

Taking Your Temperature

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Goldilocks knew what she wanted. After the B & E at the Bears home, she sampled each of the three bowls of porridge to find the one that was just the right temperature to eat. And, she was so satisfied, she stayed and took a nap.

This may seem an odd way to introduce an article on nonprofit leadership, but bear with me (enjoy the pun). Every person who comes in contact with your nonprofit takes the temperature of the environment at your organization. What is the condition of the reception area? Is someone there to greet the visitors and how are they greeted? What is their experience when they phone your nonprofit? These seemingly mundane daily encounters speak to the degree your organization concerns itself with how cool or warm it is – how welcoming it feels to clients, students, parents, patients, and potential supporters.

It is fashionable today to talk about marketing nonprofit organizations and creating a plan that will tell their stories to their target audiences effectively. What can be missing from the marketing efforts is attention to the environment in which you operate. Are you living your mission or just talking about it in “marketing” publications? Do people who experience your nonprofit find what you say about yourself matches the reality of their encounters?

Hugh Goldthorpe, now retired VP of human resources at Owens and Minor, understood completely how important a warm, welcoming work environment was for the happiness and productivity of employees and for their interactions with customers. He called himself the “Head Cheerleader,” and he gave the receptionists the title of “Director of First Impressions” who answered the phone with a cheerful “How can we make you smile today?” He knew that it was good business to create and maintain a healthy work environment. More nonprofits need to embrace this, as well.

So, who is responsible for setting the thermostat at your nonprofit? The answer is you who hold the title of CEO, Executive Director, or President. What matters to you will be important to everyone else in your organization. Working with your management team, your goal should be the inculcation of an understanding and appreciation of the holistic nature of the marketing messaging your organization is broadcasting every moment of every day of operation.

It is likely that your organization already has many elements of the warm and welcoming environment necessary for success. Here are a few ways to begin your assessment and suggestions for ways to improve.

1. Check the condition of your facilities – The most obvious is often the easiest to overlook.
 - a. Is the reception area clean, wastebaskets emptied, and furniture in good repair? Is it a pleasant place to sit and wait?
 - b. Do the workspaces/offices show employees that they are valued?
 - c. If you have a parking area, is it clean and in good condition?

2. What is the quality of the experience of the first contact with your nonprofit?
 - a. Are your receptionists given training in how to greet and assist people on the phone and in person? Do they understand their significant role in creating a positive first impression?
 - b. Is it easy or difficult to reach a staff member by telephone? Have you considered having a receptionist answer an incoming call rather than using a computer system?

3. What are your expectations of your management team?
 - a. Are they “on board” with creating and maintaining a work environment where all staff members are valued and treated with respect?
 - b. Are marketing environmental matters discussed regularly at team meetings?
 - c. Are personnel evaluated on relationship values as well as quality of work?

4. How do you involve your Board in holistic marketing?
 - a. Have you and your Board chair discussed specifically the role and expectations of Board members in representing your nonprofit to the public?
 - b. Are there opportunities planned within meetings of the Board to provide information/training in how each member can effectively tell the story of your organization?

These are simply suggestions to stimulate active thinking about taking the holistic marketing temperature of your nonprofit and to take steps to adjust your thermostat. How comfortable and welcomed your constituents feel make a huge difference in their willingness to volunteer and donate.