

Recession prompts stronger efforts from nonprofits

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Nonprofits are increasingly altering their communications strategies and tactics to counter the effects of the recession. They are reevaluating messaging, forging partnerships, and turning increasingly to social media to meet fundraising goals in a tough year.

Judy Vredenburg, president and CEO of [Big Brothers Big Sisters of America](#), (BBBS) which matches adult volunteer mentors with children aged six through 18, says that while the organization is known for its volunteer opportunities, it's not "broadly known as a place to donate." So this year, it made that point a key piece of its strategic communications plan, and the organization says it's doing fairly well in this year's attempt to surpass last year's revenues by 2%.

BBBS is also incorporating facts and figures about the positive impact its organization has on its kids in its messaging. In addition to top rankings from watchdog organizations like [Charity Navigator](#), the nonprofit commissioned a study with Harris Interactive to demonstrate its effectiveness.

"With this strong data and an environment of increased scrutiny and transparency, Big Brothers Big Sisters is an organization that can be relevant and can make the point of accountability and the difference we're making," says Vredenburg.

Outreach to corporate partners is also proving critical for nonprofits. And with many consumers encouraging corporations to [maintain their CSR efforts](#) throughout this recession, for-profit businesses have good reason to continue these partnerships.

"Companies understand and true leaders aren't giving up," says Alison DaSilva, EVP at Cone and head of its cause marketing offering. DaSilva adds that nonprofits are taking steps to "leverage their brand to make sure they're raising as much money as possible" through corporate partnerships and other communications endeavors.

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BBBS has a number of corporate partners including Comcast, which, according to Vredenburg, is a relatively new relationship, and has benefits beyond donations and volunteers.

“That happened in this environment and they’ve been extremely important to us to get free media,” she said.

Of course, like most organizations, nonprofits are also wading further into social media and new technologies, not only for advocacy, but to find donors. At Big Brothers Big Sisters, the team had started accepting text message donations, and is also experimenting with video.

PR pros who work with nonprofits, though, emphasize the need for charitable organizations to focus on solid brand building to further any of these efforts and to reach their financial goals.

“Fundraising is tough, but we counsel that it’s not just going out to ask for money, but when you make that request, that you’re in the best branding position,” says Mike Swenson, EVP and CMO of Barkley, which works with a number of nonprofits and cause marketing clients, including March of Dimes.

To that end, the American Cancer Society (ACS) [launched a \\$15 million rebranding campaign](#) in April which it had been planning for months, despite the economy. It is also tweeting, and using its blog and Facebook page to promote the effort.

“The issue of brand relevance becomes more important,” says Greg Donaldson, national VP for corporate communications at ACS, who adds that it is “sticking with the fundamentals” of what the organization is and its mission. “We’re reconnecting with consumers and patrons and doing it in ways that are contemporary and relevant. We have to be ready when the marketplace turns.”