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A Short Guide for Cultural Institutions and Nonprofits

# Five Things Your Marketing Calendar Should Account For.

*Most organizations have a calendar. Few have one that actually accounts for how audiences behave, how funding cycles work, and when vendors need to hear from you.*

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# Why most marketing calendars stop working by February.

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Most cultural institutions and nonprofits do have some version of a marketing calendar. It usually looks like a spreadsheet with event dates and send reminders. And it usually falls apart by the second month of the year.

The reason is almost always the same: the calendar was built around what the organization wants to say, not around when audiences are ready to hear it, when vendors need lead time, or when funding cycles demand attention.

A calendar that accounts for those things does something a simple schedule cannot. It becomes a decision-making tool. It tells you not just what to do next week, but why this week is different from last week, and what that means for how you communicate.

*The five points in this guide are not exhaustive. They are the ones most consistently overlooked by small organizations — and the ones that, when accounted for, make the difference between a calendar that guides your year and one that gets ignored.*

# 0 1

## Your funding cycles and your campaign calendar are the same document.

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Most organizations plan marketing and fundraising in separate conversations. Development sets a giving calendar. Marketing sets a campaign calendar. The two rarely align — and that costs both.

When a major donor appeal goes out during your busiest event promotion window, it competes with itself for your audience's attention. When a grant deadline lands two weeks before your season opener, your staff is stretched across two priorities that should have been sequenced.

A marketing calendar built for cultural institutions maps fundraising seasons directly alongside communications activity. The year-end giving window. The spring grant cycle. GivingTuesday. Membership renewal. These are not separate from your marketing — they are your marketing, for significant portions of the year.

### REFLECTION PROMPT

*Where in your current calendar do fundraising and marketing activities overlap or compete? Which months have the most conflict?*

# 0 2

## Different audiences need different rhythms — and the same message sent to everyone is a missed opportunity.

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Your general audience wants to hear about programs and events. Your donors want to understand impact. Your members expect early access and a sense of belonging. Your press contacts need lead time and brevity. Your board needs a regular structured summary.

Sending one message to everyone, at the same frequency, is the most common communications mistake small organizations make. It either fatigues the audiences who receive too much, or neglects the relationships that require more careful attention.

A well-structured calendar doesn't just schedule sends — it assigns each send to the right audience, at the right frequency, with the right intent. Donors should almost never be the first to hear about a ticket sale. Members should almost never be the last to hear about a new program.

#### REFLECTION PROMPT

*How many distinct audience segments does your organization currently communicate with separately? What does each one actually need from you?*

## 03

### **Your vendors need more lead time than you think — and in-kind value is being left on the table.**

Print vendors, broadcast partners, and media contacts all operate on timelines that are longer than most marketing calendars account for. A program that needs to be in hand by opening night requires design approval, print production, and delivery — often three to four weeks minimum. A radio partnership that should support your season opener needs to be negotiated months before the season begins.

Beyond timing, there is a financial dimension most organizations miss. Nonprofit organizations are uniquely positioned to negotiate in-kind partnerships — trade agreements, discounted rates, and co-promotional arrangements that significantly extend a limited marketing budget. But these arrangements require consistent vendor relationships and early outreach. They cannot be improvised two weeks before a deadline.

A marketing calendar that includes vendor coordination milestones — not just campaign send dates — is the difference between an organization that pays full rate and one that maximizes every dollar.

#### REFLECTION PROMPT

*What is your current lead time for print production? When did you last negotiate an in-kind or discounted rate with a media or print vendor?*

## 04

### **There is \$10,000 per month in free advertising most nonprofits never activate.**

Google's Nonprofit Grant program provides eligible 501(c)(3) organizations with up to \$10,000 per month in Google Search advertising at no cost. For a small cultural institution, that is the equivalent of a significant paid media budget

— available every month, for free.

The vast majority of eligible organizations either do not know about it, have applied and let the account go inactive, or are running it without any strategic direction. An unmanaged Google Grant account typically spends a fraction of its available budget and drives low-quality traffic.

When integrated into a marketing calendar properly — with campaigns aligned to program seasons, audience intent, and geographic targeting — the Google Nonprofit Grant becomes one of the most cost-effective audience acquisition tools available to a small organization. It should appear on your calendar every single month, not as an afterthought.

#### REFLECTION PROMPT

*Does your organization currently have an active Google Nonprofit Grant account? If so, when did someone last review its performance?*

# 0 5

## **The year-end giving window is your highest-stakes communications period — and it requires preparation that starts in September.**

For most cultural nonprofits, the period between GivingTuesday and December 31st generates a disproportionate share of individual giving for the year. It is also the most crowded communications environment of the year. Every organization with a mailing list is competing for the same attention at the same time.

Organizations that perform well in this window do not improvise it. They begin cultivating donors in September and October — with impact stories, program updates, and personal outreach — before the formal ask arrives. By the time the year-end appeal lands, the relationship has already been reinforced. The ask is a continuation, not a surprise.

A marketing calendar that treats year-end giving as a November project will always underperform one that treats it as a four-month arc. The calendar is where that discipline is built and maintained.

#### REFLECTION PROMPT

*When does your year-end donor cultivation currently begin? What is the last non-ask communication your donors receive before your year-end appeal arrives?*

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# What comes next.

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If any of these five points surfaced something worth addressing in your organization, that is a good sign. It means there is real opportunity — not a problem, but a gap between where your marketing is and where it could be.

The next step is a more complete picture. The full Nonprofit Marketing Calendar Template — included with this guide — gives you a working twelve-month framework built around exactly these principles: funding cycles, audience segments, vendor coordination, Google Grant activation, and year-end giving preparation.

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## THE FULL TEMPLATE

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Cadence guidance, seasonal timing  
recommendations, and a full quarterly vendor  
checklist.

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