“Communications as a tool for building transparency, trust and sustainability in community foundations”

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Session: Philanthropy and the Third Sector

Abstract
As a result of the competition for funds and because of the recent scandals involving civil society organizations, the demands for more transparency and accountability and the growing need for responsiveness, communications - clear, precise and reliable - are becoming vital for nonprofit organizations. In community foundations, these kinds of communications are an absolute requirement, since one of the most important roles they play is to be guardians of the communities’ main assets: resources and knowledge. This paper discusses communications tools which community foundations should rely on, in order to deal with the challenges of the present environment. This research is a result of the author’s participation at 2007 Emerging Leaders International Fellows Program, at the Center on Philanthropy and Civil Society, based at City University of New York (CUNY), in New York, USA.

Community foundations are public grantmaking organizations that seek to improve the quality of life of the population from a specific geographic area. Their role is to bring together people who care about their communities acting as leaders, conveners and facilitators. They partner with donors to build permanent endowments and other funds from which they support their activities and increase their impacts in the communities they serve. Based on the concept of community foundation and its unique characteristics, the purpose of this study is to identify and analyze the role of communications in these institutions and how communications can help to build transparency, trust and sustainability in community foundations. It is supported by the fact that community foundations publish and issue communications tools more often than other kinds of foundations. This research paper also analyzes how communications help community foundations to achieve their goals and increase their impacts. It also helps other nonprofit organizations to design their communications plan.

Methodology
The author of this paper selected four case studies to support the research. It is also based on readings, site visits, seminars and conversations with practitioners and scholars from the fields of community foundations, grassroots organizations, other kinds of foundations and communications. Several publications were analyzed and helped to find the best practices on this issue. The main questions that guided the work are:

- What is the role of communications in community foundations?
• Can effective communications help building trust, transparency and sustainability? How?
• Which are the main targets of community foundations communications tools? Who are their audiences?
• How can communications help community foundations achieve their goals and increase their impacts?

Conclusions
The research helped the author to reach the following conclusions:

1. Community foundations are more interested in issuing publications and annual reports and maintaining websites than other types of foundations, as numbers collected and interviews showed us.
2. The importance of communications for community foundations is driven by the strong competition in the sector;
3. Because of the nature of community foundations as guardians of community resources, they need to operate with transparency and keep donors and potential donors, grantees and community representatives informed about their actions, programs and impacts;
4. The role of communications in community foundations involves: strengthening the concept of community foundation and make clear to different audiences how they operate; reinforce institution identity; working with transparency and being accountable; building relationships; and showing the impacts;
5. The role of communications in community foundations helps to build transparency, trust and sustainability; therefore, effective communications are vital to community foundations;
6. The same conclusions found for community foundations can be applied to other kinds of nonprofit organizations as a way to achieve excellence in communications and to reach transparency, as a consequence;

Bibliography
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Publications & Reports

Unpublished papers & training materials

Websites
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Silicon Valley Community Foundation www.siliconvalleycf.org
The Community Foundation for Greater New Haven www.cfgnh.org
Westchester Community Foundation www.wcf-ny.org
WINGS www.wingsweb.org
W.K. Kellogg Foundation www.wkkf.org