

From Messaging to Movement

THE EVOLVING ROLE OF COMMUNICATIONS
IN SOCIAL IMPACT ORGANIZATIONS



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Introduction

Imagine a social impact organization where communications is not just a separate department, but a mindset and skillset embedded across every program, team, and interaction. Where storytellers and strategists sit beside program directors, service providers, and policy leads, shaping not just how we talk about our work, but how we design and deliver it. In this model, communications is infrastructure: invisible when it works well, essential to everything we do. Integrated communications connect mission to message, data to narrative, and community voice to systems change.

This vision is urgent, as the social impact sector is facing a moment of profound pressure — and potential. How we uphold our values, collaborate, and communicate will shape what's possible next.

Nonprofits, advocacy organizations, and philanthropic institutions are being targeted by Executive Orders and subjected to funding disruptions that strike at the heart of our missions. Our communities are under attack, and we're scrambling to respond.

For decades, we've talked about silos in the social sector, including departments that work in parallel, not in partnership. The current landscape heightens the damage that silos can do, as crisis mode operations push us further inward, focused on organizational survival rather than innovation, or new ways of working. Burnout and turnover leave less capacity for cross-functional work, increasing isolation across departments. As a field, we are at risk of disintegration of mission and momentum.

Integrated communications isn't a silver bullet, but it may be one of the most overlooked strategies for nonprofit organizations. Now more than ever, clear communications about the value, urgency, and outcomes of social impact work is an essential ingredient in how organizations will go forward in their brave support of nonprofits and communities. In times of chaos and isolation, it can be a vehicle for coherence and reconnection, ultimately leading to deeper and sustainable social change. This paper explores what integrated communications can really mean for the social impact sector beyond buzzwords and branding. Drawing on interviews with 10 communications leaders across a range of nonprofits and philanthropic institutions, we map out practical lessons, share emerging practices, and make the case for why communications must move from the margins to the core of operations.



These interviews were conducted prior to the new administration taking office in January 2025. The strategies for communications integration that emerged from our research are not only timely but increasingly critical in today's evolving landscape. While the main research question stems from an organizational perspective, the imperative of integration between communicators, programmatic responses, and evaluation is central to sustaining our communities. Interviewees represented organizations with a range of integration.

What is Integrated Communications?

Integrated communications is a strategic approach that weaves communications into the DNA of an organization — not an add-on or afterthought.



In an integrated model:



Communications strategy is embedded directly into program strategy and planning from initial concept through design, delivery, and reporting, ensuring that communications tools, tactics, and resources are leveraged for maximum program impact.



Communications is woven into the organization's overall strategic planning and daily activities, strengthening internal culture, executive communications, and external outreach.



Communications efforts are deeply informed by programmatic goals and grounded in a deep understanding of audiences and community constituents.



Communications is respected, resourced, and prioritized at the C-Suite and leadership levels as critical organizational infrastructure.

Traditional Vs. Integrated Communications in Social Impact Organizations

Traditional Communications

Communications promotes programs after they are developed ("make it look good").

Communications enters late in the process, often at the launch or reporting phase.

Separate from program teams; focused mainly on external messaging.

Audiences often treated as generic with limited segmentation and nuance.

Separate department that responds to one-off requests, viewed as a support function and reporting to Directors/VPs.

Success measured by visibility (press hits, social media likes).

ROLE OF COMMUNICATIONS

TIMING

RELATIONSHIP TO PROGRAMS

AUDIENCE UNDERSTANDING

POSITIONING OF COMMS

IMPACT

Integrated Communications

Communications is woven into program strategy from the beginning to drive stronger design, delivery, and impact.

Communications is involved from inception through planning, implementation, and reporting.

Collaborative with program teams; communications strategy and program strategy are developed together.

Deep audience and community understanding shapes both program and communications strategies.

Treated as strategic infrastructure and thought partner; respected and resourced at the leadership level and reporting to the CEO or Executive Director.

Success measured by contribution to mission outcomes, community engagement, and systems change.

Strategies for an Integrated Communications Culture

Across our interviews, five distinct approaches emerged for integrating communications into the core functions of social impact organizations. While some organizations relied heavily on one approach, most combined multiple strategies depending on culture, structure, and needs. Each approach reflects a different lever for driving integration, from leadership mandates to community-centered practices. These approaches exist on a continuum: the first three integrate communications deeply into program and organizational structures, the final two act as supportive practices that sustain integration over time.



1. Top-Down Mandate

Communications is more likely to be integrated when it is prioritized by leadership. Interviewees found that a top-down mandate directing program staff to collaborate with communications staff significantly increased program teams' willingness to support and implement communications efforts.



2. Empowering all Staff as Communicators

True integration happens when communications is no longer the exclusive domain of a single department but becomes a shared responsibility across the entire organization. Organizations that empower all staff as communicators equip every team member, from program managers to senior leadership, with the mindset, skills, tools, training, and shared values that make communicating a natural and expected part of their role. This begins with job descriptions and onboarding, ensuring that new team members understand the organization's mission and their role in it.

Ideally, staff will recognize how their contributions support the broader mission, and communicate that internally and externally. In this model, while all staff members can view themselves as communicators, dedicated communications team members ensure quality, consistency and alignment by acting as coaches and stewards rather than as gatekeepers.



3. Community-Driven Communications

Communications begin not just inside the organization, but from deep listening to the communities served. One interviewee mentioned the value of digital media as a source for strategic community listening, allowing them to pick up on trends and opinions to see how their programmatic and communications strategies need to shift, and where their institutional voice and efforts can be helpful.

**Collaboration with communities
must always be built on reciprocal,
not extractive, relationships.**

Interviewees stressed the importance of focusing on relationship building first; some communications teams spend months or years developing trusting relationships with grantees before identifying stories to elevate. Additionally, interviewees from philanthropic organizations emphasized the importance of creating communications assets that require minimal effort from grantees, and are provided as assets to help grantees advance their mission or secure additional funding. This approach embodies integrated communications by aligning the goals and needs of program teams, communications teams, and grantees using content creation to strengthen relationships, advance shared missions, and amplify impact.



4. Guardrails and Oversight

Some networked organizations with chapters and affiliates decentralize communications among their network members in the same way that some organizations decentralize communications among staff. In this approach, a central communications team shares guidelines such as a messaging matrix, national communications plan, and media toolkits across the network to ensure consistent and cohesive brand messaging. The national communications team acts as brand watchdogs, offering guidance and reviewing place-based and organization-specific content to maintain alignment with the overarching brand. This approach offers some of the key elements of the integrated model, but risks being overly restrictive if not paired with efforts to build communications skills and shared ownership among communications and programmatic staff within chapters and affiliates.



5. Celebrating Wins and Sharing Learnings

One success opens the door to another. By sharing experiments and what you learned, colleagues can be inspired to adapt and adopt new approaches. This can lead to a replicable blueprint that can support other teams to adopt those methods. Interviewees described how they increased their chances of buy-in for integrated approaches by highlighting staff testimonials and program successes internally to their broader teams and organizations. This approach has the possibility of growing integrated communications from the ground up based on shared interest but requires structural support to truly achieve systemic change.



Organizational Structures for Integrating Communications

While the five strategic approaches shape the mindset and culture of integration, operational structures define how communications work gets done on a day-to-day basis. Two operational structures supporting integrated communications emerged from our findings: embedding communications staff within program teams and maintaining a centralized communications team with distributed responsibilities across staff. No single structure guarantees integration; rather, successful organizations fostered mutual trust, clear and effective workflows, and collaborative norms, regardless of structure.



Embedded Communications Leads

Embedding a communications lead in each program team (often called a “communications embed”) gives them a strategic role, influencing budgets, identifying media opportunities, and staying on top of workflows for more effective messaging. Having a “seat at the table” doesn’t always lead to strategic collaboration for the best possible shared benefit, as the effectiveness of embeds relies on the openness of program leads. Many interviewees explained that communications embeds must fight to gain trust and build reputation, regularly explaining their recommendations to program leads who feel they have a strong grasp on communications and fail to appreciate or respect the expertise of their embed. When trust does exist between embeds and program leads, the partnership produces stronger communications outcomes and programmatic impact.

TACTICS TO STRENGTHEN INTEGRATION

Regular Alignment

The communications embed participates in weekly program meetings and strategic planning meetings.

Idea Partnership

The communications embed collaborates with the program team to develop concepts together.

The effectiveness of this model hinges on program leads trusting the expertise of embedded communicators and prioritizing their recommendations, and vice versa.

Separate Communications Team

In this model, the communications team operates as an in-house agency, simplifying communications processes for program teams while fostering a shared understanding that all staff contribute to communications. This approach can encourage collaboration and integrate communications into the organization's culture.



TACTICS TO STRENGTHEN INTEGRATION

Regular Touch Points

Program and communications teams should hold monthly, biweekly, or weekly meetings to stay informed about ongoing projects and identify opportunities for collaboration. Most importantly, these meetings should enable communications strategy to be integrated directly into program strategy and planning, and ensure that communications tools, tactics, and resources are available and leveraged during program design, delivery, and reporting.

Ticketing System

Develop a ticketing system to streamline outreach to the communications team, especially for larger organizations. Outreach should take place during project design and concepting phases to enable communications strategy and tools to be leveraged throughout. Program and communications teams develop detailed communications plans for each workstream, allowing communications to offer expertise and anticipate upcoming needs.

Hotline

For organizations with affiliate networks, a dedicated hotline (e.g., 1-800 number) allows affiliates to seek guidance on place-based messaging or newsletters. This responsive approach can help build communications expertise among the dispersed network.



Emerging Practices to Strengthen Integrated Communications

Across a range of organizations, communications professionals in varied positions of power are finding ways to amplify their impact through integration. Whether through high-level mission alignment, day-to-day operations, or maverick approaches, these emerging practices demonstrate that real change is possible at every level.

- In organizations where leaders took the time to intentionally co-create, update, and actively live out their mission and values (internally, through communications, and with community partners), interviewees described a noticeable difference: greater clarity, ease, effectiveness, and impact.



“Don’t underestimate the power of aligning staff and board on internal comms to be more effective externally.”

INTERVIEWEE

Actions to Advance Integrated Communications at Every Level of Power

Even within traditional hierarchies, communications professionals are building influence by tying their work to core organizational values and cultivating a collective ownership of messaging and strategy. This section offers practical actions at various levels of positional power from specialists to directors to executive leaders to help organizations integrate communications more deeply into their mission, operations, and culture.

Communications Specialists: Weave Communications Strategy Directly into Programs and Strengthen Collaboration across Teams

Lean on the organization’s mission and values: When pitching communications initiatives, frame them as essential to advancing the mission, which helps anchor communications from program design to reporting and ensures maximum programmatic impact.

Create institutional messaging tools: Develop simple tools and trainings that help program teams map their work onto the organization’s messaging pillars and values. This supports deeper audience alignment, demonstrates communications expertise, and can incorporate communications into programmatic planning from the start.

Seed and grow cross-team collaboration: Build internal relationships one at a time to seed and grow collaboration where potential exists. If the top-down culture isn’t encouraging integrated communications (yet!), progress can be made from the ground up with the right ally or counterpart.

Directors & Associate Directors: Build Systems and Structures That Embed Communications into Strategy and Program Design, Grounded in Audience and Community Insights

Prioritize community-centered and values-aligned hiring: Hire staff that are part of the communities that the organization funds or serves. These staff help the organization prioritize community needs and strengthen communications by ensuring it is grounded in audience insights and integrated into programmatic planning from the start.

“Hire people who will be the future of philanthropy and have deeply held knowledge about the work as it relates to them directly.”

INTERVIEWEE

Shift brand to asset framing: Move away from deficit framing towards asset framing, highlighting community strengths, aspirations, joy and wellbeing as opposed to vulnerability and poverty. Establishing this framing at the brand level ensures communications reflects and supports programmatic goals, reinforcing organizational values internally and externally.



“If you have a platform and influence in the field of funders — if you’re solid on the WHY behind the grant or strategy — then you can do more thoughtful storytelling externally and take the burden/lift off of the grantee partner.”

INTERVIEWEE



Executive Leaders: Position Communications as a Core, Strategic Function and Critical Organizational Infrastructure

Co-create or co-update shared mission and values: Lead a collaborative process to re-examine the organization's mission and values in a collective, co-creative way. Embedding communications into this work strengthens internal culture and provides clear direction for external outreach. Interviewees also described greater clarity that helped steer the ship toward more meaningful impact and set the groundwork for integration.

Uplift the connection between organizational values and communications: For organizations where values are mandated from the board and/or trustees, or there isn't current appetite for re-envisioning values, executives can regularly communicate how values are woven into communications. This strengthens the mindset and skillset of communicators across the organization.

Require programmatic communications plans: Set the expectation that every program have a communications plan aligned with priorities of diversity, inclusion, and equity. A relevant, specific plan drives support and durability. Regularly check in with VPs and program directors about the strategy – Who is the important audience now? What do they need to think, feel, and do for this work to be successful?

Amid the evolving landscape in the US and globally, funders that have internal and external alignment around shared mission and values are poised to have greater clarity in their communications and actions to drive more sustainable and equitable impact.

Field Growth Opportunity: Comms & Evaluation

In conducting the interviews, we asked participants about how they work with evaluation teams to uplift findings, grantee stories, and environmental trends they see in their research. Most of the interviewees described casual and infrequent interaction with evaluators, seeing evaluation as working directly with programmatic teams separately.

COMMON ROADBLOCKS

Typically, evaluation and communications teams are organized in similar ways within the organization and experience similar integration roadblocks.

Both communications and evaluation teams:

- ◆ Are often small and tend to bring in consultants more frequently than in programmatic work
- ◆ Are typically brought in close to the end of a project, though earlier and more continuous engagement from the beginning is a best practice in both areas
- ◆ Are important across all types of programing, internal and external
- ◆ Require technical expertise that often feels like a “different language” from programs and management

BENEFITS OF INTEGRATION

Both communicators and evaluators also benefit through 1) greater opportunities to share learnings and strengthen their fields, and 2) opportunities to generate positive attention and potentially new funding for effective programming.

BENEFITS FOR COMMUNICATORS

- ◆ Highlight the organization’s commitment to accountability
- ◆ Share trends across a large group of grantees or communities confidently
- ◆ Communicate differences in impact and experience for more equitable outcomes
- ◆ Appeal to data-driven decision makers

BENEFITS FOR EVALUATORS

- ◆ Increase utility by connecting the findings with a wider audience
- ◆ Facilitate findings to feed into advocacy and programmatic work
- ◆ Galvanize decision-makers to utilize data for strategic planning
- ◆ Motivate communities to respond to data-based strategies for social good
- ◆ Raise visibility of mission impact of evaluation work

Finding Your Tribe Across Disciplines

Finding your tribe across disciplines can propel transformative experiments in communications for good. In environments where organizational systems may not currently align with an integrated approach, forging alliances with like-minded colleagues and external collaborators helps propel impactful advocacy and narrative change initiatives.

Forging Alliances In Your Organization

One way that some interviewees worked toward integration in an organizational environment where there were significant silos was by taking the time to understand the various roles, ambitions and ways to live the organizational values and mission. Many interviewees discussed how Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) practices serve as a guiding light, informing their funding practices, cross-team dynamics and deliverables; this can be a unifying point across departments. A pillar of one company's DEI protocol was creating a welcoming and inclusive environment for the communications team and considering things like accessibility (closed captioning, image descriptions, compensation, etc.) when creating deliverables. Additionally, acknowledging the diverse expertise of team members, and understanding when to step in and step back, helps ensure clear and impactful messaging.

It's also essential to meet staff where they are. This might involve building communications literacy among program teams by routinely explaining strategies and tactics, or acknowledging that leadership may have limited time by providing ready-to-share social media clips with suggested copy for amplification.

Forging Alliances With External Partners

Some interviewees in organizations with resistance to integration focused on building alliances with external partners, particularly grantees and communities. Interviewees in these organizations knew that powerful stories for greater social impact stem from trusted relationships, and interviewees acknowledged the burden that funder-driven communications requests can create for grantees. To help ease this, they suggested funders share back photos and content that grantees can use to advance their missions. They also recommended offering free communications training and consultations, recognizing that many nonprofits lack the capacity for dedicated strategic communications. Another organization compensates potential grantees for the time and energy spent building a relationship by offering year-long general operating support during an exploratory phase. This approach ensures that the "getting to know you" period is mutual, intentional, and resourced, prioritizing trust and equity before formal funding decisions are made. By focusing on sustainable and trust-based alliances with grantees, comms is creating space for greater integration with programs departments through shared values around social impact.

“Notoriously in philanthropy, communication follows programs. [In our organization] we are moving towards program working in concert with philanthropy comms, being a strategic partner, not a promotional megaphone. It's a slow shift.”

INTERVIEWEE

Call to Action: Prioritize Progress Over Perfection

Integrated communications is not a switch an organization flips, but a practice that is built over time. No matter the starting point, the first step is a non-judgmental self-assessment of where your organization is today.



If integration feels out of reach for your organization right now, you're not alone. Full-scale integration may not be feasible, especially when teams are stretched thin with limited time, budget, or interest in communications. Integration doesn't have to be all or nothing. Even small steps, like embedding communications into a single program's planning or building cross-team relationships, can create ripple effects that strengthen your organization's impact over time. Focus on finding alignment, readiness and opportunity.

One meaningful step toward deeper collaboration can lay the foundation for long-term impact. Start with one approach and see what it unlocks. In a moment marked by heightened scrutiny, censorship, and rapid change, integration is more than operational. It's a strategy for building internal cohesion, fuelling smarter decisions, and amplifying your mission in the world.

This report is just one example of how we help organizations navigate complex challenges and drive impact. Explore our communications resources [and learn more about how we can support your goals across](#) strategic communications and narrative change [, initiative design, integration and implementation \[, and evaluation and learning \\[.\\]\\(#\\)\]\(#\)](#)

Methodology

Our research team conducted 45–60-minute semi-structured interviews with ten communications leaders at a range of foundations and non-profits nationwide to glean insights on best practices for integrating communications for social impact. Interviewees were offered compensation for their time. We used a content analysis approach to identify practical

approaches in day-to-day work that can be used at various levels of an organization. This research was first presented at the ComNet Conference in 2024 for feedback from the field. All interviewees had the opportunity to review this report for accuracy, context and implications to ensure a broader utility of the findings. We hope this document inspires integrated solutions that propel meaningful collaborations that advance social good.



Acknowledgements

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