Communications & Outreach:
A Practical Guide for Nonprofit Leaders

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1. Executive Summary

In our first paper, we introduced the idea of digital infrastructure — the foundation that allows your organization to function, connect, and grow in an increasingly digital world. We walked through the first pillar: digital presence. How your organization shows up online, and whether people can find you, trust you, and engage with you.

This paper covers the second pillar: communications and outreach. How your organization talks to the people it needs to reach — donors, volunteers, program participants, partners, funders — and whether those conversations actually happen in a consistent, sustainable way.

You already communicate. Every email, every newsletter, every response to a donor inquiry is communications infrastructure in action. The question this paper addresses is whether that infrastructure is set up to support you — or whether it's held together by whoever happens to have time that week.

The technical case first: Communications and outreach in a nonprofit context is built on a set of interconnected tools and workflows: your email platform, your audience list, your segmentation strategy, your newsletter system, and ideally, some level of automation to handle the high-volume, repeating work that eats staff time. When these pieces are in place and working together, your communications become more consistent, more targeted, and less dependent on individual heroics. When they're not, every campaign starts from scratch, nothing gets tracked, and audience relationships degrade quietly over time.

The business case: Consistent, targeted communication builds trust over time. Donors who hear from you regularly — with relevant updates, not just ask emails — give more consistently. Volunteers who receive clear, timely information show up. Program participants who get follow-up and reminders stay engaged. The inverse is also true: an inconsistent communications presence signals an organization that's struggling, even when the program work is excellent.

This paper gives you the technical foundation to build a communications infrastructure that actually holds up — one that works even when your staff is stretched thin.

2. The Stakes — What's Actually at Risk

You know the stakes better than we do. You've experienced what happens when a donor doesn't hear from you for eight months and then gets a year-end ask. You've seen what inconsistent communications does to volunteer retention. You've felt the weight of trying to personalize outreach when your contact list is a spreadsheet with no segmentation and 600 rows.

What we can add is the technical picture: what the underlying infrastructure looks like when communications breaks down, what specifically causes it, and what a more sustainable setup actually requires.

One thing worth naming directly: the damage from weak communications infrastructure is cumulative and quiet. A donor who stops opening your emails doesn't send a message explaining why. A volunteer who drifts away doesn't tell you that they felt like just a name on a list. The signal is silence — and silence is easy to misread as "things are fine."

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3. What "Communications & Outreach" Actually Means

It's Not Just Sending Emails

When most organizations think about communications, they think about the last newsletter they sent, or the thank-you email that went out after the annual gala. Those are outputs. Communications infrastructure is the system that produces them consistently — and keeps producing them even when the person who sent last year's newsletter has moved on.

A complete communications infrastructure has several components, and understanding all of them is the difference between communications that happen and communications that sustain.

1. Professional Email — As an Outreach Tool

We covered professional email in Paper 1 as an identity and credibility signal. It belongs here too, but for a different reason: deliverability.

When you send newsletters or donor communications from a professional email address — one at your organization's domain — you have access to technical configurations that protect your emails from being marked as spam. When you send from a generic Gmail or Yahoo account, you don't.

We'll go deeper on this in Section 4, but the core point is this: the same email address that makes you look credible is also the one that actually reaches people's inboxes.

2. Your Audience List

Your audience list is the foundation of everything else in your communications infrastructure. Not the platform you use to send emails — the list itself. Who is in it, how it's organized, and how current it is.

A list that lives in a spreadsheet, a personal inbox, or the memory of one staff member is a liability. People leave organizations. Spreadsheets don't sync. Contacts that haven't been touched in two years are likely to bounce or mark you as spam when you finally reach out.

A well-maintained audience list is:

- **Centralized** — in one place that the organization owns, not an individual
- **Current** — contacts are added and removed systematically

- **Organized** — at minimum, by audience type (donor, volunteer, program participant, partner)
- **Owned** — someone is responsible for keeping it clean and up to date

3. Audience Segmentation

Segmentation is the practice of dividing your audience into meaningful groups so that the right message goes to the right people. It sounds like a marketing concept, but for nonprofits it's a practical necessity.

Donors and program participants should not be receiving the same emails. A volunteer coordination message does not belong in a major donor's inbox. A grant funder who is evaluating your organization should receive something different from someone who signed up for your newsletter at a community event.

Sending one email to your entire list is not outreach — it's broadcasting. Segmentation is what makes your communication relevant, and relevant communication is what gets opened and acted on.

You don't need a sophisticated CRM to start segmenting. Even a simple tagging system within your email platform (donor, volunteer, participant, partner) is a significant step up from a flat list.

4. Your Email Platform

Your email platform is the tool that actually sends your newsletters and communications. Mailchimp, Constant Contact, and HubSpot are common options. Most have nonprofit discounts or free tiers for small lists.

What matters technically about your email platform:

- It connects to your professional email address (not Gmail directly)
- It allows you to segment your list and send targeted campaigns
- It tracks opens, clicks, and unsubscribes — so you know what's working
- It manages unsubscribes and bounces automatically, which protects your sender reputation

Using your personal Gmail to send newsletters to 400 people is not a platform strategy — it is a workaround that will eventually result in your emails being filtered as spam, and potentially your domain being flagged.

5. Your Newsletter — Cadence and Consistency

The content of your newsletter matters. But the cadence — how regularly it goes out — matters more than most organizations realize.

Irregular communication trains your audience to disengage. If donors hear from you once in January, nothing for five months, then again in June, and then twice in December, the relationship feels transactional. They learn to expect asks, not relationship.

A consistent cadence — even a modest one, like once a month — builds a different kind of relationship. Readers begin to expect your emails. They recognize your name in their inbox. Over time, that familiarity is the foundation of trust.

The cadence doesn't have to be aggressive to be effective. Monthly is sufficient for most organizations. Quarterly is the minimum. What matters is the consistency.

6. Clear Channels Per Audience

Different audiences need different things from you, on different timescales, through different channels.

Donors: Expect stewardship between asks — impact updates, mission stories, annual reports. They should not only hear from you when you need something.

Volunteers: Need operational communications — shift reminders, schedule changes, acknowledgment. Timeliness matters more than polish.

Program participants: Need access information, resource updates, follow-up. Plain language, sometimes in multiple languages, matters here.

Funders and partners: Need formal, professional communications — grant reports, impact data, institutional updates.

Having one email list and one newsletter for all of these audiences is not a communications strategy. It is a way to be occasionally relevant to everyone and consistently irrelevant to most.

7. Assigned Ownership

Communications is one of the most commonly orphaned functions in nonprofits. It often lives in the space between the executive director, the development coordinator, and the person who "is good with social media." When it belongs to everyone, it belongs to no one.

Assign specific ownership:

- Who manages the audience list?
- Who sends the monthly newsletter, and by what date?
- Who responds to incoming contact form submissions?
- Who handles donor acknowledgment emails?

These can be volunteers. They can be part-time staff. But someone needs to know it is their responsibility — and that responsibility needs to be documented somewhere that survives a staff transition.

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4. The Technical Reality — One Layer Deeper

Email Deliverability — Why Your Emails Don't Always Arrive

This is one of the most consequential technical topics in nonprofit communications, and one of the least understood.

Email deliverability is the likelihood that an email you send actually reaches someone's inbox — as opposed to their spam folder, their promotions tab, or being silently rejected by their mail server. It is not a given. It is something you either configure for, or don't.

Three technical configurations protect your email deliverability. They are set up in your domain's DNS records (the settings that control how your domain behaves on the internet). Your IT vendor, web developer, or email platform can configure these, but you should know they exist and what they do.

SPF (Sender Policy Framework) is a record that tells the world which mail servers are allowed to send email on behalf of your domain. If someone tries to send a phishing email pretending to be from your organization, SPF tells receiving mail servers that the sender isn't authorized — and the email gets flagged or rejected. Without SPF, your domain is more vulnerable to being impersonated, and your own legitimate emails are less trusted.

DKIM (DomainKeys Identified Mail) adds a digital signature to every email you send. It proves that the email actually came from your domain and hasn't been tampered with in transit. Receiving mail servers use this signature to verify the email's authenticity. Without DKIM, receiving mail servers have no way to verify the email is genuinely from your organization — making it far more likely to be flagged as suspicious or delivered to spam.

DMARC (Domain-based Message Authentication, Reporting & Conformance) ties SPF and DKIM together and tells receiving mail servers what to do when an email fails those checks: deliver it anyway, quarantine it, or reject it. It also sends you reports on who is sending email using your domain — so you'd know if someone was impersonating your organization.

All three of these configurations are free. They are text records added to your domain's DNS settings. If your organization doesn't have them in place, there is a meaningful chance that a portion of your emails — including donor acknowledgments, newsletters, and grant correspondence — are not reaching their destination.

A real example: A Portland-area cultural nonprofit reached out after noticing that staff emails were consistently landing in recipients' spam folders — even when replying to messages from donors and partners. The organization had recently transitioned their domain from one provider to another through a third party, and the issues started around that time. When we examined their email headers, we found the culprit immediately: their outgoing emails were being signed not by their own domain, but by a Google fallback address — a signal that DKIM had never been properly configured after the migration. Their DNS records showed a DKIM entry with a malformed host name, and SPF was missing entirely. Within a single session, we regenerated their DKIM key through Google Workspace Admin, corrected the DNS record, and added the missing SPF record. Within 48 hours, staff confirmed their emails were reaching inboxes. Nothing about their content had changed. The only thing that changed was their deliverability configuration — something most organizations don't know to look for until the damage is already done.

Email List Hygiene

List hygiene is the practice of keeping your contact list clean — removing addresses that bounce, suppressing contacts who haven't engaged in a long time, and monitoring your unsubscribe rate.

Why does this matter technically? Because email platforms and internet service providers track the behavior of your email sends. If you consistently send to a large percentage of addresses that bounce or never open, your sender reputation degrades. Once your sender reputation is poor, even your valid, engaged contacts start receiving your emails in spam.

Basic list hygiene practices:

- **Remove hard bounces** immediately — these are addresses that no longer exist
- **Flag soft bounces** — temporary delivery failures that may indicate a full inbox or a temporary server issue
- **Suppress chronic non-openers** — contacts who haven't opened any of your last 10-15 emails are likely hurting your deliverability more than they're helping your outreach
- **Monitor your unsubscribe rate** — above 0.5% per campaign is a signal that something is off, either with the content, the cadence, or the list quality

Most email platforms (Mailchimp, Constant Contact, etc.) handle hard bounces automatically. The active hygiene work — reviewing non-openers, auditing list quality periodically — requires a human decision.

Contact Forms and Intake — The Other Direction

Communications is not just outbound. It is also inbound — the messages people send you, the forms people fill out, the inquiries that arrive through your website.

A contact form on your website should:

- Route to a monitored inbox (not a personal email that the sender doesn't leave the organization with)
- Generate an automatic acknowledgment so the person knows their message was received
- Have a defined response time — someone on staff knows they're responsible for responding within X days

A contact form that routes to an unmonitored inbox, or that has no defined owner for responses, is worse than not having a contact form at all. It creates the expectation that someone will respond — and then doesn't deliver.

Automation — What It Looks Like in Practice

Automation in communications means setting up sequences of emails that trigger based on an action — someone joining your list, making a donation, signing up for an event — rather than requiring a staff member to manually send each one.

This is where many nonprofits feel uncertainty. Automation sounds technical, and it can feel impersonal. In practice, a well-configured automated sequence is more personal than a batch newsletter, because it responds to what the person actually did.

Here are the most impactful automation workflows for nonprofits:

Welcome sequence: When someone joins your email list, they should receive a welcome email — immediately, automatically. Not a week later when someone remembers. The welcome email confirms their subscription, tells them who you are and what to expect, and gives them an easy way to learn more. This is the highest-open-rate email most organizations will ever send, and most nonprofits don't send one.

Donor acknowledgment: When a donation is made online, a donor should receive a thank-you email immediately — with a receipt, a genuine expression of gratitude, and ideally a brief update on what the gift supports. Waiting two weeks and sending a batch thank-you email is a missed opportunity. Immediacy matters in donor stewardship.

Event reminders: If someone registers for an event, they should automatically receive a reminder 48 hours before — and potentially again the morning of. Event no-show rates drop significantly with a simple reminder sequence.

Re-engagement sequence: Contacts who haven't engaged with your emails in 6-12 months are candidates for a re-engagement campaign. A short sequence of 2-3 emails that says, in essence, "We miss you — here's what we've been up to, and here's a chance to reconnect" is more effective than either continuing to email them as usual (which hurts your deliverability) or silently removing them (which is a missed opportunity). If they don't respond to the re-engagement sequence, suppress them from future sends.

None of these automations require sophisticated software. Mailchimp's free tier supports basic automation. What they require is someone to set them up once, and a commitment to keeping the triggers and content current.

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5. A Path Forward

Starting From Where You Are

Most nonprofits we talk to have some version of communications happening — a newsletter that goes out when there's something to say, a donor thank-you process that depends on one person's memory, a contact form that routes to the executive director's personal inbox. That's not a failure. It's a starting point.

The goal here is not to overhaul everything at once. It's to identify the gaps that are most likely hurting you, address those first, and build incrementally toward an infrastructure that holds up without heroics.

Principle 1: Get the Foundation Right Before Automating Anything

Automation amplifies what's already working. It does not fix a broken foundation.

Before thinking about automation, make sure the following are in place:

1. Professional email at your domain, in use for all official communications
2. SPF, DKIM, and DMARC configured for your domain
3. Your audience list in a centralized, organization-owned email platform
4. At minimum, a basic segmentation between donors, volunteers, and program participants

These four things are the foundation. Once they're solid, automation becomes genuinely useful — it extends your reach without extending your workload.

Principle 2: Assign Ownership Before Adding Tools

Adding a new email platform, a new newsletter tool, or a new CRM does not solve a communications problem that is fundamentally about ownership. If no one is responsible for communications, more tools just means more neglected platforms.

Before adding anything:

- Name the person responsible for the audience list
- Name the person responsible for the newsletter, and define the cadence
- Name the person responsible for responding to incoming contact form submissions
- Document all of this somewhere that survives a staff transition

Principle 3: Cadence Over Polish

A consistent, simple newsletter that goes out on the first of every month is more valuable than a beautifully designed newsletter that goes out whenever someone has time to put it together.

Your audience does not expect perfection. They expect consistency. Consistency is what builds the relationship over time.

If your communications have been irregular, pick a cadence you can actually sustain — monthly is usually the right answer for most nonprofits — and commit to it. A two-paragraph email that goes out on time, every month, is better infrastructure than an elaborate campaign that ships quarterly at best.

Principle 4: Start Automation With the Welcome Email

If you implement one automation and nothing else, implement the welcome email.

It is the highest-return, lowest-effort automation available to nonprofits. Someone joins your list. They're engaged right now — that's why they joined. You have a narrow window to introduce yourself, confirm their expectations, and give them a reason to stay connected. A welcome email is how you use that window.

Set it up once. It runs forever.

Principle 5: Audit Your Deliverability

Before your next major email send, take 30 minutes to check your deliverability configuration.

- Go to MXToolbox.com and search your domain — it will tell you whether SPF, DKIM, and DMARC are configured
- Send a test email to a Gmail address and check whether it lands in the inbox or promotions/spam
- Review your last three email campaigns in your email platform — what were the open rates? Anything below 20% is worth investigating

This is a one-time audit that most organizations have never done — and the results are often illuminating.

A Practical Starting Checklist

Foundation

- [ ] All official outreach uses @ourorganization.org email addresses
- [ ] SPF is configured for our domain
- [ ] DKIM is configured for our domain
- [ ] DMARC is configured for our domain
- [ ] Our audience list lives in a centralized, organization-owned email platform

List and Segmentation

- [ ] Our list is segmented by at least: donors, volunteers, program participants
- [ ] We have a process for adding new contacts consistently
- [ ] We remove hard bounces and suppress chronic non-openers periodically

Cadence and Content

- [ ] We have a defined newsletter cadence (monthly, quarterly) and we meet it
- [ ] We have assigned ownership for who sends the newsletter and by when
- [ ] Donor acknowledgment emails go out within 48 hours of a gift

Automation

- [ ] We have a welcome email that triggers automatically when someone joins our list
- [ ] We have an automated donor acknowledgment/receipt email
- [ ] We have a defined process for responding to contact form submissions

Inbound

- [ ] Our contact form routes to a monitored, organization-owned inbox
- [ ] We have a defined response time and an assigned owner for incoming inquiries

One Last Thought

Communications infrastructure does not require a large team or a large budget. What it requires is clarity about who owns it, tools that are set up correctly, and a commitment to showing up consistently for the people who've chosen to stay connected to your mission.

The people on your list — donors, volunteers, program participants — opted in. They said, in some way, "I want to hear from you." The most respectful thing you can do with that relationship is to actually show up for it. Not just when you need something, but regularly, with intention.

That's what communications infrastructure makes possible.

This white paper was produced by Raíz Digital, a Portland-based digital consultancy serving nonprofits and mission-driven small businesses. Raíz Digital was founded by Richard Flores, a 24-year Intel engineer who now applies that technical experience to amplifying the missions of community-focused and mission-driven organizations.

Technology that amplifies your mission.

This is Paper 2 in Raíz Digital's Digital Infrastructure for Nonprofits series. Paper 1 covered Digital Presence. Upcoming papers will cover Operations & Workflows and Data & Analytics — followed by an anchor paper that ties the full framework together.

Learn more at raizdigital.co