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THE CHRONICLE OF PHILANTHROPY

OPINION

From the issue dated December 7, 2006

Newspapers Must Be Taught to Cover Charities

By Robert Egger

Over the next few weeks, newspapers around the country will be full of predictable, seasonal articles about nonprofit organizations.

Readers will be offered timely tips on how to support organizations that bring holiday cheer to the most-vulnerable Americans and dozens of tax-savvy ways to support good causes before year's end. Roundups of the big news of 2006 will most certainly include Warren Buffett's \$37-billion donation to charity as one of the most significant events of the year.

But by New Year's Day, charitable organizations will all but disappear from the newspaper pages, except for an occasional feel-good article about a local cause or an investigative report uncovering a nonprofit scandal.

It's time for change. Nonprofit leaders must now make a solid case for newspapers to cover charitable organizations with the same sophistication accorded to business and government. After all, when nonprofit assets are bundled together they become as large as the seventh biggest economy in the world; what's more, one of every 10 Americans works for a nonprofit organization.

Perhaps most remarkable, Americans donate more than \$200-billion to charity a year without the benefit of the kind of regular, in-depth analysis or subjective review that would allow them to invest their money with some hope of impact or social return on investment.

Too many kind-hearted, generous, and intelligent Americans make charitable choices based on feelings — what looks, sounds, or feels good. They have come to believe that the nonprofit world, which is being relied on more and more to hold our communities together, can run vibrant organizations and provide top-drawer services based on random checks in the mail or through the endless pursuit of grants, contracts, or gifts. Perhaps most dangerous, they have come to believe that a nonprofit group's ability to keep the nation's creativity vibrant, its communities safe, and its citizens healthy and engaged can be achieved with little or no administrative overhead.

The public needs hard news and newspapers to explain to them why it is so damaging to think that any organization can be effective in

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dealing with major social issues if it doesn't have money to spend and the overhead required to spend it with vision and audacity.

To make a real difference — and reward the public's faith in nonprofit groups — charities need to attract the best staff members, and that can't be done unless organizations spend part of their budgets on living wages and decent benefit and retirement packages to retain workers.

In particular, as nonprofit groups try to capture the interest of young people who are leaving college and the baby boomers who are retiring from the business world, they need to make a major push to attract the workers who are now poised to usher in a new era of organizational effectiveness and sustainability.

Good journalistic coverage of the nonprofit sector would also help the public understand that nonprofit groups, just like businesses, need to spend money on research and development efforts and that they will sometimes make mistakes as they develop strategies that could lead to crucial breakthroughs in how they serve society.

To demonstrate why nonprofit groups deserve the confidence of Americans, many nonprofit leaders have suggested that now is the time for ad campaigns designed to raise public awareness of charitable organizations.

But the information gap that has led to the loss of confidence in charities will not be solved through advertising drives. It can only be solved by pushing newspapers to produce informed, in-depth articles about nonprofit groups on their business pages and to put them there every day.

The idea should be easy to promote, especially at a time when newspapers are losing readers and ad revenue in epic proportions. The situation is so dire that several major newspaper companies have hired consultants or assigned their own reporters to try to determine what readers are looking for, and how to draw them back to subscribing.

One clear way for newspapers to bring back readers is for them to do a better job of covering the nonprofit organizations that are working across the country to solve problems that readers care deeply about. Americans are tired of hearing just about the problems — they want to know what is being done about them, not just by business or government, but by charities and foundations.

What's more, the tens of millions of people who work for nonprofit organizations would like to read more about the issues that are germane to their daily efforts. And on any given day, hundreds of thousands of people are looking for an organization where they can volunteer — so they would like the equivalent of a restaurant or movie review and timetable as they figure out how best to use their free time.

Another reason newspapers have a self-interest in covering nonprofit organizations is the potential for generating more advertising. In 2006, corporate America is expected to spend \$1.34-billion on marketing

ventures that benefit charity. If newspapers published more news about nonprofit organizations, businesses that want to show they care about the community will show up in droves wanting to be sure their ads appear next to such coverage.

I have met with numerous editors over the last two years, seeking to make this point. In meeting after meeting I have come to a startling conclusion: The reason nonprofit groups do not get coverage is that newspapers simply do not know how to cover them.

Newspapers look at nonprofit groups and see charity, and subsequently envision an "annual guide to giving" as the height of coverage and something of a philanthropic gesture for the newspaper to publish.

Nonprofit groups need to help newspapers understand that they want tough coverage about important issues, not fluffy, feel-good stories. With better coverage of the nonprofit world, new or weaker groups would learn how they can strengthen, expand, and grow, and those that are not well-run or whose time has passed will be replaced for the right reasons.

With the help of nonprofit leaders, newspaper editors and reporters can learn to produce articles that help readers determine which groups will really bring about social change and which groups are so slovenly organized or focused on their own egos that they will never do anybody any good.

As the nonprofit world evolves, innovative financial and social experiments are being developed, and they demand deeper, more consistent coverage of whether these efforts point the way to the future. Social enterprise, volunteer "time banks," small loans offered by microfinance organizations, and other innovations will require new measurements of how dollars and labor are mobilized to help social causes.

Maybe nonprofit groups should collaborate to develop our own Nasdaq or other measurement tools and then offer them to newspapers to publish alongside reports of how the stock market is doing and which companies are winners or losers.

The nonprofit equivalent would show which groups are making a real social impact and give investors the tools they need to reward boldness and achievement rather than continue today's survival of the cleverest approach, in which many of the best charitable programs can't attract the resources they need and poorly managed efforts garner plenty of donations by using cheap gimmicks or "cause du jour" marketing to lure ill-informed donors.

Without the regular flow of ideas, information, and analysis that newspapers provide about business and government, the nonprofit world will continue to operate in a state of chaos and competition. With more information will come an environment where good work is rewarded, fraud or failure is exposed and expunged, and everyone will

be better prepared to invest their time, energy, and ideas with confidence.

So, here's what nonprofit leaders should resolve to do as soon as this year's holiday coverage has come to an end. Enlist the head of your local Chamber of Commerce or Board of Trade, a few of your region's best-known philanthropists, as well as members of nonprofit boards and the people who are served by your local charities to make an appointment to visit the publisher or editors of your local newspaper. Make the case that strong nonprofit organizations are essential: They are good for business, which is good for the community, which is good for all.

But let them know one thing for certain: Today's nonprofit world isn't about charity, and its leaders mean business.

Robert Egger is president of the D.C. Central Kitchen, a leader of the Nonprofit Congress, and author of Begging for Change: The Dollars and Sense of Making Nonprofits Responsive, Efficient, and Rewarding for All (HarperCollins).



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