

# **Strategic Communications for Nonprofits**

A Step-by-Step Guide to  
Working with the Media

Second Edition

**Kathy Bonk, Emily Tynes,  
Henry Griggs, and Phil Sparks**

*A publication of the Communications Consortium Media Center*

Foreword by Larry Kirkman

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“This book is a must-read for any nonprofit organization that wants to have a voice in the marketplace of ideas where social policy is formed, debated, and promoted. I have worked on social justice campaigns with CCMC many times over the past 20 years, and I know from experience that the advice in this book works.”

—Wade Henderson, president and CEO, Leadership Conference on Civil Rights

“In the 21st century world in which we live, media dominates our lives and keeps us connected to everything that is going on, globally and locally. This book, and its authors, provides the tools to master the strategies, skills, and techniques of communications. Any nonprofit organization striving for social change must see it as one of *the* most important guidebooks in their tool kit of references and how-to tips for their communications work.”

—Donna Hall, president and CEO, Women Donors Network

“To make social change in this world it is imperative that nonprofit organizations think through how to tell their stories. Communication is a critical element in any strategic vision of change and the Communications Consortium Media Center knows how to do it. They are experienced, strategic, and thoughtful. This book is element number one in building a communication plan for change.”

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—Safiye Cagar, director of information and external relations division,  
United Nations Population Fund



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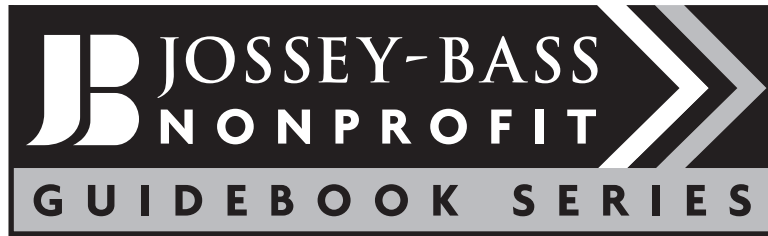
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**For Dick Boone and in memory of Lisa Goldberg.  
Thank you for your gifts of wisdom, patience,  
and unwavering support.**

# Foreword

Larry Kirkman, Dean,  
School of Communication, American University

**IN THIS GUIDE**, the Communications Consortium Media Center (CCMC) provides the compass points and tools that nonprofits need to strengthen their organizations and become innovative agents of social change—to engage, inform, and persuade their targeted public audiences and to recruit, involve, motivate, and equip their activist constituencies. CCMC’s knowledge is drawn from twenty years of experience advising organizations on their media operations and helping them conduct public education and issue advocacy campaigns. Since 1988, under the sustained leadership of Kathy Bonk, Phil Sparks, and Emily Tynes, CCMC has worked collaboratively with hundreds of nonprofits and scores of coalitions, creating a laboratory of professional practice that has explored the full range of strategic options and tested the payoffs for organizations and the causes they pursue. Their collective intelligence is distilled into best practices, vivid case studies, and proven methods for planning and evaluation. It’s more than a menu of techniques—it’s about how and when to use them, how to play them off one another, how to combine them into a comprehensive media plan. It’s about the integration of sophisticated message research, strategic media relations, powerful media products, targeted advertising, and online communications.

There are wide gaps at the intersection of media, technology, and democracy that nonprofits can fill—in policy debates, issue advocacy, and public education. When politicians fail to address the issues that matter, when news companies cut back on investigative reporting, when media barrage the public with fearsome and unintelligible images of catastrophe, making their audiences feel helpless and hopeless, nonprofits can provide the evidence and testimony that drive public engagement and promote solutions to social problems. They can speak up and talk back to the powers that be—whether

defending human rights abroad and civil liberties at home, closing the gap between economic haves and have-nots, framing global warming, or denying a call to war.

The very first edition of this book, *Strategic Media*, was published in 1992 by the Benton Foundation as part of a package of nine media and technology guides, with the title *Strategic Communications for Nonprofits*. I was director of the foundation and coeditor, with Karen Menichelli, of the series. We were on a mission—calling on nonprofit leaders to adopt an integrated and comprehensive approach to media. In the fragmented and cluttered media marketplace, many nonprofit leaders felt overwhelmed and demoralized. This series was a spirited response to the cynics who saw the media as a problem—not a solution.

The Benton series asserted the necessity for coordinated and consistent investment in communications. Major private foundations, including Ford, MacArthur, Carnegie Corporation, and Robert Wood Johnson, bought into the cause and distributed the set of guides to thousands of their grantees.

In 1999, CCMC picked up the banner of the Benton series with the next edition of this book, reviving the title *Strategic Communications for Nonprofits*. And now in this edition, it has restated and refreshed their lessons.

It's not news that nonprofits need to rethink their communications strategies for an Internet generation that has abandoned newspapers and national television networks and is tapping into multiple sources of information on demand and using and producing blogs. The digital generation wants trusted sources *and* attitude. It wants to talk back. It wants to have an ongoing conversation that blurs the traditional roles of reader and reporter, professional and amateur, personal and political, volunteer and voter.

The onslaught of the digital age has put us all on a new footing. As the media environment buckles and shifts, as new forms of technology emerge and mutate, the business, ethical, and creative challenges in communications are formidable. How do we connect to audiences who feel there is too much to take in, too much to do anything about, when everyone can have a channel and the tools of production are cheap and relatively easy to use?

Nonprofit organizations have valuable assets to deploy in the digital environment—knowledge and content, trust and brand. They are becoming news and information providers, linking directly to their audiences, building social networks, and partnering with media companies.

There is no easy road map for the emergence of a vigorous and inclusive public culture, but we need to anticipate it and can help shape it by working

across professional disciplines with media strategists, creative storytellers, and investigative journalists. Not doing so is a failure of nerve and imagination. And we have to ask the toughest questions about truth and transparency, credibility and conscience: Who has a voice? Who has access to the social, political, civil rights, and economic benefits of an information society? How do we adapt the standards and values of journalism to the creation of an enabling communications environment that we want to work and live in?

Nonprofits and their funders have a significant role to play. If we continue to get smart together, to reinvent our nonprofit organizations as communicating organizations, each of us, in our own way, can help determine the shape of things to come.



# Acknowledgments

**THIS BOOK IS** the result of many heads, hands, and hearts. We deeply appreciate the dedication of numerous members of our terrific CCMC staff: Jason Shevrin, Laura Rogers, Royela Kim, Susan Boerstling, and Kristen Hagan; they arrived at the office early, stayed late, and worked weekends to proofread or format the manuscript. Our thanks also go to CCMC staff members Linda Zerden, Micheline Kennedy, Donna Morris, Jenny Williams, Val Franchel, and Emily Breton for their encouragement and motivation. The members of our board of directors have been our staunchest supporters, and we are grateful for their confidence in us and their enthusiasm for our work. We especially appreciate the support of our board chair, Ken Nochimson, and our executive committee, comprising Raydean Acevedo, who helped keep us going on the final deadline day, Dick Boone, Al Kramer, and Marlene Johnson. Board members Frank Smith, Juan Sepulveda, and Wouter Meijer have been guiding lights. And, in the memory of Mal Johnson, we thank her and other journalists who have taught us about the importance of keeping relationships fresh and professional.

CCMC has been blessed with the talents of many individuals whom we consider a part of our extended family. A special thank you is due to Carole Ashkinaze, who edited the first edition and was especially helpful in meeting our final deadline for this edition; Joanne Omang, who helped edit and proofread while adding important insights into the first edition of the book; and Andrea Camp, a confidant and creative partner.

Much of the information in the book is a distillation of the experiences and insights of individuals whom we also consider to be part of CCMC's network of colleagues. We are especially fortunate to have had the opportunity to work with the following people: Thoraya Obaid, Safiye Cagar, and the IERD team at UNFPA the UN Population Fund, including Sarah

Craven, our office mate and trusted colleague; Donna Hall, Wendy Wolf, Margery Loeb, Friederike Merke, and Kathy Barry at the Women Donors Network; Beth Shulman, our partner who has enlightened us on low-wage work and more; Douglas Gould, a talented strategist; and Kelly Burke, a media-readiness coach.

Trudi Baldwin, the director of the M.S. Program in Strategic Communications at Columbia University, provided invaluable insights on improving this version of the book. She offered advice on a revised outline that enhanced greatly the understanding of strategic communications. Reviewer Emily Whitfield also made helpful suggestions and ideas.

At the exact right moment, Jason Salzman, president of Cause Communications, coordinated the second True Spin Conference in Denver. (This is a must-attend for any organization wanting to learn strategic communications.) We thank him for being such a great supporter and collaborator. His contribution to the field of strategic communications is unsurpassed.

A significant portion of the discussion on message development and polling was gleaned from our associations with pollsters Vince Breglio, John Russonello, Nancy Belden, Celinda Lake, and Geof Garin. The chapter on responding to a crisis and managing backlash could not have been written without help from Mindy Good for the original guide and our colleagues at the Annie E. Casey Foundation for the opportunity to work with their grantees. They provided valuable written materials from which we were able to glean concepts and case studies.

We have had the opportunity to develop and test the practices described in the book in part due to our work funded by many philanthropic organizations, donors, partners, and nonprofits. We especially want to acknowledge some of the friends and funders who have enabled us to venture into new areas of learning or to move forward during critical moments of an initiative. For these opportunities, we say many, many thanks to Sono Aibe, Peggy Ayers, Tony Berkley, Laura and Dick Chasin, Alan and Suzanne Dworsky, Kathleen Feeley, Nicole Gray, Susan King, John Kowal, Tom Layton, Cathy Lerza, Lance Lindbloom, Geri Mannion, Wanda Mial, Anne Mosle, Helen Neubourne, Greg Taylor, Kathy Toner, and Alandra Washington.

Thanks also to Diana Meehan and Gary David Goldberg for making our first grant and believing in us for the past twenty years.

Throughout this book, we have quoted many individuals with whom we have worked. We wish to thank each of them for allowing us to share their experiences. Their contributions have enriched the book and the life of our organization.



The Benton Foundation, with support from Charles and Marjorie Benton, Larry Kirkman, and Karen Menichelli, provided resources for a very early edition of this manual, for which we are forever grateful.

The first edition of this book was made possible in part by the Charles H. Revson Foundation. Eli Evans and Lisa Goldberg have been true believers in our work over the past twenty years, and we have been privileged to learn from both of them. Just before Lisa died unexpectedly in January 2007, she insisted we start working on a revised edition. She provided new ideas, insights, and the motivation to start rewriting. The statements and views expressed, however, are solely our responsibility.

Finally, special thanks go to our spouses and partners, Marc, Jill, Ben, and Ann. Again, we missed important weekends and evenings with you, but it has been well worth the sacrifice.



# About the Authors

**Kathy Bonk** established the Communications Consortium Media Center (CCMC) in 1988 and is its executive director. Over the past thirty years, she has been at the forefront of media campaigns that marked a sea change in domestic and global policies affecting women, children, and families with the support of major foundations and large donors. Prior to her work in the nonprofit sector, Kathy worked in government as a public information officer in the U.S. Department of State and in the Voting Section of the Civil Rights Division of the Department of Justice. She directed the Media Project for the NOW Legal Defense and Education Fund. She has a degree in communications from the University of Pittsburgh, and in 1988 was awarded a fellowship with the Kellogg Foundation's National Leadership Program.

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**Emily Tynes** is a founder of CCMC who has been involved in the field of communications for three decades. She has worked as a journalist, a public relations executive, and an activist. Following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, a period of unprecedented assault on civil liberties, Emily became the communications director for the national office of the American Civil Liberties Union. Emily's work as a communications strategist encompassed a range of issues, including women's rights, racial equity, energy and the environment, and the health concerns of women of color. She has a degree in English from Howard University.

• • •

**Henry Griggs** is a writer and media relations consultant and a founder of CCMC. Henry worked with the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities in Washington DC for twelve years, four of them as communications director. The group is noted for its highly active media relations program, and was named one of the “most effective nonprofits founded in recent U.S. history.” Henry was later communications director of Human Rights First in New York. A graduate of Harvard College, he worked in the election and survey unit of CBS News in New York, and conducted media events in thirty-five states for a national union of public employees.

• • •

**Phil Sparks** has twenty-five years of experience working in public interest communications. He specializes in family projects at CCMC. Phil was previously associate director for communications of the U.S. Census Bureau, director of public affairs for the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME); associate director of the President’s Commission on Pension Policy; and chief of staff to former U.S. Representative Thomas J. Downey (NY). He is a founder of CCMC.

# About CCMC: Communications Strategies for Policy Change

**CCMC WAS FOUNDED** in 1988 in response to the extraordinary, growing power of the media and of emerging communications technologies to shape public attitudes and public policy. The basis of our work is the principle that in a democratic society, informed dialogue is the cornerstone of good public policy. Our mission is to develop communications strategies for policy change.

From our offices in Washington DC, we have guided dozens of major communications initiatives that have influenced public debate in ways that respect and support individual rights, healthy families, cultural diversity, and a sustainable environment. We are proud to say that our work has helped refocus local, state, national, and global conversations about the future of communities, families, children, and youth, and about global health, population, and gender equality, with profound implications for policymaking. For example, a key tenet of our early work on the status of women around the world was our Women's Rights Are Human Rights campaign, which successfully redefined human rights to include an end to violence against women. A new idea at the time, this has informed every major international agreement since then, leading to measurable global improvements in schooling, health, self-sufficiency, and political influence for women and families.

CCMC works to mobilize public opinion through education campaigns with policy experts and organizations that share similar goals and concerns. Typically this is a collaborative process that involves dozens of prominent organizations working together for three to five years on specific communications objectives and goals. Our approach places heavy emphasis on research and cultivation of contacts at all levels in the United States and around the world.