

CASE STUDY 4: DEFINE

BE HEARD! WOODCOCK FOUNDATION

When Alexandra Christy, executive director of the Woodcock Foundation, asked grantees how they were getting their message out, the answer came back loud and clear: “Not well! We need your help.” Christy checked to see what services communications consultants might provide, but she concluded that “our grantees were talking about needing something that didn’t exist.” Christy wanted to provide grantees with customized help.

In 2005-06, the foundation established a new communications program, BeHeard! The application process was intentionally challenging “because we wanted to be sure that people understood how much work it really was,” Christy recalled. Woodcock selected five organizations, each of which received a full assessment by a communications consulting firm. “This is not a remedial program,” consultant Doug Hattaway explained. “It’s for organizations that are doing something worth talking about.”

The first step in the assessment process was to conduct a “stakeholder perceptions analysis,” which entailed interviewing people who represent the audiences — usually donors, but also volunteers, lawmakers, and others — that the grantee wanted to recruit. Next, consultants looked at each organization’s brand, going beyond the “functional message” (what the organization does) to look at emotional appeal, social dynamics, and “aspirational message” (what drives people to become involved).

After the assessment phase, each grantee received an additional \$25,000 from Woodcock to carry out a communications plan with the help of a communications consultant — the same one, or a different firm of their choice. Each grantee was required to secure matching funds upfront, at the time of the initial application, from another funding source. “The group then had a guaranteed \$50,000 to implement the consultant recommendations,” Christy explained, “and we had six or seven new funding partners, including Mott, Packard, and Nike, that were committed to field building in communications.”

Many grantees went into the program saying they wanted to get more press coverage. What they ended up with were clearer definitions of what their organizations do and how they are perceived — and new ways to mobilize key audiences through communications. For example, Common Good Ventures, an organization that provides business advice to nonprofits, used dense consulting lingo. In the assessment process, they learned that donors and volunteers were not drawn to give or participate because of the aura of expertise; rather, they wanted to be part of a social group. “So they started to present themselves more as a group of businesspeople who devote their talents to improving their home state of Maine by helping worthwhile nonprofits,” said Christy. “They immediately got a better response from their target audience.”

Iara Peng, director of another grantee organization, Young People For, explained that the assessment helped identify when and why participants in their fellowship program became inactive. “When we failed to communicate with the fellows effectively — that’s when they dropped out,” Peng said. The organization re-thought how they were communicating with fellows from start to finish: recruitment, application, outreach, retention, and alumni community.

Another grantee, the National Institute for Reproductive Health, proposed to focus narrowly on the “framing” and “messaging” of certain issues in the pro-choice movement. Hattaway urged them to take a step back first and think about “how to talk about what we do as an organization,” recalled the institute’s communications director, Mary Alice Carr. With Hattaway’s help, the organization clarified its objectives, defined its audiences, redesigned its website, and linked communications to program. Whereas communications previously received little emphasis in the organization, she concluded, “communications is now our compass.”

Information on the BeHeard! initiative is at woodcockfdn.org. The Messaging Project of the National Institute for Reproductive Health is available at nirhealth.org.