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Nonprofits need to communicate about their work in order to attract vital support from clients, funders, volunteers, board members and public policy makers. This publication examines the challenges and lessons learned from six sector-based workforce development programs as they attempted to build their communications capacity. Their experiences should serve as a helpful guide for other nonprofits interested in communications.

Building Communications Capacity:
Sector Programs Share Their Experiences

Next to doing the right thing, the most important thing is to let people know you are doing the right thing.

– John D. Rockefeller

Many sector-based workforce development programs work very hard to do the right thing – in providing greater economic opportunity to low-income individuals, in creating value for employer partners who need qualified workers, and in generally improving the function of the regional labor market for the particular industry or occupation that is the program's focus. All too often, however, programs do not plan how they will communicate their good work, a critical element in building the demand for services that is a prerequisite for stability and growth. Strong communications is key to reaching the variety of people that contribute to the success of a program, including trainees in need of new skills and employers looking for new workers, as well as funders, public officials, board members, volunteers and other individuals whose talents and support a program might wish to engage.

Many programs believe that the ability of a program to engage in effective communications depends on the program leader and his or her natural talents in that realm. Some programs seem unaware that there are a number of concrete things they can do to improve their communications effectiveness – that communications is a learned skill and a key organizational capacity. There are communications tools and skills that program leaders and staff can learn and integrate into their operations to get the message out – to a range of interested audiences – about their programs' capabilities and accomplishments.

This publication discusses the experiences of six accomplished sectoral employment development programs that participated in the AspenWSI Communications Initiative, which was generously funded by the Ford Foundation. These programs received a modicum of support and a great deal of encouragement to focus on issues of communications and to work to improve the state of their practice. The purpose of this publication is to present the specific communications issues and challenges that each program faced and share the lessons learned as they engaged in a range of strategic and pragmatic activities to build their communications capacity. Moreover, while the focus of this initiative was on sector-based training projects, the challenges these programs

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faced and the strategies employed can easily be applied to other nonprofit organizations that are interested in broadening their communications capacity.

The publication begins with an overview of the communications initiative, including the six participating programs, the structure and goals of the initiative, and a summary of activities undertaken. We then highlight some of the communications challenges experienced by the programs, which may be shared by other sectoral employment development programs. We describe the basic steps involved in developing a communications strategy, and we devote a special section to market research and marketing, which were important areas of focus for programs participating in this initiative. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of the role of communications in increasing scale, and the importance of communications in expanding overall program impact.

Components of the Communications Initiative

The purpose of the communications initiative was (1) to facilitate learning about how communications activities can play a more integral role in enhancing the stability and growth of sector programs and draw relevant lessons for the field and (2) to develop a range of spokespeople for the sector approach from a diverse set of organizations with stories that could be leveraged to further raise the profile of sectoral employment development.

In selecting programs, AspenWSI staff sought to create a group that, taken together, would demonstrate the diversity of sector programs along a number of dimensions, including targeted industry, geography, and the range of partners involved in the initiative. In addition, staff worked to identify programs that had a documented track record of successful outcomes for low-income clients, strong spokespeople who could articulate current accomplishments, and the capacity to expand should resources become available. Finally, programs needed a desire to work on communications challenges and to express an openness to new ideas and approaches. The six organizations that participated in the initiative were:

- **Homeboyz Interactive, Milwaukee, Wis.,** operates an apprenticeship training program and Web development business that provide gang-influenced youth with the skills and experience needed to succeed in high-technology jobs.
- **Paraprofessional Healthcare Institute, New York, N.Y.,** supports the training of low-income women in paraprofessional health care skills and links them with affiliated home health agencies. PHI also engages in a variety of policy advocacy and business consulting activities related to improving both the working conditions and quality of care offered in long-term care settings.
- **Project QUEST, San Antonio, Texas,** engages employers, community colleges and others in coalitions in order to develop training projects that prepare low-income individuals for good jobs in a range of selected industries, including health care and business services. Project QUEST is a nonprofit organization developed through a community organizing effort, and its training requires between one and four semesters to complete.
- **Primavera WORKS, Tucson, Ariz.,** provides the training and support that helps homeless and low-income individuals become reliable, entry-level workers for Tucson-area employers. In addition to assisting with permanent placements, Primavera also functions as a day-labor service for Tucson-area businesses in need of daily workers, short-term crew work, or temp-to-hire positions. Primavera specializes in placements in construction,

janitorial, light manufacturing, data entry, landscaping and groundskeeping.

- **Seattle Jobs Initiative, Seattle, Wash.,** is an entrepreneurial effort that began within city government, but recently became an independent nonprofit entity. SJI specializes in the recruitment and training of low-income individuals for industries such as high-tech, manufacturing, construction and office occupations.
- **Westside Industrial Retention and Expansion Network (WIRE-Net), Cleveland, Ohio,** works with Cleveland manufacturers to provide workforce development and training, manufacturing improvement, community investment and redevelopment, and expansion and relocation services. Founded in 1988, the organization serves more than 150 members and stands as a model for employer-led associations around the country.

For this year-long initiative, each of the six participating programs received a $12,000 grant; professional media training; and a minimum of 30 hours consultation from Laufer Green Isaac (LGI), a California-based strategic communications firm. AspenWSI staff organized an orientation meeting for all project participants, designed to establish a common understanding of the goals of the initiative, kick-start the planning and goal setting for communications strategies and begin the process of shared learning. The meeting included a one-day media communications training, conducted by LGI, to help program leaders build the skills needed to effectively represent both their own program, and the field of sectoral employment development more broadly.

During the initiative, AspenWSI conducted site visits with participating programs, and facilitated periodic conference calls among the programs to encourage group discussion and learning. On-going individual contact between AspenWSI and program staff was also maintained in order for staff to understand the progress of individual communications projects and to facilitate the resolution of issues as they arose.

Programs were free to spend the $12,000 as they saw fit, in support of their communications goals. Some programs used the money to support staff members dedicated to communications work, others chose to use the money for discrete market research activities or the development of marketing materials. All of the programs supplemented the money with resources of their own. By the end of the project, the six programs had experimented with a range of communications strategies, tools, and products. Most efforts resulted in concrete gains and progress toward addressing their stated communications challenges; others contributed to a greater understanding of how to explain and market their services effectively. **Table 1** *(see page 4)* summarizes some of the activities and accomplishments of the six programs.

Communications Challenges for Sectoral Workforce Initiatives

Communications professionals often discuss a communications continuum that begins with unawareness and proceeds through awareness to engagement to action. For an organization to determine its approach to communication, it needs to carefully define the action that it ultimately hopes will occur, and the actor (audience) that should undertake this action. Only then can the organization think about how to reach that audience, how to construct a message that will resonate with that audience, and how to move the intended audience toward the desired action.

In working on these challenges, it became clear that sectoral initiatives face a number of challenges, some of which are common to

Table 1: Summary of Communications Initiative Activities

Homeboyz Interactive	• Created elevator message • Produced brochures • Developed presentations to orient business advisors • Interviewed past and present clients • Developed branding plan • Redesigned Web site
Paraprofessional Healthcare Institute	• Secured media coverage of program • Produced marketing materials for consulting services • Redesigned Web site • Developed plan and partnership to market and distribute program video • Developed relationships with new employers • Completed speaking engagements to raise program awareness
Project QUEST	• Completed customer satisfaction survey with employers • Collected testimonials from past and present clients/employers • Created marketing materials for potential employers, other members of business community
Primavera	• Conducted focus groups with current and potential employers • Developed TV spots, billboard ads and reworked existing advertising • Sponsored a booth at the Southern Arizona Home Builders Association's home and garden show • Expanded base of business customers through tailored communications
Seattle Jobs Initiative	• Redesigned Web site • Created a communications package to support policy education and describe need for change in organizational structure • Trained six staff members in media and communications
WIRE-net	• Produced communications package that can be tailored for different target audiences • Redesigned Web site • Conducted focus group with current and potential employers to glean external perceptions of services

many nonprofit organizations and others which may be more specific to industry-based workforce development organizations.

Misconceptions about the level of market research needed

The communications initiative highlighted that market research and marketing are core activities that programs should integrate into their work. Both funders and program leaders may assume that because industry-based workforce development programs focus on an industry, undertake labor market research, and work with employers, no additional market research is needed. They may contend that existing information is sufficient to inform a program's communication strategy. But experience shows that while programs may understand the workforce issues of their industry, there can be significant gaps in the information they have about their "target market." Among programs in the initiative, market research is a vital and ongoing need, one that is distinct from research executed as part of initial program and training design. Programs learned anew that having a good product does not spontaneously generate demand for the product.

Example: Primavera WORKS wanted to expand its day labor business. The organization had a good understanding of the dynamics of the day labor business, pathways to profitability, and how its business model was unique. Primavera had a good system for preparing workers for jobs, and had a number of satisfied, repeat customers. It appeared that Primavera had a sufficient understanding of its market. Yet in order to grow the business, Primavera needed a better understanding of why existing customers were satisfied and a better definition of the potential target market of new customers. Conducting market research helped Primavera answer questions about the types of businesses that should be targeted first, how many of those businesses were in the area, and which specific aspects of its service should lead in sales pitches.

Organizational complexity and targeted communications to multiple stakeholders

Part of what makes industry-based workforce development programs effective is their capacity to play multiple roles and facilitate change at the individual, organization and systemic levels. Yet that also makes these initiatives difficult to describe in a sentence or convey in a sound bite. Programs often combine a series of roles that may include acting as an enterprise, a training provider, a management consultant, an employee advocate and a policy educator, to name a few. Program staff needs to communicate in the languages of the business, policy, media and philanthropic worlds about the role the organization plays for each target audience. There is an inherent tension between developing specific messages in specific language for specific audiences, and developing a general message in consistent language that the whole organization can use to build the image and brand of the organization. This tension must be recognized in order for sectoral employment development organizations to make informed choices about the messages they need to promote and to whom.

Example: PHI is a very complex organization, with activities ranging from workforce training to policy advocacy to research to business consulting. Associated with this range of activities are different audiences, including policy makers, long-term care workers, health care business leaders, and workforce development organizations, for instance, and of course each of these audiences uses a particular jargon and a set of issues that frame their thinking. Trying to develop a one-size-fits-all method of describing the organization clearly would not work. PHI had a unifying theme in its focus on the long-term care workforce, but needed to tailor its language to better communicate with potential business clients. For example, in communicating with businesses, PHI staff reports, "We have moved away from abstract language that described us as a 'workforce development and advocacy organization' to identifying PHI as an organization that focuses on 'recruitment, training, and supervision of direct-care workers within the long-term care system…' This language is likely to resonate much more effectively with our potential clients."

Programs bear the burden of bridging the cultural gap between nonprofits and for-profit partners

Research by Laufer Green Isaac suggests that the nature of many service-oriented, nonprofit organizations is to talk in terms of attributes and mission, perceiving the organization's role as educational.[1] This approach can fall flat with businesses that are more comfortable with brief, sales-oriented conversations that emphasize ways to maximize profits. Given that businesses generally do not look to nonprofit organizations when they want to find new

[1]For more information on this research see "Hidden Agendas: Stereotypes and Cultural Barriers to Corporate-Community Partnerships" (Los Angeles, California: Laufer Green Isaac, February 2004); available from http://www.lgicommunications.com.

employees, business services, or the various other services the organizations in our group had to offer, the programs necessarily became responsible for learning the for-profit culture and language, and reaching out to business partners in terms they understand.

Example: The Seattle Jobs Initiative (SJI) wanted to sell its supervisory training to area employers. That "product" furthered its mission with respect to improving the working conditions for the low-wage workers it trains. SJI also hoped to make money, and hence further support the training and services provided to low-income workers. In discussing the factors that helped SJI reach out to businesses and turn them into customers, Anne Keeney, SJI's director of New Product Development, notes: "I think what worked for us is: one, being well-connected to the employers; two, having some credibility with them; ... and three, really being immersed in the language and literature of our business community. In Seattle, I read the *Puget Sound Business Journal* that comes out weekly. I read the *Seattle Times* business section every day." Keeping up with the business press and understanding local business concerns was one technique SJI used to build the organization's capacity to speak the language of business. SJI also hired consultants and staff with strong private-sector marketing experience to further enhance its abilities to attract businesses. SJI found that adopting a sales-oriented business approach was useful in developing good relationships with area companies.

SJI completed a beta test of its supervisory training, but in the process realized it needed more staff capacity than was available to promote the new offering effectively, given its other pressing objective: becoming independent of the mayor's office. The beta test itself, however, created a positive image for the organization among area employers, who continue to contact SJI to secure the organization's services.

Internal conflicts about messaging and self-promotion can hinder communications strategy

Many programs approach self-promotion efforts with mixed feelings. Part of their primary mission is to promote the success of their worker-clients, therefore, promoting the program can appear to diminish the accomplishments of the individuals themselves. In addition, programs have a real concern about stigmatizing their clients in the workplace, and thus will often play down their connection with specific employees. Programs in this initiative learned, however, that "flying under the radar screen" and not garnering attention for their services made it difficult to both articulate the case for repeat business among existing employer-clients as well as to expand demand among the local employer base, so as to grow their core business and their ability to serve clients. Programs need to embrace some form of marketing in order to expand their ability to achieve their mission. A key aspect of this is developing a message for private sector clients that describes the business value of their services within the context of their social mission. When done thoughtfully, the social mission can be a point of differentiation within a competitive market, rather than an indication of a lack of professionalism or inferior quality services.

Example: Project QUEST interacts with employers in a variety of ways, but like most sector employment programs, two primary and on-going sources of interaction revolve around understanding the skills that are most in demand, and connecting trained individuals with jobs. Project QUEST has done this well in the San Antonio area, providing employers with more than 1,800 trained individuals who had the skills they needed, and achieving impressive employment outcomes for participants. Yet, in surveying its customer base, Project QUEST was surprised to find that a number of employers that had hired clients nevertheless indicated no knowledge of Project QUEST. A closer look at this phenomenon revealed that Project QUEST had been reluctant to tell employers about its role in supporting the educational success of specific individuals. Yet by not taking some credit for providing services, Project QUEST was anonymous to these employers. Given the importance of employer support in maintaining and expanding funding, which comes primarily from the city, Project QUEST realized it needed to elevate its visibility. As part of the initiative, Project QUEST collected testimonials from employers and incorporated them into marketing materials that are used to raise visibility and awareness of its role among employers, which it hopes will translate into increased demand for services.

Lack of dedicated resources

While this challenge is listed last, it is certainly not least. But it can only be addressed if an organization's leadership decides strategic communications is a critical organizational function. Insufficient resources are often stumbling blocks for many program capacity-building efforts. In the absence of a discrete effort such as the AspenWSI Communications Initiative, industry-based workforce development programs – like the majority of nonprofit organizations – often lack the time and resources to focus on communications and marketing. In addition, programs may also lack the incentive to seek funding for communications work. Philanthropic funders generally do not expect programs to use communications to build organizational capacity, and programs generally prefer to focus on "real work," i.e., the direct provision of services. Obtaining funding for communications functions is difficult and requires program leaders' time to convince funders that marketing and communications are integral to continued implementation and program expansion. To finance communications work, program leaders must first decide that strategic communications needs to be an integral part of the organization's work and build this strategic function into the organization's overall budget.

Communicating Effectively: The Basics

Communications should be considered a strategic function within an organization. Communications is not simply about "getting the word out," or "selling your services" or raising funds. Rather, communicating strategically means an organization is making every effort to understand and influence the behavior of various targeted audiences (e.g., potential trainees, business customers, public officials, etc.), who are critical to the organization's success. Strategic communications should be integrated into an organization's overall strategic plan and used to help the organization achieve its stated objectives. As such, it is essential for an organization to carefully examine its objectives before identifying the types of communications products or activities to produce and use.

Step 1: Establishing the organization's objectives

Although many organizations have an overall mission, they often have not articulated a concrete set of objectives they are working toward. Arriving at objectives often requires some research to determine those that are the most feasible and potentially rewarding. In addition, it is helpful to think upfront about how to measure progress toward achieving those objectives. It can be a fair bit of work to carefully define the desired outcome, the anticipated steps toward achieving that outcome and the set of "players" who will be instrumental in achieving the desired outcome. Often consultations with individuals inside and outside the organization are needed to flesh out the relative importance and feasibility of a range of objectives. Establishing and prioritizing a concrete set of objectives is a key step in developing the action plan for a communications strategy.

Defining (and Re-defining) Your Objective: Homeboyz Interactive

Homeboyz Interactive (HBI) came to the communications initiative with the goal of expanding the scope of its operations. At the time, plans were well underway to launch an office in Chicago, which would be followed by further expansion into Los Angeles. As part of this expansion, HBI sought to reach out to various parties whose support would be important to the success of the new office, including business customers interested in its services, employers interested in its graduates, and various public, nonprofit and philanthropic entities interested in its mission. To determine which services to emphasize in a new market, HBI asked Laufer Green Isaac to conduct a survey of its current and past clients. What the organization learned, however, it found a little disconcerting. Overall, customers were very satisfied – LGI noted they were among the most satisfied customers they had ever interviewed. However, HBI learned that its nonprofit status caused many to expect that HBI might not be quite as competent as other firms, which could be a barrier to attracting new work. In addition, many found HBI through a chance word-of-mouth or other personal connection – the overall awareness of HBI as a competitor in that market appeared relatively low. Further, the market for Web design and other technology services had become much more price sensitive and competitive than when HBI was founded.

LGI recommended that HBI focus on "mission compatible" organizations, such as nonprofit organizations, philanthropy and educational institutions located in the Midwest, allowing the face-to-face contact that tends to be important to this market segment. The survey results, however, forced HBI to take a hard look at its business strategy and the amount of work required to generate a sufficient volume of business to continue supporting the Milwaukee office, as well as a Chicago office. HBI determined that the timing was poor to pursue a major expansion. Based on business customers' reactions to HBI's services, the organization focused on its competitive advantage within the education and nonprofit market segment in Milwaukee and re-oriented its objective to building business in Milwaukee, focusing on a more tightly defined market. While HBI's overall goal to expand operations remained in place, its newly defined objective had clear implications for a reconsidered communications strategy.

Step 2: Defining the audience

An organization must describe specifically who it is trying to reach. There may be one audience or several discrete audiences that an organization needs to reach to move its agenda forward. For each one, the organization should consider how this audience is relevant to organizational objectives, and what in particular this audience should do. For example, an organization may want to engage business in its operations, but does it want to bring new business partners to the table or more fully engage current business clients? What types of business do they seek to reach – what industry, size, geographic location, etc.? How many businesses of the desired type are located in the target market? Where do those businesses get information? In working through such questions, an organization can develop a better sense of both appropriate methods and media for communicating with the target audience and the challenges they may face.

Defining the Audience: Westside Industrial Retention and Expansion Network (WIRE-Net)

WIRE-Net began the initiative with the goal of expanding its resource base. The organization initially described three objectives: increasing its membership and associated dues revenue by 50 percent; expanding non-dues sources of earned revenue; and increasing grant funding. Each of these methods of expanding revenue, however, required targeting different audiences, developing different outreach strategies, and creating different messages about the value of WIRE-Net's services. WIRE-Net needed to determine which objective to pursue first, and then identify the implications for its communications strategy. In prioritizing its objectives, WIRE-Net considered the resources available, including the resources from the communications project, as well as existing staff capacity and other assets, and how those resources matched what might be needed to pursue different communications strategies.

Given those resources, WIRE-Net leadership decided it was an opportune time to focus on generating revenue from manufacturers in Cleveland. The organization's leadership believed that expanding its membership was the way to go, as that would allow more companies to get to know WIRE-Net, and vice versa, and ultimately would put WIRE-Net in a stronger financial position while also contributing to its mission of retaining and strengthening the manufacturers of Cleveland's west side.

Before embarking on this campaign to expand its membership, however, WIRE-Net engaged in some market research. Specifically, LGI was asked to conduct focus groups with current members and with non-members. WIRE-Net staff observed these focus groups, and the experience changed WIRE-Net's thinking. WIRE-Net learned that member companies were unaware of the full range of WIRE-Net's offerings, but were nevertheless intrigued. Conversely, non-member companies seemed to lack the motivation to become WIRE-Net members or the capacity to pay for WIRE-Net services. Thus, WIRE-Net determined that "cross-selling" to its existing membership appeared to be a more fruitful approach to expanding its resource base. Having gone through this process to more specifically identify the priority audience (current business members, who could use more of WIRE-Net's services) and the audience's current view toward WIRE-Net's services (positive, but limited understanding of the full suite of services), allowed the organization to develop a communications strategy designed to move the target audience toward a specific action (purchase of more than one WIRE-Net service).

Step 3: Developing and delivering the message

Once an organization has a clear picture of the audience and the specific actions desired from this audience, the organization then needs to carefully consider the kind of communication that will reach the target audience and prompt action. In developing the message, it is helpful to consider the frame in which the target audience operates – what it cares about, what it believes, and how it makes decisions. It also is important to think about communicating in language that is familiar to the target audience. In addition, it is critical to understand how the target audience normally obtains information and the sources it finds credible. The goal is to make messages clear and compelling to the target audience – be it a client group, policy makers or the general public.

Step 4: Evaluating results

As mentioned in Step 1, objectives should be concrete, providing a clear picture of how an organization can assess the effectiveness of its communications approach and determine whether adjustments are needed. Developing a concrete objective facilitates evaluating results. Many of the participating organizations in this initiative had a clear, measurable objective, such as: "expand our client base by 20 percent" or "convince five business customers to pay for supervisor training." But some objectives – such

Developing Messages: Seattle Jobs Initiative

The Seattle Jobs Initiative (SJI) came to the initiative with a number of "messages" it needed to develop. One of SJI's major concerns was an upcoming transition from operating out of the mayor's office to becoming an independent nonprofit organization. SJI needed clear and compelling language about the value of its work to the public, and how its approach to workforce development differentiated the organization from other entities. Having a clear and compelling public message was important for the organization to attract continued public and philanthropic support. In addition, SJI had a number of stakeholders with whom it would need to communicate effectively about its changing status. These included community-based organizations, government agencies, business leaders and others. Staff needed a consistent core message, but also needed to tailor messages and language for these specific audiences.

At the time the project began, SJI was preparing its message, and used LGI's services to help articulate a more tightly focused message highlighting the organization's results. In tailoring messages for different audiences, the organization might put more emphasis on different kinds of results. For example, for business audiences it would speak about employee retention and how that translates into a bottom line benefit for employers. For community-based organizations SJI would note the advantages of retention that accrue to workers, such as steady income and stable employment. The organization also decided that more staff members should participate in media/communications training. Such training helped ensure that all the key SJI staff was putting out the same message, and it also guided the development of SJI's information packet about its spin-off from city government.

SJI staff felt that the training and work on the messages was critical to keeping staff on the same page and presenting a consistent "brand" as an organization. In addition, SJI staff noted that the message development and packet of materials were helpful in recruiting board members for the newly independent organization. After participating in the AspenWSI Communications Initiative, SJI leadership felt that a strong communications capacity would be an important element of the organization's future success, and sought to fund and hire a communications director.

as, "create a positive public image in order to maintain city funding for training" – are influenced by a wide range of factors apart from the communications campaign, such as overall budgetary difficulties, political change, and so on. In such situations, a program might want to more carefully distinguish between the overall goal of maintaining or expanding public funding, and specific objectives that can reasonably be expected to contribute to that goal and which might be more easily measured. For example, in the case above, an objective might be: "three public officials will cite our program as a model for workforce development efforts." Success against such an objective is clearly easier to measure. This example also demonstrates the point mentioned in Step 1, that a concrete objective is easier to translate into an action plan. Evaluating the results of the communications activity is important in determining its effectiveness and ensuring that an organization gets the most from its investment.

As described above, the basics of a good communications plan include: (1) defining the objective; (2) defining the audience; (3) developing and delivering the message; (4) evaluating the results. Yet, as the examples demonstrate, the process is not necessarily simple, and the steps are often inter-related and iterative. The examples also underscore the importance of market research in supporting the process – i.e., in testing the feasibility of objectives, refining the definition of the target audience, and in developing messages. The next section offers further discussion of the market research strategies programs used to help them with this process, and some of the lessons learned about that aspect of developing a communications strategy.

Market Research & Marketing

While the strategic communications process described is clearly broader than market research and marketing, these activities played a prominent role in the AspenWSI Communications Initiative. Most of the participating organizations hoped to improve their communications with their business clients, and market research and marketing were integral to that goal.

Market research

Market research is critical to: testing the feasibility of a communications objective, understanding your audience and its needs as well as your audience's perception of you and of your competitors, and tailoring and testing your messages and discerning the most effective avenues for delivering messages. In sum, market research is key to developing and delivering products and services that will be in demand.

Market research should be part of a feasible marketing plan and research costs should be included in the budget for developing and sustaining programs and services. For sector programs in particular, it is important not to confuse knowing workforce needs in the targeted industry with knowing how to market workforce products and services to the targeted industry. For example, WIRE-Net staff knew a great deal about how a shop floor operates among the manufacturers it works with, had considerable information about the demographics and trends in the manufacturing labor market, and knew a fair amount about the competitive challenges firms in the area faced. But knowing all this did not tell staff how to reach out to new firms and raise visibility, or how to package and price services to attract the target market. Market research was needed to answer these questions.

Market research can be done in a variety of ways, depending on the questions posed and resources available. In the context of this initiative, four of the six participating organizations invested in formal market research, and all used some less formal techniques to better understand their target market. **Table 2** *(see page 12)* describes the questions posed and market research techniques chosen by participating organizations.

As revealed in **Table 2**, groups participating in the initiative used the professional communications firm to conduct a variety of market research. Two groups chose to conduct focus groups and two did surveys, although of very different types.

Focus groups

The focus groups were professionally designed and conducted, with staff members from the workforce organizations observing from behind a one-way mirror. Focus groups provided the opportunity to engage a potential target audience deeply and gauge responses from participants in a variety of ways, providing rich information. For example, in one focus group, staff was able to see how participants responded to various marketing materials, as well as hear their reactions to potential messages about the value of an organization's services. In another case, the moderator began by talking generally about the service that the organization offered to see how quickly the organization's name came up, and which other organizations respondents mentioned. The moderator could then explore how respondents felt about the various organizations named.

The focus group participants also were selected carefully in order to incorporate a certain mix of participants both within and between groups. Specific goals in the mix (e.g., 50 percent of respondents from the west side of Cleveland) were established as part of the screening process, and participants were recruited according to those criteria, such that the group approximated the desired cross-section of organizational types and individual experiences. WIRE-net also chose a feature that it used to distinguish between participants in each focus group – whether the company was a current member. In general, focus groups offer the opportunity for in-depth discussion and the chance to explore similarities and differences in response across specific groups.

Table 2: Market Research Purposes and Methods

Purpose	Methods
To define target market in terms of size, location, industry niche, etc.	• Review the Yellow Pages, business association membership directories, other public/local information sources – Primavera, HBI • Consult regional economic development and industry-specific data sources – All
To better understand the characteristics and preferences of the target market likely to utilize the program's products or services.	• Collect and review client or customer data that documents key characteristics (for businesses – industry/occupation classifications, # of employees, key contact, # of workers hired from program, etc.) – Primavera, Project QUEST, WIRE-Net • Focus group research w/current and potential customers – Primavera, WIRE-Net • Mail and telephone surveys – Project QUEST, WIRE-Net, HBI
To determine effective messages and modes of communication that will resonate with the target audience or market.	• Focus group research w/current and potential customers – Primavera, WIRE-Net • Solicitation of informal feedback on messages and format of existing communication materials from credible industry insiders – PHI, SJI
To inform product/service development, refinement or expansion possibilities.	• Focus group research w/current and potential customers – Primavera, WIRE-Net • "Beta test" of product – SJI
To gauge and document customer's level of awareness and/or satisfaction with products and services.	• Mail and telephone surveys – Project QUEST, WIRE-Net • Focus group research w/current and potential customers – Primavera, WIRE-Net

The participant organizations found the focus group experience valuable to them on several dimensions. As noted above, it can provide a very deep sense of why a client or other audience may respond in a particular fashion. The experience of observing the focus groups from behind a mirror, particularly as a team, provided the staff with a visceral understanding of its target market and a team-building experience that contributed to a shared vision, useful in driving the strategic plan forward. On the downside, results of focus groups rely on a relatively small sample of respondents. Thus, multiple focus groups of each particular interest group, and/or a follow-up survey of a larger group of respondents are often recommended to engage more respondents and provide greater reliability of results. WIRE-Net, for example, planned a survey of member and non-member firms in the Cleveland area as a follow-up to the focus group work, with the survey questions based on findings from the focus group.

Client surveys

Another common method of market research is client surveys. In the course of this initiative, two very different client surveys were conducted. Homeboyz engaged LGI to conduct a telephone survey of current and former clients. This format generally achieves a better response rate and allows for greater use of open-ended or discussion questions. In having this survey conducted by an independent, third-party, Homeboyz received valuable information about how it is perceived within the market place, and how firms make purchasing decisions with respect to the types of technology services Homeboyz offered.

Project QUEST engaged LGI to conduct a very different kind of a survey. Project QUEST was completing marketing materials, but it had never collected testimonial or other information from clients to highlight in promotional materials. LGI designed a mail survey to elicit such information from Project QUEST's customer base. Response rates for mail surveys are typically low, but conducting a mail survey is less resource intensive. For Project QUEST's purpose, the mail survey format worked well.

Marketing

Market research helps programs with internal functions, such as refining products and services, developing strategic plans, and creating internal agreement on program priorities. But the research must lead to the implementation of a marketing or strategic communications plan. Marketing involves outreach to target audiences to position and promote products and services. In the case of organizations in this initiative, almost all of the market research and marketing activities involved reaching employer-customers more effectively and enticing them to utilize consulting and placement services.

In developing a marketing approach, an organization faces many choices. Some organizations choose to employ several techniques and evaluate which ones pay off. Primavera WORKS adopted that approach, and thus its experience highlights several marketing lessons *(see page 14).*

Collectively, the programs in the initiative undertook a range of marketing activities. To determine which marketing strategies programs found most effective, AspenWSI staff asked participants to rate the value of the various techniques one year after the communications initiative ended. In particular, we asked programs to indicate which strategies they actually used, to rate the value and cost, and to provide pertinent comments about their experience. **Table 3** *(see page 15)* lists many of the marketing techniques employed and provides a summary of programs' assessments of each strategy. Organizations with limited resources may find their ratings and remarks helpful in determining which strategies offer the best bang for the buck.

In re-contacting programs, we also found that they were applying their communications capacities in new ways. For example, Primavera noted that it is collaborating with organizations in Phoenix and Albuquerque that would like to establish organizations similar to Primavera WORKS, and that the first issue raised in its "learning circle" was marketing. WIRE-Net has secured funding to do a comprehensive communications plan as well as a more in-depth membership survey. One respondent noted, "As we grow, this work [communications] is

Some Notes on Working with a Professional Communications Firm

A number of the organizations in this initiative had not previously worked with a professional communications firm. While many found the overall experience of great benefit, it was not without its occasional frustrations. To maximize the experience, the following points may be helpful:

- **Do your homework**. Working with a high-quality professional communications firm can be expensive, so being clear at the outset about what the firm is expected to accomplish is important. Time is indeed money in this situation – often on the order of $200 per hour, depending on the market and the services provided.
- **Develop internal resources.** Examine your organizational structure and consider where to build internal staff capacity, or contract for services. Several of the organization's involved in the initiative hired or planned to hire someone who would play a senior role and take responsibility for strategic communications to continue ideas generated by LGI. Others seemed more likely to develop a relationship with a local firm to provide assistance.
- **Research an array of firms.** There are many firms that offer communications services, and they all have strengths (and weaknesses). Once your organization has defined its needs, seek out a firm with the expertise and experience that matches your needs. Ask specific questions. For example, if you would like a firm to generate media coverage, ask about reporters it has worked with in the past. If you are looking for marketing materials, ask for examples of previous work. Talk to former clients if possible. Choosing the wrong firm can be costly, so don't be shy about verifying its capability.

Implementing the Marketing Strategy: Primavera WORKS

Primavera WORKS' primary goal was "to increase its base of business customers by 20 percent (from 50 to 60 businesses) and to devise marketing strategies to sustain a healthy pace of expansion over time." LGI facilitated focus groups for Primavera within targeted industries. Based on those results, Primavera improved its existing marketing materials and revised its message. Unlike Homeboyz, Primavera found that bringing the nonprofit nature of the company to the forefront engendered trust. This was still in line with its core message, which emphasized reliability, quality, responsiveness and customer service – the bottom line for its clients.

Primavera also engaged in several marketing approaches to raise visibility, including:

- advertising in the Yellow Pages
- paid and Public Service Announcement TV spots
- radio announcements during prime morning driving hours
- billboard advertisements
- personal visits to clients
- networking through memberships in local business and trade organizations
- a booth at a local home and garden show

Billboards, while not something planned originally, seemed a potentially viable option as it became clear that the targeted employers were commuters. Similarly, radio appeared helpful in reaching drivers while in their cars. However, Primavera found that, given its geographically concentrated markets, other less costly strategies could be used to reach potential customers. Similarly, Primavera found that the cost of membership in a specific business organization should be carefully weighed against the number of active members that are potential clients, and the avenues that membership offers to reach these clients that are not otherwise available. Some associations can be expensive to join, and offer few unique marketing opportunities. Primavera found paid advertising in the Yellow Pages to be a useful technique for reaching its business customers, but it also was expensive relative to other approaches.

One strategy Primavera found to be effective was to sponsor a booth at a local home and garden show run by the Southern Arizona Home Builders Association. At the booth, eight hours of free labor were raffled, but to enter the raffle, employers had to provide contact information. This tactic brought Primavera 100 new business contacts for potential follow-up. Primavera found this approach particularly helpful with its residential market segment. Another creative tactic that helped them build employer relationships was to conduct site visits with clients, and bring a small thank you gift, such as home-baked cookies. The cookies were appreciated and made Primavera memorable.

Overall, Primavera surpassed its original goal, expanding its customer base by more than 40 percent, to 71 business accounts. It also achieved a higher rate of growth in its residential customer base during the communications initiative, which staff believes is due to the communications and marketing strategy.

becoming more essential to our organization, and there seems to be more and more of it to do. We're trying to keep the lessons of the project in mind and think strategically about our goals as we develop a more public profile."

Lessons learned:

- Market research and marketing one's products and activities are critical aspects of program management. As such, the leadership of an organization must make them a priority. That means staying involved in marketing decisions and providing adequate financial resources.
- Even small investments in marketing can yield significant program results.
- Marketing new products or services, however, needs to be supported with the staff capacity to close the deal or make the sale. As one participant put it, "inquiry does not equal sale."
- To gauge the success of marketing activities, organizations should track costs and evaluate outcomes.
- An organization's promotional materials must be consistent. Likewise, staff messages must be consistent and reflect key concepts employed in the organization's marketing materials.
- Do not be afraid to promote good work! Testimonials and "success stories" are like gold. Programs should routinely collect feedback and document success stories. We found that few programs in the communications initiative had success stories "at the ready."

Table 3: Program Perspectives on Marketing Strategies

Strategy	Value	Cost	Comments
Brochure/info packet development and dissemination	Medium-High	Low-High	Development costs ranged widely depending on the amount of staff time required and the production value of the final product.
Yellow Pages listing	High-Low	High	Different types of businesses will be more or less likely to use the Yellow Pages, and this is important to understand before investing in such advertising.
Vendor booths at conferences	Medium-High	Low-Medium	For nonprofits, getting space donated or at a reduced rate can help keep costs down. This can be a useful way to concentrate staff time in making a number of contacts. Often requires resources to follow up with new contacts.
Billboard and sign advertising	Low	High	For targeted markets, this strategy can be too diffuse to justify cost, which can be considerable.
Radio & TV Public Service Announcements	Low	Low-High	Costs vary depending on the level of resources dedicated to developing the spot. Spots may not be frequently run or run at odd hours when target market is not listening/viewing.
Paid radio & TV advertising	Low-Medium	High	One organization reported receiving many calls based on its advertising. Associated costs can vary depending on the media market, becoming prohibitive in high-cost areas.
Face-to-face visits with customers	High	Low-Medium	The main cost is staff time, which can be considerable. For some, however, visits are the only way to "close the deal."
Securing coverage in local business journals and newspapers	High	Low-Medium	Coverage helped with name recognition and often brought inquiries from new potential customers. Staff resources are required to cultivate contacts and "earn" media coverage in desired outlets, such as trade journals or local business press.
Web site development and promotion	Medium-High	Medium-High	Web sites are a lot of work. Outside developers can be costly; content development takes time; and maintaining the site takes constant attention. For programs in the initiative, however, the payoff was worth it. Some noted that they received many business contacts this way, and one finds this a useful and cost-effective way to allow customers access to account information.
Speaking engagements	High	Low-Moderate	Effective if geared to the right audience. Helps build awareness among potential opinion leaders. Costs depend on associated staff time.
Collecting/using testimonials	High	Moderate	Having a peer business testify to value of your service gets attention. Costs depend on the amount of time needed to "secure the blessing" of the source.
Professional memberships	Low-High	High	Memberships in Chambers of Commerce can be helpful in making business contacts and selling services in some markets. Since membership costs are high, one should get involved at the committee level to make the most of this investment.

Conclusion

Effective communications can have a number of payoffs for nonprofit organizations. Programs often use strategic communications to raise funds, attract new clients, recruit high profile board members and solidify public support for their work. Communications work is a key part of setting an organization's strategy and requires the commitment of an organization's senior leadership. All of the organizations in this initiative had the active support and participation of the primary decisionmaker in the organization. And several of them were inspired by their participation to continue investing in their communications capacity. Indeed, for most, it was clear that they could hardly afford *not* to invest in this work.

Having studied sectoral employment development programs over a number of years, AspenWSI staff has been impressed by the resourcefulness and accomplishments of sector programs. Yet most business people, public policy makers, foundation program officers, and other key stakeholders will not look for sectoral programs in order to learn about them, nor will they sift through vast quantities of information to better understand them. For programs to gain and maintain the support of key constituencies, they must actively describe their capabilities and accomplishments in ways that are clear and compelling. It is, of course, difficult to get what you want if you don't ask, and how you ask can make all the difference. A strong communications capacity is key to helping an organization achieve its goals.

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