



United Way E-Newsletter

A research resource for United Way organizations

Fall 2006

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Featured Article

"Drowning in Data"

Stanford Social Innovation Review

Author: Paul C. Light

To read more, go to: [Stanford Social Innovation Review](#)

<http://www.ssireview.com/>

Useful Links

[Philanthropy News Digest](#)

Find all the latest news in the philanthropy sector—all in one place!

[The Nonprofit Good Practice Guide](#)

A great resource from the Johnson Center for Philanthropy

[Kingman Museum](#)

The recipient of the 2006 Nonprofit Research Assistance Program

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Balancing Perceptions

Accountability built by connecting community members and organization leadership

Many studies have been completed, articles have been written, and organizations have set goals — all surrounding the topic of accountability. Accountability increases organization legitimacy, which is essentially the degree that nonprofits are "**informed about** and are **responsive to** their constituents" (Kissane, Gingerich, 2004). Most United Way organizations and other community nonprofits are striving to be accountable. Without a certain level of accountability—a connection with the community—problems arise.

A recent article from the *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* highlighted research showing the differences in perception of community issues among nonprofit leaders and community residents. The article asserts, "**Dissimilar perceptions** may strain the ability of nonprofits to be responsive to the local community in meaningful ways." (Kissane, Gingerich, 2004). The question becomes, how many nonprofit organizations, like the United Way, have this disconnect between the leaders of the organization and the community?

The reality is, many nonprofit organizations are facing a potential disconnect in perception because staff and leadership are **balancing the need to be accountable** to two different groups. This idea is explained in the article as "pulls" in different directions: a "downward pull" from the community—and an opposing "upward pull" from donors. It is likely that each organization differs with which "pull" has more strength; and even though the strengths may differ slightly, both the upward and downward pull are important.



The first step to reducing the disconnect between the organization and the community is understanding what gives strength to the "community pull" (community perception). One way to gain an understanding from the community is to ask questions to a group of residents and/or clients your organization serves. For example, your organization could discover **issues of**

concern within the community such as safety, substance abuse, or other social problems. Once leadership understands what the top issues are in the community—from the community's perspective—the organization will be better equipped to plan and meet the needs of the community.

Perspectives Consulting Group, Inc. has worked with United Way organizations to gain information and an understanding about community issues and community perception. For more information, visit our website at www.perspec.com.

Reference:

[Kissane, Rebecca J., and Jeff Gingerich. "Do You See What I See? Nonprofit and Resident Perceptions of Urban Neighborhood Problems." *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 33\(2004\): 311-333.](#)

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Evidence for Community Assessments

Recently, the Chronicle of Philanthropy featured an article highlighting the changes in United Way gifts, both up and down, for the year 2005. Many articles are available that tie increased giving with certain actions made by the organization. This article featured a quote by Brian Gallagher. "For the first time in 2005 we could, in a statistically valid way, say [to local United Ways], if you do this, you **will do better**" (Hoye, 2006). So what can your organization do that will help you do better? Answer: identifying major community concerns by means of a Community Assessment. Gallagher also declares, "in addition to fund-raising results, United ways that have promoted their role in solving problems have seen improvements in measures of public trust and public perception..." (Hoye, 2006).



Since most United Way organizations currently are moving towards Community Impact, and supporting larger community issues, it is important to have valuable information about the state of your local community. A community assessment is a great tool for coordinating secondary and primary research, and creating an invaluable tool for future efforts in the organization.

Visit our [website](#) to see more about Perspectives Consulting Group, Inc. and our experience with United Way organizations—check out an example of a community assessment project: the [Community Report Card](#).

Reference:

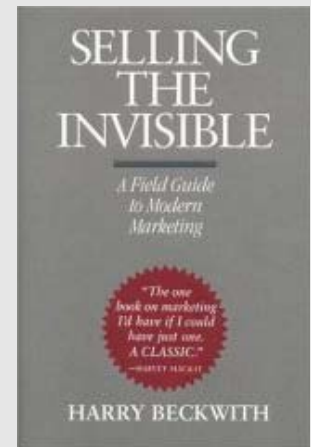
[Hoye, Sue. "United Ways Increased Gifts by Nearly 3% Last Year." *The Chronicle of Philanthropy* 14 SEP 2006: 26.](#)

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Look at this Book!

Selling the Invisible
Author: Harry Beckwith
Warner Books, 1997

In the preface, the author of *Selling the Invisible* targeted his book to people who work in service companies; however, his lessons apply to a much broader audience, including those working in United Ways. *Selling the Invisible* starts with a discussion of service quality, and then explores perception, positioning, branding and communicating in a series of short examples that demonstrate a simple message or truth.



As market researchers it is refreshing and appealing to see a book about marketing start with a discussion of market research. The second section of the book, entitled “Surveying and Research” drives home points that every United Way should heed; ask what donors and the community think, survey to keep in contact with your donors and the community, and have a third party do your surveys because people are willing to talk behind your back.



A fair number of pages in the middle of the book discuss the issue of positioning which in Beckwith’s terms means, “how you wish to be perceived.” When talking about how to create a positioning statement, the process applies directly to United Ways although the examples may be service businesses. The author ties together research and positioning stating, “Your position is all in people’s minds. Find out what that position is.”

One lesson especially appropriate for United Ways comes in the communication section of the book with the idea that one story beats a dozen adjectives. Especially when communicating with donors, United Ways should take advantage of the opportunity to tell a story, which makes your presentation more interesting, more personal, more credible and more persuasive according to Beckwith.

An intriguing idea comes near the end of the book when the author writes, “Shoot the message, not the messenger.” Beckwith’s thesis is that the problem may not be how we communicate the message, but failing to create a message that resonates clearly with the market. He discusses the idea from the point of view of a sales pitch for sales people, but for United Ways it applies equally as well when trying to communicate the benefits of a United Way to the

community, whether you are a staff member, board member or volunteer.

You may find more than a few ideas and tips about how to make sure the work of your United Ways is not invisible in *Selling the Invisible*.

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