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When to Leverage Actual vs Perceived Value in Nonprofit Marketing Communications



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What's in it for me? Why should I care? How would this [service, program, partnership...] benefit my organization or my community?

I'm talking about *value*.

Value: 1. the regard that something is held to deserve; the importance, worth, or usefulness of something; 2. a person's principles or standards of behavior; one's judgment of what is important in life.

Definition 1. resonates with the left side of our brain, our logic and cognitive side - what we interpret as *actual value* - the quality, performance, cost saving, and tangible benefits.

Definition 2. resonates with the right side of our brain, our creative and emotional side - what we interpret as *perceived value* - the subjective, felt, believed, and experienced benefits.

When you truly understand the **value** of the work your organization is putting so much time and effort into achieving, you have a north star to guide all your communications.

Knowing when, and to which audiences to appeal to with **actual value** (head) vs **perceived value** (heart), and what kind of messaging and

marketing strategies and tactics to use, is what I will talk about here.

The most successful campaigns will appeal to both actual value of an intervention and perceived value yet at varying degrees *based upon audience and the stage of your campaign engagement*.

Every organization I have worked with intuitively understands their value - they live and breath it every day so that it simply is a part of their work, part of their being. Yet, enabling others to "get it" without directly *witnessing* the process, program, or real-world results...well, it can be challenging.

The Value of Value for Head and Heart

Extracting a clear value statement and distilling it into a memorable proposition is something that has always been my north star in my communications and marketing roles - something I always focus on as the guiding light.

Repeatedly, I have learned about the incredible work of hundreds of organizations, whether it be through words (e.g. articles, impact reports), numbers (e.g. data, data-visualizations), photos, or video, and *logically* I am drawn into understanding the efficacy of the intervention. These modalities appeal to my *head*. Though I may have never experienced them personally, my higher cognitive functions can create a facsimile of what it must be like.

If I have had direct experience of some similar form with the advertised interventions and their outcomes, for example if I too had experienced the positive effects of an economic development community or life-saving program in a similar situation, I will "get it" in my being, in my *heart* because I have also experienced the *feelings* of joy, comfort, and hope associated with the program.

I had the fortune of visiting Gurugram, India in the Fall of 2023 where a member organization (of the nonprofit association I was working for) welcomed me into their office where we talked about their work with rural farmers. The organization was the [S M Sehgal Foundation](#) (Sehgal) who has helped thousands of rural villages in India with their sustainable farming and community development programs.

Quick Example: Site Visit

I already had a foundational understanding of Sehgal and after speaking with Anjali Makhija, Trustee and Chief Executive Officer, and producing a podcast from the interview (listen on [Apple](#) or [Spotify](#)), I understood more clearly the *actual value* - the objective, logical understanding of the work and their impact. I could compare the data and program structures to other organizations and see they stood out as a true exemplar of these types of programs.

Later that day after my interview, they drove me to a small community in the rural sub-district of Nuh in the state of Haryana, India, one of the poorest districts in the country. From the gleaming glass and steel tech center of Gurugram to the dusty, dried mud paths of Nuh, I was about to have a profound experience.



Farmer in Nuh rewarded by higher crop yields. Photo: Joel Meyers

We visited a smallholder farmer who was growing beans and coriander. He only had 2 acres, yet with the training from Sehgal had increased his yields 40% and had converted to all-natural pesticides sourced with ingredients from local markets. The new farming methods were a great improvement over previous practices, yet what struck me and caused me to "get it" in my heart, was seeing his pride and his joy about what he was achieving ([read more about this work](#)). I understood the *perceived value* of these programs as I identified with these emotions of pride and joy from jobs well-done and movement in positive directions that benefit me and my loved ones.

Not only did I understand what programs that Sehgal was being successful at a much more profound level of perception, I had a much deeper, human/heart connection to what outcomes were being achieved. I am now a consistent fan of Sehgal.

Of course, not every donor/partner/supporter can travel to locations of program implementation (though some agencies do focus on cultivating these very experiences, such as [Elevate Destinations](#)).

So what can we nonprofit marketing and communications specialists do to effectively advertise perceived and actual value to the most appropriate audiences?

Understanding the distinction between actual value and perceived value is crucial for success, particularly when your primary audience is donors. Instead of a product, the "offering" is the *impact* and the *opportunity to contribute to a cause*.

Actual Value for Donors, and Donor Types

For donors, the *actual value* lies in the tangible, measurable, and verifiable impact their contributions make. It's about the concrete outcomes of the organization's work.

How to Provide Actual Value to Donors

To provide actual value to donors, mission-driven organizations must focus on:

1. **Program Effectiveness:** Developing and implementing programs that genuinely create positive change and achieve their stated goals. This involves rigorous evaluation and data collection.
2. **Transparency and Accountability:** Clearly communicating how donations are used, providing detailed financial reports, and demonstrating responsible stewardship of funds. This builds trust.
3. **Measurable Impact:** Establishing clear metrics and regularly reporting on the quantifiable results of their work. Donors want to see concrete evidence that their money is making a difference.
4. **Operational Efficiency:** Operating lean and ensuring a high percentage of donor funds go directly to programs, rather than administrative costs. While some overhead is necessary, minimizing it enhances actual value.
5. **Ethical Practices:** Upholding high ethical standards in all operations, from fundraising to program delivery.
6. **Sustainability:** Demonstrating a long-term vision and plan for continued impact, assuring donors their investment will have lasting effects.



Annual reports are a great way to communicate actual value.

Donors Who Resonate Better with Actual Value Marketing (Rational & Impact-Focused)

These donors are typically analytical, strategic, and want to see concrete evidence of impact and efficiency. They are more likely to scrutinize financial statements and program outcomes.

1. **Major Donors/Strategic Philanthropists:** Often have significant resources and want to ensure their large investments yield measurable results. They view their giving as a strategic investment in social change. They may request detailed proposals and impact reports.
2. **Foundation and Corporate Donors:** These entities typically have strict guidelines and require detailed data on program effectiveness, financial transparency, and accountability. Their giving is often tied to specific objectives and measurable outcomes.
3. **"Return on Investment" (ROI) Focused Donors:** These individuals (or organizations) want to see that their money is being used as efficiently as possible to achieve the maximum possible impact. They are interested in cost-effectiveness, scalability, and long-term sustainability.
4. **Experienced/Repeat Donors (especially long-term):** While emotional connection might have drawn them in initially, over time, these donors often seek reassurance that their continued support is genuinely making a difference. They want to see progress and concrete achievements.
5. **Analytical/Data-Driven Donors:** Individuals who are comfortable with numbers, statistics, and logical arguments. They appreciate seeing charts, graphs, and evidence-based reporting.
6. **"Problem-Solvers":** Donors who are motivated by solving specific problems and want to see tangible solutions. They want to understand the root causes of issues and how the organization's programs directly address them.

Marketing & Communication Tactics to Communicate Actual Value

- **Impact reports and data:** Presenting clear metrics, statistics, and verifiable outcomes (e.g., "1,000 children fed," "50 wells dug," "90% success rate").
- **Financial transparency:** Sharing audited financial statements, detailed breakdowns of expenses (e.g., percentage going directly to programs vs. overhead).
- **Program specifics:** Explaining *how* the programs work, the methodologies used, and the long-term strategy for achieving the mission.
- **Accountability and governance:** Highlighting strong leadership, board oversight, and ethical practices.
- **Transparency and efficient use of funds:** Donors want to know that their money is being used wisely and effectively to achieve the mission, not wasted on excessive overhead. This includes clear financial reporting and accountability.
- **Evidence-based approaches:** Explaining that programs are based on proven research or best practices.
- **Long-term vision and sustainability:** Demonstrating how the organization plans to continue its work and create lasting change.

Perceived Value for Donors, and Donor Types

Perceived value for donors is about the emotional, psychological, and social benefits they derive from supporting a mission-driven organization. It's about how the donor *feels* about their contribution and the organization.

How to Enhance Perceived Value

To ensure donors feel perceived value, mission-driven organizations must focus on:

- **Sense of purpose and impact:** The feeling of contributing to something meaningful and making a difference in the world.
- **Alignment with personal values:** The satisfaction of supporting a cause that resonates deeply with their beliefs.
- **Emotional connection to the cause/beneficiaries:** Stories of individuals or communities helped by the organization can evoke strong empathy and a desire to help.
- **Belonging to a community:** Feeling part of a group of like-minded individuals who are working towards a common good.
- **Reputation and prestige:** Association with a reputable, impactful, and well-regarded organization.
- **Recognition and appreciation:** Being acknowledged and thanked for their generosity.
- **Legacy and lasting change:** The idea that their donation contributes to a positive, enduring legacy.



I visited the Education on Wheels program provided by Sukarya, an NGO that works in the poorest slums of Delhi. This program brings educational opportunities directly to children who otherwise would not be educated. Photo: Joel Meyers

Donors Who Resonate Better with Perceived Value Marketing (Emotional & Relational)

These donors are often driven by their hearts, a sense of personal connection, and the desire to feel good about their contribution. They want to be inspired, feel empathy, and see themselves as part of a positive movement.

1. **First-time or Impulse Donors:** These individuals may be moved by an immediate, compelling story, an urgent appeal, or a sense of shared community. They might not have a deep, established relationship with the organization yet, so the perceived value of making a difference and feeling good about it is paramount.
2. **Emotionally Driven Donors: Altruists:** Those who genuinely want to help others and feel a "warm glow" from giving. They resonate with stories of suffering alleviated and lives transformed. **Empaths:** Individuals with a strong capacity to feel what others are feeling. They are deeply moved by personal narratives of individuals or families benefiting directly from the organization's work. **Identity-**

Based Givers: Those who see their giving as an extension of their personal values and self-concept. Supporting a cause that aligns with "who they are" provides significant perceived value.

3. **Community-Oriented Donors:** People who want to belong to a group of like-minded individuals working towards a common good. They value the social aspect of giving and being part of a collective effort.
4. **Younger Donors (often):** While not exclusive, younger demographics are often highly influenced by social media, powerful visuals, and impactful storytelling that creates an emotional connection. They may seek instant gratification from their giving and the feeling of making a tangible difference quickly.
5. **Those Seeking Recognition/Social Status:** Donors who appreciate public acknowledgment, being part of an exclusive group, or having their name associated with a noble cause. The perceived value here is the social capital or prestige.
6. **"Legacy-Minded" Donors (in an emotional sense):** While they may also care about actual impact, the emotional desire to leave a lasting mark, be remembered, or honor a loved one often falls into perceived value. They want to feel their life had meaning through their giving.

Examples How to Communicate Perceived Value

To enhance perceived value for donors, mission-driven organizations must focus on:

1. **Compelling Storytelling:** Sharing powerful narratives (photos, videos, interviews) and testimonials that highlight the human impact of their work. This taps into emotions and makes the cause relatable.
2. **Emotional Connection:** Crafting messages that evoke empathy, hope, and a sense of shared purpose.
3. **Strong Brand Identity:** Building a reputable and trustworthy brand that conveys professionalism, passion, and effectiveness.
4. **Highlighting community:** Showcasing how many people are involved and the collective impact.
5. **Personalized Communication:** Tailoring messages to individual donors, acknowledging their unique interests and past contributions.
6. **Regular and Meaningful Updates:** Keeping donors informed about the progress and impact of the organization's work, going beyond just financial reports. This reinforces their decision to give.
7. **Recognition and Stewardship:** Expressing genuine gratitude, publicly acknowledging major donors (with their permission), and showing how their support is valued.
8. **Opportunity for Engagement:** Inviting donors to get involved beyond just giving money, such as volunteering, attending events, or visiting program sites (if appropriate). This deepens their connection.
9. **Demonstrating Urgency and Need:** Clearly articulating the problem the organization is addressing and why immediate support is critical.
10. **Social Proof:** Showcasing the support of other donors, prominent figures, or community leaders to build confidence and inspire others.
11. **Visionary Leadership:** Having passionate and credible leaders who can articulate the mission and inspire confidence in the organization's ability to achieve its goal.

The Crucial Balance in Mission-Driven Organizations

For mission-driven organizations, the balance is even more delicate than in the for-profit sector.

- **Without strong actual value (demonstrable impact and good stewardship)**, donors will eventually feel their money is not being used effectively, leading to disillusionment and withdrawal of support. Trust is paramount.
- **Without strong perceived value (emotional connection, clear communication, and recognition)**, even the most impactful organization may struggle to attract and retain donors. People give from the heart as much as from the head.

Successful mission-driven organizations prioritize both actual value and perceived value. This holistic approach ensures that donors not only see their money making a difference but also *feel* good about their contribution, fostering long-term relationships and sustainable funding for the mission.



Speakers at a conference presenting about the impact of their food security and education programs and investments. Photo: John Vicory

It's helpful to think about donor motivations as a spectrum rather than strict categories, as many donors are influenced by both. However, we can identify types of potential donors who would likely resonate more strongly with one approach over the other.

The Ideal Approach: A Blend

The most effective fundraising strategies recognize that even the most "rational" donor has an emotional side, and even the most "emotional" donor wants to know their money isn't being wasted.

- **Lead with emotion (perceived value):** Capture attention and inspire initial interest through compelling stories and a clear emotional connection to the cause.
- **Follow with data and impact (actual value):** Provide the necessary evidence and transparency to solidify trust and justify continued

support, especially for larger gifts or long-term relationships.

By segmenting their donor base and tailoring communications to resonate with these different motivational drivers, organizations can build stronger, more sustainable relationships and maximize their fundraising potential.

Final Words: Know Your Audience and the Channels They Frequent

There are a multitude of nuances to nonprofit marketing and communications, and many methods, systems, and practices I am not mentioning here (this article is already getting too long), yet to round out these thoughts I would be remiss for not mentioning how important it is to understand your audience and the channels where they ingest their information.

Simply put, a CEO or Executive Director in their late-stage career will typically not be using the same channels as a recent college grad who has just initiated their professional trajectory. This is the difference between receiving updates from LinkedIn or newsletters vs. TikTok or Instagram.

Understanding your audience and creating your demographic profiles is a subject that is best saved for a whole other article. What I will highlight is that using the information above coupled with clear knowledge of your audience and knowing where they ingest information will create a winning combination for marketing and communication efforts.

Resources

<https://smallbusiness.chron.com/real-value-vs-perceived-value-20857.html>

<https://mailchimp.com/resources/perceived-value/>

<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/perception-value-vs-actual-deep-dive-from-engineering-attupurathu-cgocc>

<https://bluestoneconsultinggroup.com/marketing/perceived-vs-real-value-do-you-know-the-difference/>

<https://www.projectguru.in/stimulating-purchase-intention-by-focusing-on-consumers-emotional-perception/>

<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/intrinsic-vs-perceived-value-emily-halleran-acwuc>

<https://dovetail.com/customer-research/perceived-value/>

<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/perceived-vs-actual-value-business-hassan-olwde>

<https://www.investopedia.com/terms/p/perceived-value.asp>