

Soapbox Engage Blog

Online engagement news and strategies for changemakers

Grassroots Marketing Basics for Nonprofits

by **Tim Forbes** on November 04, 2021



Grassroots marketing campaigns can be an effective way for nonprofits to raise awareness about their cause, expand their support base, and even raise money. They're also a valuable way to mobilize your current supporters to share their passion for your mission with others.

With all kinds of different marketing and networking strategies out there, it can be tough to keep up with best practices and strategies to use each of them effectively. Have no fear! We created this intro guide to help you get the basics of grassroots marketing for your nonprofit.

Table of Contents

- [Grassroots marketing basics for nonprofits](#)
- [7 keys to nonprofit grassroots marketing success](#)

Grassroots Marketing Basics for Nonprofits

Grassroots marketing usually begins from the "ground" up. Typical fundraising or marketing campaigns use a strategic message from your nonprofit's leadership that you hope will connect with many people. In contrast, grassroots marketing campaigns usually target a small group of people, hoping that the message or information will spread organically to a broad audience.

While the goal of grassroots marketing is still to connect with many people, the idea is to create content that your audience actually wants to share. These campaigns are different from typical marketing campaigns because the goal is to connect with a small audience using content they want to share with people in their network.

Benefits of grassroots marketing campaigns

Beyond the obvious benefit of grassroots marketing being more cost-effective than many other marketing strategies (which is a clear plus for nonprofits on shoestring budgets), nonprofits can enjoy other potential benefits from these types of campaigns.

Increase authentic engagement with potential donors: When done well, grassroots marketing campaigns can [bring a new level of authenticity and relevance](#) to your advertising and fundraising. This increases the likelihood that your audience will engage more deeply with your message.

Highlight the voices and perspectives of valued supporters: People [tend to trust recommendations from those they know](#). Grassroots marketing capitalizes on this human trait by highlighting and empowering your valued donors and supporters to tell others about your mission or cause!

Reach a more targeted audience: Large email fundraising campaigns and social media "blitzes" are valuable for nonprofits, but they usually need to use more general messaging to resonate with a broad audience. With a grassroots campaign, you can focus on one specific group of people and really tailor the message to them. This is where really knowing your supporters and donors comes in handy.

Potential disadvantages of grassroots marketing for nonprofits

With grassroots marketing or fundraising, the organization starts the process and lets the audience take over from there. This "spontaneous" momentum that makes grassroots efforts exciting can also come with some potential risks or disadvantages to consider before launching a grassroots marketing or fundraising campaign.

Lack of control of the timeline: Grassroots marketing usually relies on word-of-mouth and people "sharing" content via digital platforms (email, social media, etc.). This process takes time, and you aren't necessarily in control of the process. So, if you need to expand your donor base or accomplish another task quickly, this strategy is probably not the best option.

Lack of control of the messaging: Though most grassroots campaigns start with well-crafted and strategically designed content, a nonprofit usually doesn't control exactly what information spreads. This could turn out poorly if people misunderstand or accidentally (or intentionally) change the message.

Grassroots marketing efforts are generally unpredictable: Unlike most other fundraising or marketing strategies, grassroots campaigns usually are unpredictable because they rely so heavily on human emotions, proper timing, and other external factors nonprofits typically have very little control over.

7 Keys To Nonprofit Grassroots Marketing Success

Grassroots marketing requires connecting with a specific group of people within your audience of donors and supporters. The goal is to create content that inspires them to share your message and invite others to join them in taking action. It's similar to viral marketing because you're encouraging people to take action. The difference is, you're targeting a smaller, specific audience in hopes that the message spreads from there.

Here are some specific keys to success when creating a grassroots marketing or fundraising campaign for your nonprofit.

1. Know your target audience well

We've said it before, and we'll repeat it, nonprofits must understand their audience very well for any and all fundraising and marketing strategies. Take time to research your target supporters to identify trends so you can create informative content that appeals to the emotions of your audience.

For example, [The American Cancer Society](#) capitalizes on the emotions of cancer survivors and families impacted by cancer. Each Relay for Life event has a lap honoring individuals who won or lost their battle with cancer. This targeted campaign usually mobilizes families and friends of cancer patients to take action on behalf of their loved ones.

2. Think outside the box and inspire action

A grassroots marketing or fundraising campaign aims to get a small group of people to take action. Don't be afraid to think outside the box and look for inspiring, relatable, memorable content.

Perhaps you're now thinking of some of those guerilla-style PR stunts we see from time to time from businesses or organizations.

One [risky grassroots marketing campaign](#) that was definitely outside the box came from Mandic Cloud Solutions, an online data storage provider. Their target audience was businesses and organizations with outdated data storage solutions. They held a mock funeral outside a cathedral in Brazil, laying small caskets out. Each contained an old computer server symbolizing data storage and security technology that needs to be put to rest.

It was a risky campaign for sure, especially given the religious symbolism used in the PR stunt. However, it did get people talking, and many businesses did decide to upgrade their data storage technology!

3. Storytelling can be a crucial part of grassroots marketing

As with many things in the nonprofit world, storytelling can be a key to grassroots marketing success. Because grassroots marketing usually explores your target audience's emotions in some way, [stories can be powerful](#).

Whether you want to tug at their heartstrings, spark anger, elicit joy, or any other emotion, a story can accomplish that! If people feel represented or impacted by your content, they're likely to share it far and wide.

Do you remember the [Kony 2012 campaign](#) from the charity, [Invisible Children](#)? This grassroots campaign aimed to make Joseph Kony, a cult and militia leader, indicted war criminal and International Criminal Court fugitive, known worldwide for his crimes against countless Ugandan children. Their 28-minute video was viewed more than 2 million times globally. People who had never heard of this justice issue in Uganda--or of Joseph Kony--were suddenly aware of the plight of thousands of children as people shared the video far and wide.

Strategic and powerful storytelling sparked an international conversation about child soldiers and children trafficked for other crimes.

4. Start with a hyper-focused target audience

While the ideal might be to have your own international grassroots marketing success story, no grassroots campaign starts internationally. Instead, successful campaigns begin by focusing on a particular target audience. The goal is to create content that connects SO well with that group that they cannot help but share it far and wide.

5. Visual content usually does better in grassroots marketing

Visual content in grassroots marketing campaigns **usually gets shared more frequently** than other types of content. Graphics, photos, videos, and presentations tend to get people's attention. Use that to your advantage when creating your grassroots marketing content.

For example, Samaritan's Purse **created a "how-to" video** showing the best strategies to pack their traditional "Christmas shoeboxes." Their niche target audience is individuals learning how to pack their shoeboxes, but they're going for a clever, fun approach that people will want to share for laughs (spreading the word about Operation Christmas Child).

6. Don't forget to include a specific call to action

At the risk of being painfully obvious, don't forget to include a specific call to action in your grassroots campaign efforts. After all, your goal is to inspire people to take action--whether it's to donate to a specific campaign, purchase a product in your nonprofit's store, or share content to raise awareness.

7. Be prepared to capitalize on trending topics and current events

Part of the power of many grassroots marketing efforts is that the content is current and relevant, **relating to trending topics or current events**. Part of the key to success here is being able to capitalize on those trending topics quickly (without compromising quality).

It's equally important to know which current events or trending topics your organization should leverage. We can all probably think of an ad campaign or fundraising effort that was current but perhaps not sensitive or tasteful. For example, unless it's an issue that directly relates to your specific mission or cause, it's probably wise to avoid any grassroots marketing content related to current political events or other topics that might be misunderstood as tone-deaf or insensitive.

This is one example of an organization using current events strategically and powerfully. After the Boston Marathon bombing in April 2013, One Fund Boston received more than \$72 million to support the victims of the bombing because Curtis Clough, a Cleveland resident, was watching the marathon and tweeted the One Fund Boston organization using the hashtag

#BostonStrong. The [hashtag went viral as a rallying cry of support all over the world](#). They were in a position to offer direct support to the victims. They sprang into action quickly to capitalize on people's eagerness to donate to the cause.

Grassroots marketing and fundraising can be a powerful fundraising strategy in any nonprofit's toolbox. One benefit is that organizations of all shapes and sizes can utilize the strategy well. Don't be afraid to experiment to see what approaches connect with your audience and ideal donors.

Here are three more resources to help you expand your fundraising efforts.

- **Peer-to-Peer Fundraising: What You Should Know and a Quick-Start Guide:** Peer-to-peer fundraising is one of the fastest-growing forms of crowdfunding in the nonprofit world. There are many reasons you should consider launching a peer-to-peer fundraising campaign, and this blog offers some basics and a quick-start guide to help you start your first peer-to-peer fundraising campaign!
- **How to Choose the Right Fundraising Event for Your Nonprofit:** Most nonprofits use fundraising events to raise large portions of their annual budgets. But big events can require more time to plan and advertise, and they usually have a higher overhead cost. It's critical to choose fundraising events that match your nonprofit's budget and execution capacities. This blog will help you select fundraising events that best fit your nonprofit.
- **6 Salesforce Apps Nonprofits Will Love:** Salesforce is arguably one of the most advanced CRM systems for businesses and nonprofits alike. As a development professional, you may already use a CRM system. Still, even if you're new to Salesforce, some great apps can help you grow your audience, increase your fundraising revenue, and make your systems more efficient. This blog offers a list of our top picks of Salesforce apps for nonprofits.