion on the part of staff about how to pair program goals with communi-

cation approaches. Staff also identified a number of barriers to making more effective use of communication to drive social change. Many foundation staff who make grant decisions would benefit from an enhanced understanding of strategic communication practices and principles, as well as how to avoid common pitfalls.

A number of foundation staff in our sample estimated that at least one-half—or more—of their grants contain communication components. In a separate research project, we worked with a large foundation to examine the actual patterns of grantmaking to identify resources devoted to communication. Approximately one-quarter of the total grant portfolio was supporting various and diverse communication initiatives across programs. These aggregated communication expenditures surpassed the level of investment in some entire programs.

Looking ahead, the drive to improve philanthropic effectiveness can succeed only if foundations commit to new standards for performance in strategic communication. Based on our research, we believe that opportunities abound for foundations and their grantees to adopt a more strategic approach to communication—in large part by working together to address the barriers identified in this report.

# BRIDGING THE GAP:

## Connecting Strategic Communication and Program Goals

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

How do foundations perceive the role of communication in grantmaking today? How effective are they in using communication to improve nonprofit and foundation effectiveness? And what needs to happen in order for foundations and their grantees to adopt a more strategic approach to communication—an approach that strengthens the connection between communication and the sector’s goals for social change?

These are the questions at the heart of this report.

*Bridging the Gap: Connecting Strategic Communication and Program Goals* is based on more than 50 in-depth interviews with staff from U.S. foundations and related organizations. We brought to this survey the point of view that effective communication can enhance program objectives. The survey objective was to begin to identify how foundations define communication, how they integrate communication with other aspects of their grantmaking, and what they perceive as barriers to a more strategic and effective use of communication in service of program goals.

FoundationWorks conducted this survey with assistance from Edge Research. The survey was made possible by a generous grant from the David and Lucile Packard Foundation.

### Highlights

**1. Almost all foundation staff acknowledge the value of communication in achieving philanthropic potential. However, many reveal confusion about how to match communication approaches to program goals, which results in less effective grantmaking for communication.**

- Most see communication as a compendium of tools and tactics for conveying news and information. Others, however, view communication through more of a strategic lens—emphasizing audiences, messages and strategy and regularly making the connection between communication and program goals.
  - Communication to inform the public, dubbed “FYI communication” in the survey, is fundamentally oriented to the dissemination of program findings and is prevalent across foundations.
  - Strategic communication, on the other hand, implies a different way of doing business, with a goal to create public awareness and response that leads to behavioral and/or policy change.
  - Many barriers depicted by staff in efforts to fund effective communication stem from a lack of clarity about the underlying premises inherent in these two approaches to communication.
- 2. A foundation’s leadership bears significantly on the degree to which strategic communication is fostered through grants. Other variables such as foundation size, program emphasis, size of communication department, and staff backgrounds do not correlate consistently to a foundation’s making effective use of strategic communication.**
- Researchers divided respondents into three groups based on their level of strategic communication practice.
  - The breakout was based on criteria including: how the respondents define communication, the degree to which they integrate communication into program strategy, and the percentage of grants they fund that include communication activities.

- Each of the three groups included representatives of small, medium and large foundations, as well as individuals from a range of job categories and backgrounds.
  - Hiring staff with communication background and having a stand-alone communication department tended to have some impact on the level of a foundation's commitment to strategic communication. However, respondents who indicated a "high" level of commitment were just as likely not to meet either of these standards.
  - Instead, respondents pointed to a foundation's leadership as the most significant factor for thinking strategically about communication.
- 3. Foundations that are more strategic in their approach to integrating communication tend to be more collaborative in their grantmaking.**
- Interviewees described varying degrees of involvement with their grantees, depending on their perception of their role as funders.
  - Those who feel it is their role to be very involved with their grantees before and after grant approval tend to adopt a more sophisticated approach to communication.
  - On the other hand, those respondents who said they have little involvement with grantees during the development of proposals and through the life of a grant all indicated a low level of strategic communication practice.
- 4. Staff described a number of barriers that inhibit their ability to adopt a more strategic approach to communication. These barriers include:**
- *Communication as an afterthought.* The failure to integrate communication with program activities from the start is one consequence of narrowly defining communication in terms of tactics and tools. Those who think of communication as strategy (focusing on avenues to goals) tend to integrate communication considerations (audience, message, motivational approach) into program design.
  - *Limited understanding among staff.* Program staff, experts in their own fields, often have limited knowledge of communication and limited time in which to learn. Yet these are the people who most often review communication requests and who regularly deal with grantees on communication issues. Even when communication expertise is available inside a foundation, it is underutilized. Few interviewees had ever asked for a communication expert to review a grant request or to participate in a peer review process.
  - *It's just too expensive to do it right.* The most often cited barrier to more strategic use of communication is the perception that it costs too much. Many staff feel it is impossible for an organization's communication activities to have a discernible impact. As a result, foundations may overlook the potential importance of communication when reviewing proposals and awarding grants. The perception of communication as too costly ignores the reality that effective communication does not need to be expensive. Ineffective communication, on the other hand, can be both costly and unnecessarily wasteful.
  - *How do you measure success?* For a sector that is becoming increasingly focused on evaluation, communication is challenging. The reason: It is often difficult to measure the impact of project communication over the life of a grant. The result, as described above, is that foundations are reluctant to fund communication sufficiently because they can't show real-world, real-time results.

**5. FoundationWorks' analysis suggests that the barriers interact to create a self-perpetuating cycle that limits return on philanthropic investment. Successful intervention in any one area can have a positive effect on others.**

Here is how these factors interact:

- *Communication is an afterthought:* Critical decision trees in developing program strategy occur at the very beginning. Depending on what decisions are made, the entire program with its embedded communication implications goes one direction or another. If communication does not inform program strategy at the outset, no amount of excellent communication execution can save a flawed strategy. Communication is perceived then not to have added value, which in turn keeps it on the periphery of program planning...an afterthought.
- *Communication doesn't add the value it could:* Program expertise does not translate to communication know-how. Program staff say they value communication and fund it, but many do not understand what strategic communication is. As a consequence, many outreach efforts skip strategy altogether and focus on tactics and tools. Because many program staff define communication in those terms, and because they also assume they know how best to communicate the issues, the optimal communication solution is overlooked.
- *Communication is expensive:* The ineffective strategies and choices of tactics that can result from a failure to integrate communication from the outset are the true costs of misguided communication. Because communication is not well understood by many, staff may rely on expensive media in which the message and the outputs are controlled (such as paid advertising or television documentaries). These actual expenses are compounded by a mismatch of tactic to goal, and may therefore make little or

no progress towards program goals. The cost of strategic communication input at the earliest decision points is negligible compared to the cost of executing a communication campaign—particularly one that won't get the biggest bang for the buck.

- *Communication is hard to evaluate:* Because communication is perceived as expensive, there is pressure to evaluate. Leadership may be less inclined to pursue major initiatives where effects are difficult to measure.

## CONCLUSION

As the philanthropic sector continues its work to strengthen the effectiveness of foundations and grantees, an expanded awareness of strategic communication can support those efforts. Foundations can embark on a serious effort to address the barriers to strategic communication identified in this report. Foundation leaders have an opportunity to create a communication culture that encourages a strategic mindset. This, in turn, has potential to accelerate social change.

## METHODOLOGY

Lynne Murphy, of FoundationWorks, with Pamela Loeb and Lisa Dropkin of Edge Research, conducted 51 in-depth interviews with staff from U.S. foundations and related organizations to collect perceptions about the relationship between strategic communication and program goals.

For the purposes of this project, we defined “strategic communication” as “delivering a message to a specific audience to elicit an intended response.”

Each interview was between 30 to 60 minutes in length. Care was given to interview:

- A mix of small (\$1 million to \$10 million in grants/year), medium (\$11-\$99 million grants/year), and large (\$100 million+ in grants/year) foundations:
  - 18 interviews with staff from large foundations (representing 11 foundations)
  - 15 interviews with staff from medium size foundations (representing 13 foundations)
  - 13 interviews with staff from small foundations
- A mix of staff types:
  - 22 interviews among program staff
  - 17 interviews among executive staff (at least 11 of whom also have specific programmatic responsibilities)
  - 7 interviews among communication staff (a few of whom also have programmatic responsibilities)
- Foundation associations and affinity groups:
  - 5 interviews with key staff at foundation associations and affinity groups that were mentioned often by foundation interviewees
- A mix of programming areas:
  - Interviews were conducted with individuals involved in programs in Arts and Culture; Education; Environment/Animals/Nature; Health; Human Services; International Affairs/Development/Peace; Public and Society Benefit; and Science and Technology.

A list of institutions with participating staff is attached in the Appendix section.

*A note about the findings: In-depth interviews are considered qualitative research in part due to the self-selected nature of respondents. These findings should be viewed in a qualitative frame of reference and, thus, the results cannot be projected with any statistical validity.*

*A note about the findings: In-depth interviews are considered qualitative research in part due to the self-selected nature of respondents. These findings should be viewed in a qualitative frame of reference and, thus, the results cannot be projected with any statistical validity.*

# BRIDGING THE GAP:

## Connecting Strategic Communication and Program Goals

### FINDINGS

1. **Almost all foundation staff acknowledge the value of communication in achieving philanthropic potential. However, many reveal confusion about how to match communication approaches to program goals, which results in less effective grantmaking for communication.**

Almost every participant interviewed recognizes the value of communication to achieving philanthropic potential and impacting social change. This cut across foundation size, job description, and program area as illustrated by the quotes below:

*The [reproductive rights community] armed themselves with the battery of modern message development and constituency development tools from polling and research and message development to building an infrastructure of an email network, rapid response action. I believe we've basically turned around what was a very desperate situation with respect to this movement, which was bleeding. I think we staunched the wound. This top-down investment has been extremely important. (Program staff, reproductive rights, large foundation)*

*At least from what I work on, which is environmental policy, it's the only way to go. I mean, the challenge has been and it continues to be linking a core sentiment in the public for increased environmental protection with the fact that policy doesn't meet that aspiration. So trying to make the public aware of the shortcomings of its elected policymakers is vital.*

*"We are completely dependent on leverage and partnerships in getting public participation in what we do. So I don't know how any philanthropy can get anything done without a dedicated communication strategy."*

(Management, health, large foundation)

*If we fail then bad things happen. If we succeed in making that link then at least bad things don't happen and maybe even good things happen. So it's vital. (Management, environment, small foundation)*

*One of the most effective investments a foundation can make is in shaping the debate over an issue, rather than in simply paying for some marginal amount of work in an area of work. (Program staff, non-profit support, medium foundation)*

Yet, some foundation staff still struggle to define their role in the social change process. This is a deeply felt and complex issue for some in the community who observe that foundations see themselves as funders first and foremost, and are historically uncomfortable with marketing or advocating on behalf of the causes and issues they fund.

*Sophisticated PR firms and media experts are really looking for ways to spin things, ways that really build public will and public support. I think foundations are reluctant to do that ... you feel as if you're being somewhat dishonest if you spin things in a way that mask the real issues. But I see it being done effectively over and over again... foundations are much more likely to just want to get that good information out there, get the facts out there, and I'm not sure that's how we influence public opinion in this country. I don't know. That is something that I've thought a lot about. (Management/program staff, large foundation)*

The interviews made clear that there is not a common understanding about what “communication” means, which is hurting foundations’ willingness to embrace the discipline and implement effectively. In fact, many barriers cited by staff appear to stem from a lack of clarity about the underlying premises and implications inherent in these different ways of thinking about communication.

For some, “communication” is what you do at the end of grant—disseminate programmatic findings:

*If it’s increasing reading scores or reducing teenage pregnancy or whatever it might be, we encourage whomever we’re funding to issue a report on what they’ve found. (Management, public/society benefit, small foundation)*

*I assume it’s anything that’s disseminated for public knowledge. We just simply don’t have a publications program. (Program staff, science, large)*

Others define communication as videos and documentaries or advertising and public relations. Said one staff person at a small health foundation “I think that communication is often very narrowly defined as media relations and a sort of a dispatch center.” In each of these cases, communication is defined in tactical terms that center on concrete products and their dissemination.

In addition, several respondents who are actually funding a lot of communication were so confused by the vernacular that they did not realize they were doing so.

*Because of how I’ve thought about communication I didn’t include something that we do a fair amount of, which is advocacy work. We do grassroots communication or legislative policy building around communication plans. (Program staff, community, medium foundation)*

*That’s part of it, the mindset or what people perceive. He [program officer who said he did not fund communication, so declined interview] does ... He does fund it ... but it’s not sort of a part of his thinking. (Communication staff, large foundation)*

*Foundations are also a little confused ... they don’t understand that advocacy and outreach and marketing even necessarily is communication. I think when some of the definitions are more mixed they’ll start seeing the incredible benefit that communication can have in their work or that they have been doing all along. (Affinity group)*

Based on the responses in this sample, we identified two ways that staff typically define communication. Both are useful, valid and appropriate for accomplishing specific goals. These mindsets have distinct requirements as to approach and process.

*"I guess I look at communication as electronic as well as print. So you’re thinking beyond those two mediums?"*

*(Program staff, environment, small foundation)*

The first is fundamentally oriented to dissemination of program findings, and is prevalent across foundations. We call that track “FYI communication.”

The second focuses on communication to create public response and ultimately social change. We call this track “strategic communication.” Strategic communication

implies a different way of doing business, with communication integrated into program. Staff who employ strategic communication use this terminology, as well as other telling words and phrases to describe their work:

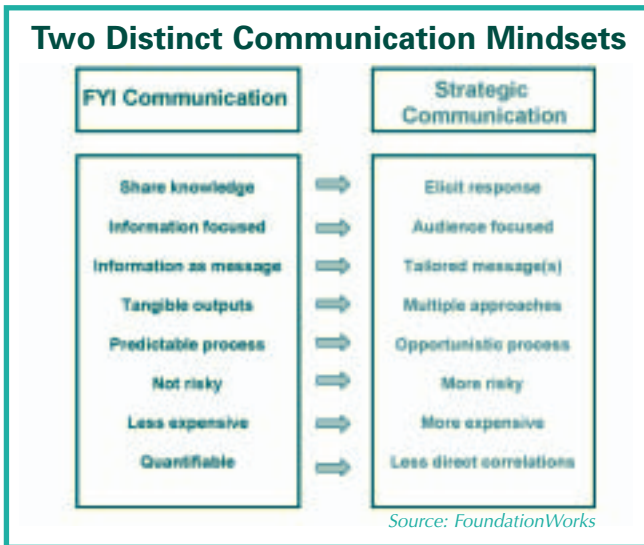
*I usually view strategic communication—it’s like comparing a rifle to a shotgun. It’s very targeted; it’s very deliberate. You know whom you’re trying to reach and why you’re trying to reach them versus just trying to reach anyone who will listen. Also when you’re working in strategic communication you want to know why you’re doing this and why it’s important*

*and why they should feel what you're saying or doing is important. Then you think what tools do I need? (Program staff, social change, large foundation)*

*We have a very broad definition, but across all three programmatic areas, we're always looking at how we can prevent disease and promote health. So once again, that word "promote" health comes into play, and to me, again says you need to have some communication strategies about how you'd promote that. (Communication staff, health, medium)*

*I think the importance of thinking about communication not as product and dissemination, but as message and strategy." (Program staff, health, small foundation)*

The following chart illustrates two distinct communication mindsets:



Many barriers depicted by staff that inhibit effective grantmaking for communication stem from a lack of clarity about the underlying premises and implications inherent in these different ways of thinking about communication. Consequently, approaches appropriate to meet "FYI" communication objectives may be applied to meet "strategic" communication requirements, without success. This results in ineffective use of resource.

**2. A foundation's leadership bears significantly on the degree to which strategic communication is fostered through grants. Other variables such as foundation size, program emphasis, size of communication department, and staff backgrounds do not correlate consistently to a foundation's making effective use of strategic communication.**

Although communication is valued almost universally, there are varying degrees to which foundations practice strategic communication and integrate it into program. We looked at the group of interviewees to try and determine if there was a particular variable that correlated with using communication in this way. We broke out respondents into three categories—high, medium, and low—based on criteria that included how respondents define communication, the degree to which they integrate communication into program strategy, and the percentage of grants they fund that include communication activities.

As illustrated by the chart above, foundation size has no impact on the practice of strategic communication. There are representatives from small, medium and large foundations in each of the three groups. In addition, current job type does not correlate with communication expertise, as there are similar proportions of management and program staff in each of the groups.

In the high and medium groups, half of the foundations represented have at least one communication person on staff; in the low level group, there is only one foundation that has a communication staff person.

Interviewees in each of the groups come from a mix of backgrounds, most common of which is government, non-profit and/or advocacy, and previous foundation experience. A third of the people in the high level group had some prior communication-related job before coming to their foundation, while no one in the low group had a communication background.

There were representatives from a mix of program areas in both the high and medium groups, while



those in the low group were more likely to work on human services and community involvement. It may be that the philanthropic community has been slower to adopt strategic communication practices within these issue areas.

Hiring program staff with communication background and having a communication department could have some impact on the communication mindset within a foundation; however, those in the "high" category are just as likely to not possess either of these qualifications.

Instead, these interviews suggest that the real determinant of utilizing strategic communication within a foundation is a leadership (at the director and/or board level) that values these practices and makes it part of the institution's mindset. More than a third of participants specifically mentioned this as the key variable impacting their foundation's approach to communication. A foundation's leadership can either create a culture in which communication can thrive, or it can inhibit staff and grantee attempts at strategic campaigns. As

one Executive Director explained, "It is absolutely CEOs. The boards are really important too. The fish rots from the top."

At foundations where there is no commitment or mandate from the top, staff is reluctant to understand and encourage strategic communication. Said one respondent, "If the board were really savvy, if at least one board member was a real expert on communication, that could help us enormously at being able to extend our capacity." (Program staff, environment, medium foundation)

This research makes clear that any effort to foster strategic communication in the philanthropic community must start at the top. Staff explain that their willingness to embrace strategic communication practices is fostered by a management philosophy, if not mandate. Said one staff person, "I think it kind of gets back to that management philosophy. Perhaps there's a way we could think about presenting this as more of a management tool than just a tactic." (Communication staff, health, medium foundation)

Below, a member of the program staff at a medium-sized foundation explains the currently evolving change in attitude, which began at the board level and is now creeping into the consciousness of program staff:

*Our trustees had a retreat a year ago and had a speaker who came forward and gave a lot of statistics about what it means to affect the media in that sort of broader level of communication. And public awareness as a way to produce a climate that is receptive to the work that nonprofits are trying to do. So in the back of the minds of our trustees is that message, that the climate really can affect the kind of work that gets done. But what hasn't necessarily caught up with that is the process for how to do that ... with that in the back of my mind, when a housing group came to do a pre-application visit I certainly know I was open to hearing what they had to say because it seemed to fit in the context of this broader discussion about how do you prepare the public to be able to do public agenda work. (Program staff, community development, medium foundation)*

A couple of large foundations that have broken new ground integrating strategic communication into program objectives spoke of significant cultural change undergone by their institutions. They explain that these processes do not happen overnight, and can take years to move from theory to practice.

*I think there are just some internal things you have to do ... it's taken two or three years. It had to be nurtured from our vice president for programs and our CEO and myself (Communication Director) ... we have a CEO who understands and believes that this can strengthen our programmatic work. It's been very fulfilling to be a part of that. But I heard a comment at that meeting the other day that most places that use communication as a strategy, it comes from the CEO who just gets it, kind of like you'd see on the corporate side of things. (Communication staff, health, medium foundation)*

Educating foundation leadership is critical at a time when foundation staff say the number of requests for communication funding is increasing. Interviewees were asked to estimate the percentage of grants they fund which contain some type of communication element. Half of participants interviewed said that the majority of their grants include some type of communication component. At the same time, many of these proposals are simple requests aimed at dissemination, when they should be developing strategic plans. As one staff person explained,

*A lot of times, they will put in a line for communication and then all we're thinking about is that will be enough so we can hire somebody who will pull together a press conference, press release, and pitch the story to a couple of papers. Hopefully we'll get something in the New York Times, Washington Post, or the Wall Street Journal, and we leave it at that. So it's a step in the right direction in the fact that at least they're putting that down and requesting money for it. But okay, you're doing that, what about message development, what about media training? (Program staff, social change, large foundation)*

### **3. Foundations that are more strategic in their approach to integrating communication tend to be more collaborative in their grantmaking.**

Not surprisingly, this also ties back to a foundation's philosophy on level of grantee involvement and their role as funders. Interviewees described three basic models of grantee involvement:

**Low:** In many cases, foundations fund organizations that they are familiar with and "trust," and have little involvement in proposal development or throughout the life of the grant. They tend to give groups money and ask for a report at the end of the day.

*Very low (involvement) from the foundation standpoint. We basically give the money. We require reports on, for the most part, a semi-annual basis. We'll travel from time-to-time but*

*we are definitely hands-off. (Program staff, education, large foundation)*

Among our sample, these foundations all fall into the "low" category when it comes to practicing strategic communication.

**Medium:** Other foundations will ask lots of questions of their grantees upfront to hopefully encourage a more effective plan, but rarely challenge the grantees' final request/decision. Again, they are removed from the process until a report is produced at the end. They characterize this approach as one of "respect."

*I think my approach is more to ask questions to probe to see whether, indeed, these are the right strategies to go with. If the organization comes back and says these are what we think are most important then we would generally say go for it. (Program staff, population, medium foundation)*

**High:** The third category spends more time reviewing, critiquing, and ultimately revising their grantees' proposals, or designing it in tandem with them. Some of these foundations, particularly the large ones, have a "portfolio" approach to grantmaking, where they have created a larger initiative that a number of grants support, and thus, want more control over the process.

Those who feel it is their role as funders to be very involved with their grantees are more often than not sophisticated at communication work. Most of the respondents who described their grantee involvement as "high" were also in the "high" category in terms of strategic communication practice. In addition, they explained that they are often particularly proactive about communication, because they see it as critical to their overall philanthropic strategy.

*Well, we try to really take time with prospective grantees or groups that we're currently funding. So what we would do in that case is help them think through how they would develop a communication program that's*

*appropriate for their organization so that they could apply it to the project for which they're seeking support. That can range from just talking the thing through, suggesting either communication consultants that they might contact, or developing partnerships with organizations whose niche is communication, helping them restructure their budget so that they're building a strong communication component, all of the above. (Management, environment, medium foundation)*

#### **4. Staff described a number of barriers that inhibit their ability to adopt a more strategic approach to communication.**

In addition to the question of leadership, staff identified four major barriers to making more effective use of strategic communication: a) failure to integrate it with program from the outset; b) gaps in knowledge on the part of program staff; c) the expense of communication initiatives; and d) the difficulty of evaluating the effectiveness of communication components. We believe that understanding the interplay of these barriers is fundamental to shifting the prevailing paradigms that limit return on foundation investment in communication.

##### **a) Integration with program**

Interviewees explain that communication is too often an afterthought, thrown in at the end of the grant in a non-strategic way to disseminate or publicize the findings.

*I think for many foundations they think about dissemination only after the project is over or close to the end. They say how should we disseminate it. They don't start from the beginning and have a plan that leads to where dissemination is a crucial part of the plan. At least there's not enough times that they do that. (Management, science, medium foundation)*

*I think one of the problems is that communication has been looked upon in the philanthropy field, with a few notable exceptions, as an*

*afterthought. The program is developed; the strategy is laid out. Then oh, I guess we should bring in the communication people because we should have some sort of communication plan or strategy. (Program staff, social change, large foundation)*

Those who think of communication as strategy (avenues to goals) embed communication considerations in program design from the beginning. They have moved from the world of "program work" to the world of "strategic positioning."

The communication "gurus" interviewed explained that solid, actionable communication is always tightly woven with program, and plays a supporting role.

*Funding always starts with program and with the program purpose first, and then communication plays a role in that. (Communication staff, medium foundation)*

*I just believe that communication is not the lead dog in the train here but it's a very important dog in the train. You're essentially trying to see, I think, how individuals can learn to expand their mental models and therefore their understanding of holistic work that will improve what they do in the field. (Management, medium foundation)*

At one foundation where program and communication staff work closely together, a program manager explained that good communication officers are always mindful of program first:

*The communication person in one of our program areas, he can*

*get a standing ovation in about any meeting. He has made himself so valuable and valued to the staff ... it's not like he's trying to redesign a program with communication as the main vehicle, and so where we've been able to have people like that it works beautifully. (Program staff, youth and education, large)*

*"I'm making a mental analogy between the shift that has to go on and has had to go on in the private sector from sales to marketing, to the shift that has to go on in the nonprofit sector from program work to strategic positioning."  
(Management, medium foundation)*

One way that some foundations have forced their grantees to think about communication from the outset is to include it in the grant application. This is an opportunity to frame the grantee's thinking in terms of strategy, rather than the all-too-frequent leap to tactics and tools. Some foundations that include communication in the grant guidelines ask grantees how they will communicate their findings,

while others request plans to encourage more expansive thinking about communication and its potential.

**b) Program staff have limited knowledge of communication, and limited time in which to learn**

Many participants brought up staffing issues as a major barrier to effective communication strategies. This plays out on several different levels:

Program staff do not have adequate communication experience or training. In most cases, program staff are evaluating the merits of communication activities in grant proposals on their own, regardless of their level of expertise.

Some worried that staff hubris makes them think that communication is easy. Others suggested that because program officers are often

*"The most important question for us is not so much whether we think the media communication is going to be effective in and of itself. It's whether the media plan makes sense in the context of the overall goals of the campaign and whether it's being integrated in such a way that would lead to advances in what the intent of the program is."  
(Management, small foundation)*

experts in their program area, they think they know how to best communicate about that issue to the public. This can lead to poorly conceived campaigns and ineffective messaging, which only resonate with insiders.

*A lot of times people tend to feel that they know how to do communication. Program people [think they] know about it and they can do their press release. They can talk to the reporter without any kind of a briefing. It can't be that difficult. After all basically we're telling them what we already know. They don't realize there's a whole strategy and a whole process that you need to go through to ensure that what you think you're saying is actually what you're saying. So there's a tendency of looking at, I have a Ph.D. or an M.D. I've given speeches and I've given talks and things like that. How hard can it be? After all, I went to Harvard, I went to Yale, I went to Brown, or whatever. (Program staff, social change, large foundation)*

In addition, program staff do not have time to do communication work. They are extremely busy making grants, managing their programs, and remaining current in their issue area. Communication savvy is seen as an add-on to an already heavy load.

*The program officers by themselves don't see their central job as being communication. They see their central job as making grants and dealing with grantees and looking for good ideas and all that. (Communication staff, medium foundation)*

*"As smart and capable and thoughtful and hard-nosed as many of my colleagues are, most of them have not run or been party to or worked on any kind of aggressive public education campaign. I think part of it is not having enough people with experience in how to look at a proposed campaign and really ask the tough questions about whether it will work or not."*

(Management, environment, small foundation)

*"A lot of foundations still have communication folks segregated from some of those other strategic decision-making processes as it relates to the grant making and view the communication department as the external relations department."*

(Affinity group staff)

*Unfortunately at this point there would have to be more program staff. Right now, we're working at capacity to do what we do, so it would mean more of a financial commitment. (Program staff, society, medium foundation)*

A staff person at a large foundation talked about the cultural shift that has had to take place in order to foster a receptive environment to communication:

*One impression the staff had is that you're adding on too much stuff. You're going to add on evaluation, you're going to add on communication, and you're making my job harder. Well, in that sense we all had to sort of say the work is hard, what we want is greater bang for our buck, we want more leverage*

*and we want our investments to get more strategic and because of that these tools are essential, they're going to help us do that. (Program staff, youth/education, large)*

Finally, when a foundation has a communication department (and only half of the foundations we interviewed do), they are often silo-ed, with no connection to program. Their primary charge is to communicate about the foundation's work. This could just mean developing an annual report and maintaining a website, or it could mean more elaborate efforts at helping tell their grantees' stories,

but under the foundation brand. Thus, they might be great practitioners of "FYI" communication, while program staff need "strategic" communication skills.

Even if the communication department does have relevant expertise, it does not even occur to many program officers to call on those colleagues. A few program staff say they might consult them on an ad-hoc basis, but this is the exception rather than the rule.

*They don't assist a lot in developing the advocacy or communication grants that the program staff is recommending. No, they don't. Whether they should or not is another question. (Program staff, large foundation)*

*We really don't use too many experts to look at communication pieces. We do have our own communication department. So if there's any substantial piece we might pass it through them. But it's not standard practice. (Program staff, children and families, medium foundation)*

Several communication officers explained they needed to be advocates within their organization to encourage and improve grantee communication requests.

Many participants felt that program staff should receive some type of communication training. Some thought it should be a formal process, done through the affinity groups:

*There could be more formal training. Almost every program area now has some sort of Affinity Group attached to it. So by actually promoting communication training through the Affinity Groups you will reach a fair number of people. (Management, small foundation)*

*Boot camp. It might be interesting if say at an Environmental Grant Makers Association session or something like that to put together a kind of two- or three-hour course on Communication 101. Although it's not really*

*101 because program officers are a fairly sophisticated bunch of people. But sort of say break it into four or five modules, public opinion, how do you get it, what does it cost, when do you use it, what's a credible pollster, what isn't? Then you do the next one, earned media. When do you use it, why do you use it, how do you use it, what is your audience, who are your leaders, what papers do you have to get, which ones can you ignore? How do you get into the local papers, how do you get into the weeklies, and so on. Right? Make it super high quality, super intense so that you keep people stimulated. Have a little communication university or short course in applied communication for nonprofits, or something like that. If you did it well you could take the same show on the road to the next Affinity Group. (Program staff, environment, large foundation)*

*"We're building a much better understanding for the kinds of questions we need to ask regarding communication efforts. What is the target audience? Who have you hired to carry this out? Are you receiving expertise on carrying out this particular communication program? What kind of messages do you want to convey? Essential things like that.."*  
(Program officer, environment, medium foundation)

Others thought they would not take advantage of this type of opportunity through an affinity group, saying that when they attend these meetings, their tendency is to focus on learning more about their program area. Said one interviewee "I'll be honest with you, if I went to the Council meeting that's not what I go to the Council meeting for. I go to learn more about the issues that I'm going to have to respond to on the ground." (Program staff, society, medium foundation)

Others suggested this would have to be done through their foundation, or even on an individual basis. One interviewee suggested putting

this information, with compelling case studies, on CD-ROM: "If you put the information on a CD-ROM then you can look at the various aspects of a public relations campaign. You can see the print ads; you can see the television ads; you can see the radio spots if there are any." (Program staff, human resources, large foundation)

In lieu of formal training, some suggested that program staff just need to be taught to ask the right questions of their grantees. Some describe a simple mental checklist, which they use to encourage strategy rather than tactics.

*I don't know that I have a set of questions other than does it make sense? Who is your audience, how do you know it's going to make a difference? What are some of the indicators you're trying to find or see to make sure this thing works or doesn't work? I guess one of my questions is how do you know if this tool isn't working or is working. Then those are the ways I get people to talk about what indicators they're looking at and then read more on the outcomes. (Program officer, children and families, medium foundation)*

There were a few foundations interviewed at which communication officers are intimately involved in program. The most dramatic examples are at a couple of the large foundations interviewed. At both of these foundations, staff is organized into "teams" or "strategic grantmaking initiatives," each of which is assigned a full-time communication officer who helps shape the overall program strategy and remains involved throughout the life of the grant.

This operating model is probably not feasible for smaller foundations with scarcer resources, but such foundations can encourage a higher level of interaction between the two departments. One staff person at a small health foundation explains how this kind of relationship led to a programmatic success:

*I had a lot of time to do advanced planning for the release of an annual survey on employer health benefits, and we really took it to a whole new level because the level of coordination with the program was very high, the access to the information even as it was being finalized was very high, and we were able to form very productive internal and external relationships to really put the resources where they needed to go. The creation of the right list, the creation of*

*the right collateral material to appeal to different audiences, all those things that take a lot of work and a lot of time, came together. (Communication staff, health, small foundation)*

A communication staff person at another foundation explained that she needed to do some internal marketing in order for management and program to realize the value of this relationship. When they saw the successful launch of one program officer's communication campaign, there was more demand for her services.

*There's nothing more powerful than a peer in terms of changing attitude. You end up with program staff that had a very successful launch of a program or information that gets a lot of media exposure or a lot of Web exposure or a great publication. So other program staff sees this, so we get a demand on our services. (Communication staff, large foundation)*

Regardless of whether and what internal resources exist, these findings suggest that many program staff would benefit by better understanding basic distinctions in communication goals and approaches and what it takes to achieve them.

### **c) Communication is expensive**

One of the greatest barriers to embracing communication is the perception that it is too expensive to make a real impact. For those who define "communication" as broadcast or print media, there is the concern that it is hard to cut through the clutter without huge dollars behind a campaign. Many believe that "just those foundations that are big and have a lot of money can do this kind of work." (Communication staff, health, medium)

*For the most part, communication efforts employed by nonprofits don't rise to the level of Nielsen ratings; they don't rise to measurable impact in a broadcast media kind of environment. So it becomes hard and very expensive to actually identify with any precision what the impact was. (Program staff, nonprofit support, medium)*

*Sometimes it was very expensive and we didn't do very many of them. If you're going to try and do a public TV program all of a sudden you're up in big bucks. (Management, science, medium)*

*I've looked at too many of these things trying to figure out what works. What works are those campaigns that are super saturated campaigns that cost a huge amount of money. (Management, small foundation)*

One staff person explained that philanthropies often under-fund media efforts, exacerbating this perception that it is impossible to have a discernible impact. "What generates frustration," he explained, "and ultimately abandonment of campaigns, is that we under-fund them. The threshold may be a million bucks, but we're going to throw in \$150,000 and hope for the best. I think we end up getting very disappointed at these results." (Management, environment, small)

Said another, "A lot of times you see grantees convince grant-makers that somehow or other they should support a one-time media shot and nothing could be a bigger waste of money in my estimation than that." (Management, small foundation)

Participants also pointed to various examples of expensive communication endeavors, which had no impact because there was no context or market. Examples given included ad campaigns not tied to a timely event or policy debate, or aimed at the American public, rather than a specific demographic segment. As one participant criticized, "I think that things fall off when you don't keep a target audience in mind. You don't get inside their heads and understand what it is they want to do and what they are willing to do. So I would say that's a big downfall and I'm not sure a lot of foundations spend enough time getting into the minds of the people they're trying to affect, or giving grants to people to figure that out." (Communication staff, health, medium foundation)

Others said that in these difficult economic times, foundations have a harder time "stomaching" the bill for communication, and will more likely scrap these endeavors in order to fund core program.

*In this economic climate, I think there's a problem in that communication is often seen as something that can be knocked off the list, even though in my mind that means you're really limiting the value of your investment because it's going to sit on a shelf. (Program staff, health, small foundation)*

*I think that the hard issue is going to be there's less money. One of the reasons there was money for communication is because there was enough money that you could continue to do some program investment and still have left over for communication. But if there's less money I think particularly the more old-fashioned foundations are going to be reluctant to take money away from programs which actually help people, and put it into something as ephemeral as communication. Nobody is getting a contraceptive if you're just communicating about it. (Program staff, reproductive rights, large foundation)*

Interviewees talked of several disappointing initiatives that were done "in a vacuum," or without any follow-up, and thus, never had momentum.

*Ads several years ago to influence public opinion on global warming. The ads were just big TVs buys done in a vacuum, there wasn't anything else going on. There wasn't a campaign to influence anything at the time. They just died on the vine; there was no perceptible impact of these things. It is difficult to spend enough money to penetrate consumers' minds. In this instance we're talking about global consumers of one type or another, like Coca-Cola can or GM or whoever. So these educational ads spending tens of thousands or hundreds of thousands of dollars I think are just lost in the vapor of major media today. I just think they*

*leave no footprints at all. Unless any communication is done as part of a larger coherent plan it's unlikely, in and of itself, to have an effect. (Management, small foundation)*

*It was a series of ads that were placed in the New York Times about children's health problems as a consequence of exposure to chemicals in the environment. I think there were six ads, but they just appeared with no reference or relationship to anything else that was going on ... Looking back on it, it would have made a lot of difference if there had been specific correlations or tie-ins with either federal policy that was under debate, campaigns that were being conducted in the field. (Management, environment, medium foundation)*

Others say true positioning means a more holistic approach to social marketing. They talk of successful multi-tiered efforts, which first used communication to raise awareness, change perceptions and behavior, and by doing that, create a more receptive environment in which to pass legislation or raise additional funds.

*I think that we can point directly to the twin prongs of pushing advocacy while pushing public education in a consumer campaign directly to the news that came out recently about swordfish. I think the effort to get people to "Give Swordfish a Break," have a temporary moratorium on ordering it in restaurants, to get chefs to stop serving it, generated the kind of publicity and pressure on the international slow-to-move, slow-to-act bodies, that they did act. It didn't seem like 100% victory then, but now we've learned that swordfish have actually come back ... that is just a classic example of not losing sight of one side when you're moving another. (Management, environment, small foundation)*

*It gets back to what we're trying to achieve—to create an environment in our state that puts children first. We had to start working with the media to get a positive message out there about kids and more specifically about what adults*

*can do to have a positive impact in kids' lives. We are looking at that from a media standpoint, we're also looking at it from a systems standpoint. We've got a project going on that is connected to this that involves high schools and what high schools can do to change their environment to make it more tolerant for kids, more interactive for different groups of kids ... We've seen that just by having a message out there in the media it's started to change the environment just enough, or the word is getting out there just enough, that it's had some impact on fundraising in a few of these communities. (Communication staff, health, medium foundation)*

A couple of participants noted that the conservative movement has been very smart on this front by using media to create a climate which keeps them on the offensive, rather than the defensive. Their strategies range from fostering relationships with journalists, to using talk radio, to funding independent media.

*The extensive use of media on the conservative side... They are basically from cradle to grave involved with seed funding journalists from out of college ... really tracking young people and pumping money so that they're then led down a path where the ultimate goal is to get them into media outlets with this full set of background training. Another piece of that is that the conservative philanthropies are pumping a lot of money into just journalistic efforts in general. So that's why you see a lot of news out there where you look and think gosh, do most people feel this way about these issues? And probably not but we, on the progressive side, have not been particularly adept at getting our message out there. I think we need to really look hard at how we're doing business. (Program staff, environment, small foundation)*

Successful (and more economical) communication endeavors also look for leverage, by targeting specific policy-makers or stakeholders, rather than expensively educating the masses. Below are

illustrations of successful approaches used by both small and large foundations, which did not have huge budgets.

*Trust for America's Health ... Their goal was to try to get federal government to appropriate money to begin to do tracking of environmental disease and chronic disease ... they targeted, I think, about nine Congress members and got \$25 million appropriated. So you look at the bang for the buck, they probably spent \$250,000 or \$300,000 ... and they leveraged \$25 million in their first go with Congress ... So that's sort of laser communication so you focus in, as opposed to saying how can we educate the American public about the need for health tracking? The answer is you can't, it's too expensive. (Management, small foundation)*

*We fund a lecture series at Yale that the whole goal of which is dedicated to marine. It's at the School of Forestry and the Environment. The whole goal of the lecture series is actually simply to raise the profile of marine and coastal studies at the school, which produces many of the top environmental managers and NGO workers in the country, and lo and behold it does seem to be doing that. We feel very strongly that that's just a way in which to raise the profile of an issue in a setting where the audience is relatively small—100 or 200 people a week for 13 weeks—but the impact and the leverage of that is huge. (Management, environment, small foundation)*

*If you want to influence public policy there's some people you're never going to influence and there's some people that are always on your side. There's that big difficult middle ground that you've got to cover. So if you want to get Gallatin County, Montana to resist coal bed methane development you have to get the*

*"We look for leverage pretty much everywhere because we don't have a ton of money and our hope is that a small amount of money can have a big impact if you spend it the right way.."*

*(Management, environment, small foundation)*

*ranchers. You have to develop materials the ranchers are going to go along with. You have to have names; you have to have vocabulary that ranchers are going to be interested in. (Program staff, environment, large foundation)*

Another way to tackle limited resources is to collaborate. These interviews suggest that the sector is increasingly more interested in collaboration, so that efforts can be adequately funded, as well as knowledge and expertise shared. When staff talked about communication successes, many mentioned collaborative efforts. One such program described by participating

institutions is the "Collaborative Defense Campaign":

*We collaborate with other foundations ... like two years ago we created with five other foundations a "Collaborative Defense Campaign. Its whole goal was to battle the Bush Administration and Congress. We put a million bucks into it, as did several other foundations ... the whole purpose of this collaborative defense campaign was to do phone banking and messaging and advertisements to defeat the administration's attempt to drill in ANWR ... All of that was very strategically focused in communication. (Management, medium foundation)*

*I'll highlight the "Collaborative Defense Campaign." One of the focal points of the three was protecting the Alaskan National Wildlife Refuge from drilling, and it was the one major vote according to the president's chief lobbyist that he feels most disappointed in not having succeeded in getting ... If you think about the communication issues involved, for somebody voting, a member of Congress voting from Central Ohio and getting Ohioans up in arms about something that's 4,000 or 5,000 miles away that they're never going to see in their life*

*is a tall communication challenge. But it seemed to work. (Management, environment, small foundation)*

Another interviewee discussed collaborative work that is being done by the Rocky Mountain Energy Campaign, and the collaborative structure that was put in place so that monies were not spent on duplicative staff and messaging work:

*For example, we're working on coal bed methane in the West. It's this sort of runaway technology that does unbelievable damage to the environment and for which there are very few environmental controls. Almost as quickly as the technology emerged the groups got organized. And with the help of another foundation they formed the Rocky Mountain Energy Campaign, which includes about 40 different groups... money was put in to help those groups but also put in to do media outreach, to do technical studies. They created a structure to which our foundation could then pour money. So we didn't have to go out there and duplicate all that staff work, we could just write one check. (Program staff, environment, large foundation)*

*"The groups are working together, they know right up-front they need polling, they need media, they need spokesmen, they need technical studies. They know that they have to do that in common, they can't afford to do it one-off.."*

(Program staff, environment, large foundation)

Other institutions have encouraged collaboration among the non-profits they fund. Quite a few respondents talked positively about the "Partnership Project," which brought environmental organizations together in an effort to share membership lists so that environmentally-minded voters could be easily mobilized on key issues.

*The Partnership Project ... they persuaded at first seven or eight and now it's up to 20 or 21 of the biggest national environmental groups to take all the names of their donors or members and dump them into a common pool at a direct mail house. So that no one would ever see the*

*names from any other group's lists, but all of the lists would be put into a common data file ... so they had 4.5 million names. They were then able to go into a congressional district and instead of having 50 people from NRDC from there they had 4,000 people or 5,000 people.*

*They would then be able to do phone banking or emailing. (Management, small foundation)*

*We brought the top 19, at the time, environmental groups together. Gave them \$5.5 million and they could only get the money if they collaborated. So we forced synergy. Now they don't understand how they ever did it without working together. (Management, medium foundation)*

One participant suggested appointing a "Charlie Cook" of the philanthropic sector who could help foster collaboration and stop

duplication by keeping track of the various communication campaigns and publicizing them sector-wide. As he described, "With a little simple table, target audience, message development, yes or no, a message delivery table so that you have a rough sense of what's happening out there. That could create a wonderful opportunity for funders to pick up the phone because the last column would list the people actually funding that campaign to kind of see if there's a way to cooperate and help. That would be wonderful." (Management, environment, small foundation)

Finally, participants say that foundations need to expand their communication toolbox, beyond paid advertising and the New York Times op-ed mentality that they currently have. Efforts like this might sound sexy (particularly to board members and trustees), but they rarely have the desired impact.

Some say the sector needs to further encourage the use of targeted local media, or as one participant called it "grassroots press," and online activist tools, to more effectively get out the message.

*We could probably do better in working the local media and we could probably do better in taking advantage of what we think might be the capacity of the growing Web activities. Clearly, there are inherent limitations developing in the extent to which we can reach audiences through network TV advertising. Both because of the expense of that and because of the diffusion of audience with cable television, satellite television, so forth, on the emergence of diffusion of audience penetration. So what that means is we need to find more effective ways to get to audiences and that means being more creative about how we engage local media feeds and that sort of thing. (Program staff, health, large foundation)*

*One of the most effective grants I think I made in the four years here is to a group called the American Forum which is committed to messaging through earned media—planting stories and op-eds and that sort of thing through grassroots newspapers in targeted states. We asked them specifically to target the South and the Southwest on a variety of issues. In other words, it's not a campaign so much as it's a kind of effort to engage grassroots press and media in progressive messaging around issues like contraception, abortion. (Program staff, reproductive rights, large foundation)*

Several foundations have developed innovative communication tools to create economies-of-scale and encourage ongoing grantee communication independent of their grants. One foundation offers a free web-casting service. Another at one time had a technical assistance program to help grantees with Internet outreach and activism. Yet another annually brings the media and stakeholders from a community together to network. One respondent suggested that the sector create

more of these mechanisms to share technology and knowledge, as well as cut time and costs:

*There are clear economies-of-scale that we're not taking advantage of. It shouldn't be necessary, in my judgment, each group out there, small, medium-sized, large, to have to develop and pay for a media list. It just doesn't make any sense. There ought to be a mechanism in the nonprofit community, particularly the nonprofit advocacy community, to be able to consolidate a lot of that delivery stuff whether it's just normal press releases or just finding out who the relevant media people are in a particular target area. There's a group called Green Media Tool Shed which does a little bit of that work and that's sort of the germ of what I think is a really important next idea. I think there's no reason, for example, that we can't come up with very plug-and-play systems for groups to produce radio spots that can be easily delivered by DSL to many radio stations right now for very little money. (Management, environment, small foundation)*

*A colleague and I have talked about trying to support some common tools that people could have access to that improves their communication. For example, he and I have funded a community media workshop here in Chicago, which provides training for nonprofit organizations, does a news tip service, which is pretty widely used. So that kind of thing is a piece of infrastructure that helps the nonprofit community to learn how to get its message out and builds relationships with reporters, and so on. (Communication staff, medium foundation)*

#### **(d) The effect is difficult to measure**

For a sector that it is becoming more focused on evaluation, communication is challenging, because it is often difficult to measure impact over the life of a grant; communication may be opportunistic, and therefore unplanned (not benchmarked); and when planned, evaluations

tend to focus on the tactic and tool, rather than the strategy. In other research we have done, philanthropists (and donors) explain that they need to see a face and count numbers—1000 hungry children fed, 500 dolphins saved from captivity—to feel that they have made a difference. Thus, at some level evaluation becomes the enemy of communication.

The sector is struggling to find quantitative measures that better gauge the effect of communication efforts. They recognize that the number of viewers, listeners, or website "hits" does not accurately reflect impact.

*Not having any idea how you measure impact. So even with the radio efforts that we've done sometimes you might as well drop flyers from an airplane. Who knows who's picking it up, who knows who's listening, who knows how they're responding and if they're actually doing anything about it. I think that's one of the major issues around funding. (Management, small foundation)*

*I don't think funders typically have good enough tools to evaluate the potential effectiveness of those proposals. And typically do not have or build in to grants measurable outcomes from that work. I hasten to add that it's not outcomes like we did this many newspaper ads or we have this many clips. But really, if the purpose was to move and mobilize public opinion, proof that that happened. So I don't think we work with enough tools to do a good job of that. (Management, environment, small foundation)*

In addition, most grants are just one or two years, and it is hard to show change over that time period.

*I think the outcomes of the communication effort are not necessarily known in the time frame of our grant. That's probably the biggest one. I think the second one is, some of the benefits, especially the public outreach in education programs are slow to build, hard to identify and only come to the fore when the issue becomes a front page crisis issue ... It's very hard to know at what moment your spending is going to pay off. (Management, environment, small foundation)*

*"We don't have any formal metrics at this point other than to request from the groups we fund the number of people we reach through communication efforts ... sometimes it's very difficult when you have the radio broadcast. All you know is the general audience size as opposed to what the audience really does with that information." (Program staff, environment, medium foundation)*

*We're just getting to the point where we can start measuring some of the impact. But I'd say we're still probably ten years away from actually showing how much value added we've brought to the table. (Communication staff, health, medium foundation)*

Very few staff interviewed feels they have properly evaluated communication efforts, and in fact, few have tried. Some argue that it is just too expensive and time consuming, and unless the foundation is large enough to afford it, or feels that it will really add strategic value, it is not a worthwhile investment. Others go even further, saying the philanthropic sector is too focused on evaluation, and it is shooting itself in the foot. They explain that corporate America has accepted that products need substantial marketing and communication efforts in order to create a receptive consumer climate, and the independent sector should do the same.

*It may be that funders need to accept some general principles. Accept the principles that the corporate sector in Madison Avenue have lain down. That is, if you invest these things and do them well, marketing and communication, you're going to have a predictable response. It may not be ultimately measurable but it can be predictable. So if you make those investments you have some assurance that*

*you're having an impact even though you can't necessarily prove it beyond a shadow of a doubt. It may be that you sort of need to accept what Proctor & Gamble has accepted, and that is to achieve what you want to achieve you have to invest some up-front money in communication to do it ... maybe funders also need to lighten up a little bit about requiring some absolute proof of impact. (Program staff, non-profit support, medium foundation)*

Only a couple of the foundations interviewed have actually conducted thorough formal evaluations of communication efforts, but those who have say that evaluating the success helps reaffirm the value.

*We did really good evaluation, so we know that 70% of the people in those two counties are aware of Be A Local Hero, Buy Locally Grown. We know that 40% of those people who are aware have actually changed their behavior and are buying more local. We know the number of stores carrying local, we know the premiums that farmers are getting, and we know the added income the farmers are getting from it. So it's not just about doing the communication but it's about being able to document that this communication work is making a difference. (Program staff, food, large foundation)*

At these foundations, evaluation staff is involved in the process from the beginning, interfacing with program and communication so that all have a common understanding of the grant goal. Benchmarks are established so changes in awareness, attitudes and behavior can be measured over time.

*The link comes again in that the evaluator is there from the very beginning ... too often initially what we had was everyone had his or her own chimney just like every program was its own chimney. You would have the evaluation, but it didn't necessarily have that much to do with the communication. So this way by working them together around what really is*

*it that we're trying to change here and that programmatic decision is one that has the input of evaluators as they help construct the logic model and the communication people right from the get-go. (Program staff, youth and education, large)*

Effective communication efforts take long-term commitment. Depending on the effort, foundations have to be prepared for obligations extending beyond the typical one to two year grant in order to truly make an impact. This is particularly true when you are trying to change attitudes and behavior.

*Usually the timeline is driven by how much money they think they can raise in the time period they have. But I think it's harder, this is an obstacle, for funders to embrace the idea of a multi-year long-term communication campaign. They get way too impatient. (Management, environment, small)*

**5. FoundationWorks' analysis suggests that the barriers interact to create a self-perpetuating cycle that limits return on philanthropic investment. Successful intervention in any one area can have a positive effect on others.**

The barriers staff described interact with one another to create a self-perpetuating cycle that leads to inertia and less effective results from communication resources. Successful intervention in any area can have a positive effect on others. Here is how these factors interact.

*Communication is an afterthought:* Critical decision trees in developing program strategy occur at the very beginning. Depending on what decisions are made, the entire program with its embedded communication implications goes one direction or another. If communication does not inform program strategy at the outset, no amount of excellent communication execution can save a flawed strategy. Communication is perceived then not to have added value, which in turns keeps it on the periphery of program planning ...an afterthought.

*Communication doesn't add the value it could:* Program expertise does not translate to communication know-how. Program staff says they value communication and fund it, but many do not understand what strategic communication is. As a consequence, many outreach efforts skip strategy altogether and focus on tactics and tools. Because many program staff define communication in those terms, and because they also assume they know how best to communicate the issues, the optimal communication solution is overlooked.

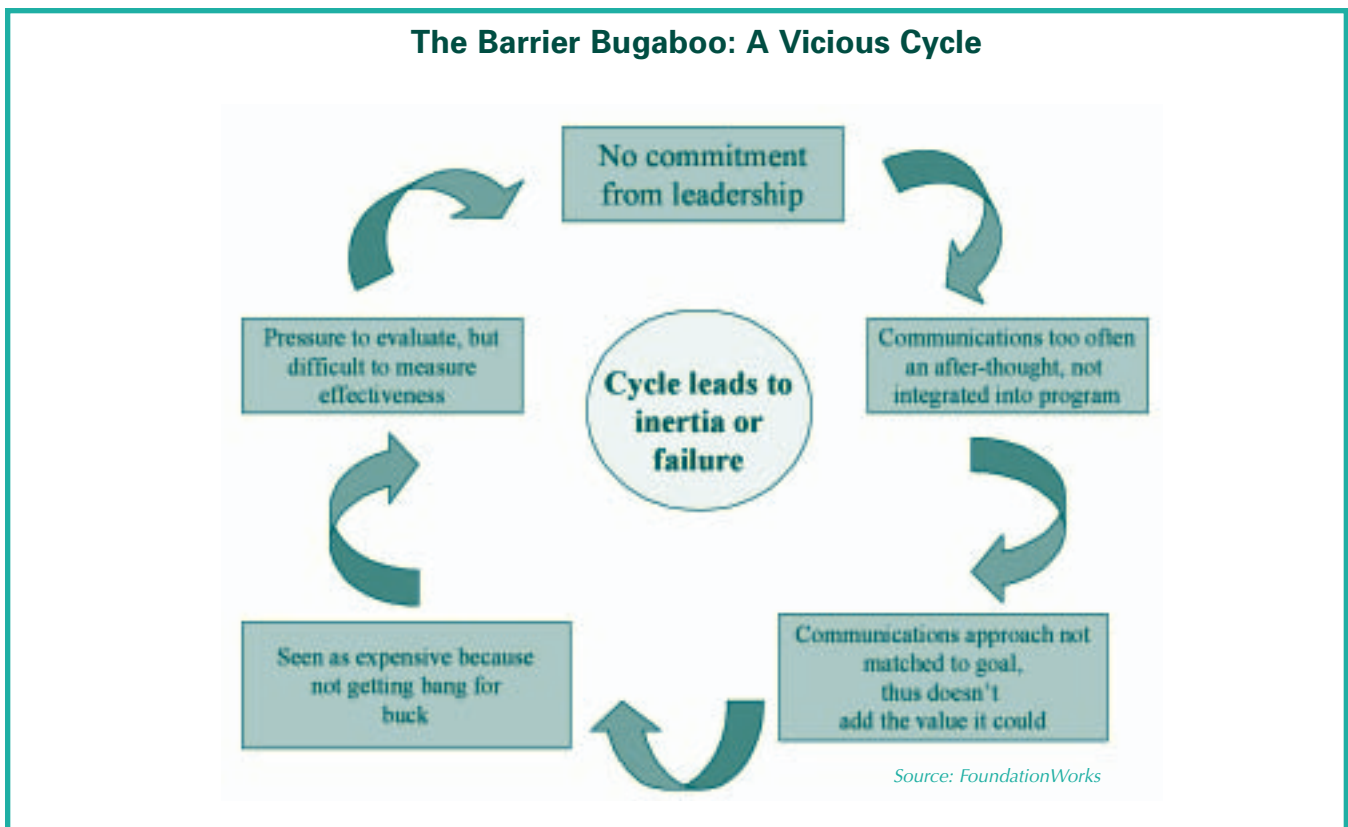
*Communication is expensive:* The ineffective strategies and inept choices of tactics that can result from a failure to integrate communication from the outset are the true costs of communication. Because communication is not well understood by many, staff may rely on expensive media in which the message and the outputs are controlled (such as paid advertising or television documentaries). These actual expenses are compounded by a mismatch of tactic to goal, and may therefore make little or no progress

towards program goals. The cost of strategic communication input at the earliest decision points is negligible compared to the cost of executing a communication campaign—particularly one that won't get the biggest bang for the buck.

*Communication is hard to evaluate:* Because communication is perceived as expensive, there is pressure to evaluate. Communication is not well understood by those who request evaluation, which constrains evaluative approaches. The sector seems focused on quantifiable measure, rather than on fine-tuning a mixture of indicators and approaches to measurement that may hold more potential for assessing communication effects. Leadership may be less inclined to pursue major initiatives where effects are difficult to measure.

### The Barrier Bugaboo: A Vicious Cycle

This cycle can be stopped if the sector begins to adopt some of the best practices that its communication leaders have implemented. In the end,



"foundations are fundamentally in the social change business," said one interviewee, and true social change cannot happen without communication.

*It can't happen without it. For me to assume that we are going to achieve the kind of change that strategically we're looking for without heavy investment in communication would be folly on my part. I just know we can't do it. (Program staff, food, large foundation)*

*I think communication, it's the only way any issue ever makes it to the forefront and it's the only way major change every takes place. (Management, environment, small)*

## LOOKING AHEAD

As the philanthropic sector continues to devote considerable attention to the question of how to improve the impact of grantee programs, the role for communication should not be overlooked. These findings suggest that foundations can strengthen performance and make the most of their resources by:

- 1) Working with program staff and leadership to expand awareness about the potential of communication to advance program goals, and what it takes to accomplish communication targeted to social change; and
- 2) Cultivating a strategic mindset within the foundation with regard to communication so that those funds allocated for communication initiatives can be leveraged for greater effect.

Foundation leaders can create a communication culture that will yield benefits for their institutions and for their grantees.

## SPECIAL THANKS

FoundationWorks wishes to thank the foundations, affinity groups, and most especially the individuals who so generously agreed to share their experiences, insights, and ideas with us in the course of this study. We also thank Edge Research, particularly Lisa Dropkin and Pamela Loeb, for their expert assistance with the survey.

## ABOUT FOUNDATIONWORKS

FoundationWorks is a new organization devoted to helping foundations and their grantees make more effective use of philanthropic resources to accelerate social change. FoundationWorks will apply for nonprofit status by the end of the year.

For more information, please visit [www.FoundationWorks.org](http://www.FoundationWorks.org), or contact either of us:

Lynne Murphy  
[Lmurphy@FoundationWorks.org](mailto:Lmurphy@FoundationWorks.org)  
(703) 759-7444

Vikki Spruill  
[Vspruill@FoundationWorks.org](mailto:Vspruill@FoundationWorks.org)  
(202) 667-5400

# APPENDIX: PARTICIPATING ORGANIZATIONS

Abell Foundation  
Annie E. Casey Foundation  
Beldon Fund  
Charles Stewart Mott Foundation (3 interviews)  
Carnegie Corporation  
Edna McConnell Clark Foundation  
Enterprise Foundation  
Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation  
Gordon Moore Foundation (2)  
Hewlett Foundation (2)  
John Merck Fund  
Joyce Foundation  
Kaiser Family Foundation  
Kansas Health Foundation  
Lazar Foundation  
Lily Endowment  
Mariah Fund  
McCormick Tribune Foundation  
McKnight Foundation  
Merck Family Fund  
Munson Foundation  
Open Society Institute  
Otto Bremer Foundation  
Pew Charitable Trusts (2)  
Rockefeller Family Fund  
Rockefeller Foundation  
Robert Sterling Clarke Foundation  
Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (2)  
Shefa Fund  
Smith Richardson Foundation  
Summit Fund  
Surdna Foundation  
Tortuga Foundation  
Turner Foundation  
Wallace Global Fund  
W.K. Kellogg Foundation (3)  
Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation

Association of Small Foundations  
Communication Network  
Consultative Group on Biodiversity  
Council on Foundations  
Grant Makers in Health





FoundationWorks  
1731 Connecticut Avenue, NW  
Suite 500  
Washington, DC 20009  
Tel: 202.667.5400  
Fax: 202.483.9354  
[www.FoundationWorks.org](http://www.FoundationWorks.org)