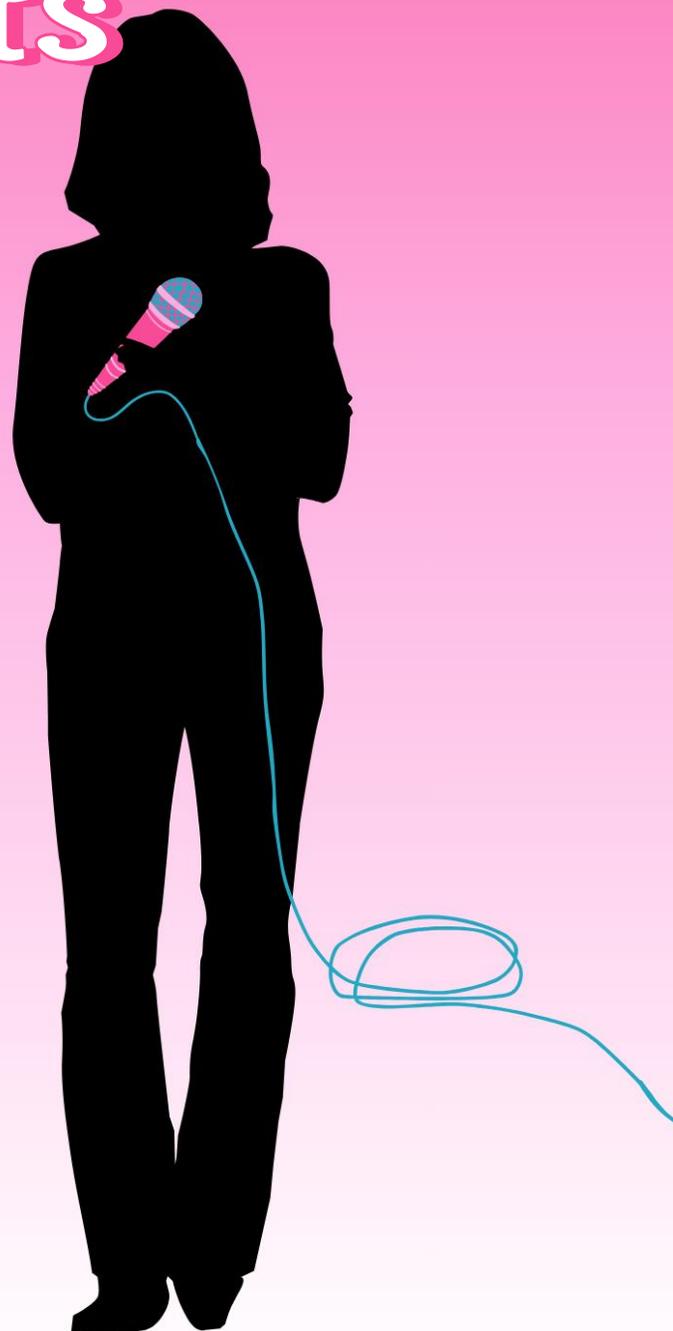


Barbie for Nonprofits

5 Lessons in Communication

A Sept. 5 news release named “Barbie” Warner Bros.’ highest-grossing movie *ever*, at more than \$1.38 billion worldwide. Its success got us wondering – what’s so special about “Barbie”? Why is everyone *still* talking about it, months after its release? And is there anything we can learn about effective communication from such a blockbuster?

Turns out, there is! (No surprise there.) We identified five communication lessons from “Barbie” that are applicable to nonprofit and foundation communication strategies.





Create Community

How can people demonstrate their commitment to your cause?

Community is powerful because everybody wants to belong. “Barbie” transformed theaters into a pink-clad community by inspiring dress-up. And they did it by simply prioritizing the color in their marketing.

When viewers started showing up adorned in bright pink outfits, people started talking. Choosing what to wear to watch the “Barbie” movie became its own event, and it generated more buzz about the film than marketing alone could have done.

So how can a nonprofit or foundation create community?

1. Follow in Barbie’s high-heeled footsteps and amplify **color**. Chances are you can think of at least one nonprofit associated with every color of the rainbow. One that comes to mind right away is the [Walk to End Alzheimer’s](#), which prominently features purple in its marketing and events.
2. Go big on a **catchphrase**. One of our favorites is the National Park Foundation’s “Explore More.” It captures the organization’s mission in a statement that encourages action.
3. Establish a **connection** between your work and other work your audience cares about. Essentially, piggy-back on another organization’s community, either by developing a formal partnership with that organization, or by elevating their work through your own communication channels. For example, [Mothers Against Drunk Driving](#) supports [National Police Week](#), and also has an “Officer of the Month” feature on their website.



Tap Into Nostalgia

Which shared memories can you connect to your message?

Nostalgia is effective because it triggers feelings of familiarity and fondness. The “Barbie” audience spans generations, and most movie-goers identify with the brand on a personal level. Watching with your sister may bring back memories of playing with your own Barbie Dreamhouse and Barbie Dreamcamper in your childhood home.

The film invoked that sense of nostalgia by incorporating elements of Mattel’s Barbie collection that were popular in the 80s and 90s (Greta Gerwig, who directed “Barbie,” was an 80s baby). Stereotypical Barbie drove the convertible every Barbie fan knows and loves, and Barbie Land was filled with our favorite dolls (Who didn’t play with Ocean Friends Barbie in the bathtub)?

When you give your audience such a strong, positive association with your work, your organization becomes memorable.

So how can a nonprofit or foundation tap into nostalgia?

1. Start with **storytelling**. The simplest way to harness the power of nostalgia is to frame your work in an emotionally resonant way. St. Jude Children’s Research Hospital often publishes kids’ artwork on social media. Who here didn’t draw or color as a kid? Sometimes there’s an ask, such as with this [Instagram post](#) inviting people to set up a birthday fundraiser benefiting St. Jude.
2. Play to the **senses**. There may be no better example of this than Girl Scout Cookies. (Samoas and the Tagalongs are some of our favorites.) Is your mouth watering yet? Tasty treats aren’t the only attention-getter. Smells can just as easily transport us to another time and place. (Walk into an elementary school cafeteria and tell us we’re wrong.)



Own Your Own Narrative

In what ways can you acknowledge historical injustices or inequities while forging a path forward?

Transparency goes a long way in building trust (or, at the very least, respect) with your audience. Barbie isn't (and never was) a perfect toy. While fans tout Barbie's positive impact, critics highlight Barbie's negative impact.

The movie nodded to this duality by positioning Barbie as both feminist and anti-feminist, recognizing the complexity of the doll's influence on American culture.

So how can a nonprofit or foundation own its narrative?

1. Clarify your organization's [core identity](#) – who you are, the big-picture what you do, and why it matters. You can't own your narrative if you don't know what it is, and if you don't define it for yourself, you risk being defined by others.
2. Develop a [core message](#) – a concise, compelling, and consistent way to talk about your work. Use your core message to acknowledge the challenges in your industry or sector, and to describe the ways your organization is addressing them.
3. Connect with your audience through **storytelling**. As mentioned above, stories resonate. When it comes to your organization's narrative, consider sharing stories about your leaders – what inspired them to pursue this work, and how their experiences inform the way they lead.



Empower Your Champions

Who are your biggest fans, and how can you support them?

The most successful organizations don't accomplish much on their own. They leverage the energy and enthusiasm of their biggest supporters to drive change.

In Barbie Land, it wasn't Barbie who led the movement to dismantle Kendome, it was Barbie's biggest fan: Gloria. Here's how Barbie empowered Gloria to drive change:

- She listened to Gloria's opinion.
- She supported Gloria's idea of reminding Barbies who they truly are by providing resources to take action.
- She uplifted Gloria's voice when Gloria pitched a new Barbie concept to the CEO of Mattel: Ordinary Barbie.

The results – Barbie Land restoration, reconciliation with the Kens, and Gloria's courage – came quicker because Barbie welcomed and encouraged her champions to act.

So how can a nonprofit or foundation empower its champions?

1. **Listen to your audience.** Whether on social media or in a feedback survey, take your audience's ideas and opinions seriously.
2. **Provide the resources your audience needs to take action.** Make it easy for your supporters to go to bat for you. A good example is this [ITIN awareness toolkit](#) developed by the Protecting Immigrant Families coalition for its members.
3. **Uplift the voices or actions of your strongest allies.** Children's advocacy nonprofit First Focus does this through their [#Champions4Children awards](#), recognizing the members of the House and Senate who prioritize kids' issues.



Flip the Script

How can you change what you say to emphasize what you mean?

Sometimes audiences get tired of hearing the same message over and over again, especially in a world saturated with sales pitches and political arguments and trending topics. If attention is waning, try refreshing your messaging.

The Barbie movie flipped the script on patriarchy by using the Barbies' oppression of the Kens to show how ridiculous it is for one gender to subjugate another. In the end, when the Kens' patriarchy is overthrown, Barbie realizes that it's better for *everyone* to have agency, as opposed to one group over another.

Approaching a well-known topic from a new angle renewed interest in it.

So how can a nonprofit or foundation flip the script?

1. **Reframe the problem you're working to solve.** Many economic development projects are organized in a top-down structure – government and investors making decisions without input from people in the community – and emphasize fixing issues, like poverty, malnutrition, and crime. In [DC's Ward 8](#), a new economic development initiative created a plan of action by tapping into the community's potential, leveraging residents' strengths and interests. Instead of solving the problem of poverty, they were solving the problem of economic development that doesn't involve the community.
2. **Demonstrate a different impact.** Have you heard the phrase, "My dog rescued me"? That's an example of demonstrating a different impact of pet adoption than what's typically described – saving a pet's life. Highlighting the many benefits of pet ownership *for the human* is one way an animal nonprofit might flip the script on adoption.