

# Nonprofit Marketing Calendar Guide

Five principles that separate a working marketing calendar from one that stops working by February.

## WHAT'S INSIDE

- Why most nonprofit calendars fail by February
- Five structural principles for a year-round calendar
- Audience rhythm and channel frequency guide
- Year-end campaign timing: cultivation-to-close sequence
- Reflection prompts for immediate team use

## SANTA FE MARKETING / RESOURCE SERIES

Brian Bixby

FRACTIONAL DIRECTOR OF MARKETING & COMMUNICATIONS · SANTA FE, NEW MEXICO

[SANTAFEMARKETING.COM/RESOURCES](https://santafemarketing.com/resources)

## What we mean by “Marketing Calendar”

A marketing calendar is not simply a schedule of emails or social posts. It is a planning framework that aligns programming, fundraising, media outreach, and audience communications across the full year. The goal is coordination, not just scheduling.

Most organizations have a calendar. Few have one that accounts for how audiences behave, how funding cycles work, and when vendors need to hear from you. The result is a calendar built around what the organization wants to say, rather than when audiences are ready to hear it.

A calendar designed around those realities performs differently from the start. It sequences appeals rather than stacking them. It builds toward year-end rather than reacting to it. It assigns communications to audiences by their readiness to receive them, not by the organization’s production schedule.

## THE PROBLEM

### Why most calendars stop working by February

February is typically when nonprofit marketing calendars start to unravel. The year-start energy fades. Events shift. Grant applications consume staff time. Donor follow-up from December gets delayed.

Calendars fail not because teams are disorganized. They fail because most calendars are designed around content production rather than audience readiness, vendor timelines, and funding cycles. When the calendar is built around what the organization needs to publish, rather than when the audience is prepared to act, the two fall out of sync almost immediately.

#### A PRACTICAL EXAMPLE

Instead of launching a donor appeal during the same week as a major event promotion, a well-structured calendar sequences them: event promotion first, donor stewardship afterward. Both communications perform better because the audience receives one clear message at a time.

## OVERVIEW

# Five Structural Principles

Each principle addresses a specific structural gap that causes nonprofit calendars to lose coherence over the course of a year. They are ordered from the most foundational coordination problem to the most time-sensitive planning challenge.

**01**

## Share One Calendar

Development and marketing operate on separate calendars in most organizations. Appeals compete with promotions. Year-end emails collide with membership renewals. The first structural fix is a single shared planning document.

**02**

## Match Communication to Audience

Donors, members, general audiences, press, and board each require different message types at different frequencies. A calendar that treats them as one list will fatigue the most engaged segments first.

**03**

## Include Vendor Timelines

Print deadlines, broadcast windows, co-op application cycles, and press lead times are invisible on most calendars. When they are missing, the team manages them reactively, at higher cost and lower quality.

**04**

## Maintain Google Ad Grants Monthly

The \$10,000/month search advertising credit available to qualifying nonprofits requires ongoing attention to maintain compliance and spend effectively. Organizations that set it up once consistently underperform.

**05**

## Start Year-End Cultivation in September

The highest-stakes fundraising period of the year cannot begin in November. Effective year-end campaigns are the result of three to four months of donor cultivation, not a sudden December ask.

## PRINCIPLE 01

### Fundraising and Marketing Must Share One Calendar

When development and marketing maintain separate calendars, neither team sees the full picture of what the organization is asking its audiences to do in a given week. A donor appeal launches alongside a ticket promotion. A grant report consumes the same staff bandwidth as a spring campaign. The communications stack up, and the audience experiences them as noise.

The fix is not a technology problem. It is a coordination decision: one shared calendar document, maintained by both teams, with a single person who holds authority to flag conflicts and enforce sequencing. When every communication, campaign, and donor touchpoint lives in the same view, conflicts become visible before they reach an inbox.

#### REFLECTION PROMPTS

Where do your fundraising and marketing calendars currently overlap or conflict?

Who owns the integrated calendar in your organization?

What was the last communication that should have been sequenced differently?

## PRINCIPLE 02

### Each Audience Requires a Different Communication Rhythm

A well-structured calendar does not just schedule sends. It assigns each send to the right audience. Donors want impact stories. Ticket buyers want event information. Members want early access and a sense of belonging. Press want brevity and lead time. Board members want a structured monthly summary.

Sending the same communication to all five audiences at the same frequency is the most common reason email lists fatigue and unsubscribe rates climb. Audience-specific cadence is not a complexity to manage later; it is the minimum standard for a calendar that performs through the year.

A nonprofit typically communicates with at least five distinct audiences: general/public, donors, members, press, and board. Each has a different relationship with the organization and a different tolerance for frequency and message type.

Donors respond to impact stories. Members want early access. Press contacts need brevity and long lead times. Board members need a structured summary, not a stream of updates. Sending the same message to all five groups at the same frequency is the most common reason email lists fatigue and unsubscribe rates climb. The full guide includes an audience-by-channel frequency matrix to help structure this.

#### AUDIENCE X CHANNEL FREQUENCY

AUDIENCE	EMAIL	SOCIAL	PRINT
General Audience	HIGH	HIGH	MED
Donors	MED		MED
Members	HIGH	LOW	LOW
Press	LOW	LOW	LOW
Board	LOW		LOW

**HIGH = RECOMMENDED BASELINE.** MED = OCCASIONAL OR SEASONAL. LOW = MINIMAL OR EVENT-DRIVEN.

## Audience Segment Communication Priority

AUDIENCE	PRIORITY GUIDANCE
General Audience 32%	Highest volume. Email 2-3x/month. Social 4-5x/week. This is your broadest list.
Donors 24%	Impact-first. Never lead with an ask. 1-2x/month. Stewardship drives renewal.
Members 22%	Exclusivity and early access. 2-4x/month. Renewals start 60 days before expiration.
Press 12%	Event-driven. Brevity above all. 4-6 weeks lead time for any coverage request.
Board 10%	Structured monthly summary. Send 3-5 days before board meetings, not after.

### REFLECTION PROMPTS

How many distinct audience segments do you currently communicate with separately?

Which audience is most underserved by your current email cadence?

Which segment receives the wrong message type most often?

## PRINCIPLE 03

### Vendor Timelines Belong on the Calendar

Marketing calendars typically track what the organization plans to say and when. They rarely track when vendors need to hear from the organization. Print production, broadcast negotiation, co-op marketing applications, and press kit distribution all operate on fixed lead times. Missing a deadline means rushing at a premium or missing the window entirely.

The principle is backward-mapping: start from the public date of any deliverable and work backward to the vendor deadline. When that deadline appears on the shared calendar, the team sees the true workload, not just the publishing schedule. The full guide includes a vendor lead time reference table with typical windows for each vendor type.

#### VENDOR LEAD TIME REFERENCE

VENDOR TYPE	LEAD TIME	CONSEQUENCE IF MISSED
Print (programs, postcards)	3-5 weeks	Rush charges or missed print window
Radio / broadcast	3-5 weeks	No available inventory; market goes to competitors
Co-op applications (NMTD)	3-5 weeks	Missed funding cycle for the calendar year
Press kit distribution	3-5 weeks	No media coverage for opening or event
Photography / videography	3-5 weeks	No visual assets ready for campaign launch

#### REFLECTION

Which vendor relationships are you currently managing reactively?

Which vendor deadline has caused the most disruption in the past year?

## PRINCIPLE 04

### Google Ad Grants Require Monthly Calendar Presence

Google Ad Grants provides qualifying nonprofits with up to \$10,000 per month in search advertising credits. The program rewards consistent attention and penalizes inattention with reduced impressions and, eventually, account suspension.

Every month should include at least one Ad Grants task: keyword adjustments, campaign alignment with current programming, compliance checks, and spend optimization during high-traffic periods. The full guide includes a 12-month recommended activity calendar. A separate Resource Series guide (Guide 01) covers the complete program walkthrough.

#### GOOGLE AD GRANTS: RECOMMENDED MONTHLY CALENDAR PRESENCE

JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN
Review keywords	Check CTR	Spring campaign	Grant deadlines	Update landing	Summer Campaign
JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC
Max Spend	Max Spend	Fall campaign	Donor keywords	Giving Tuesday	Year-End Campaign

Maintenance
  Active campaign
  Peak spend

#### FOR THE COMPLETE GOOGLE AD GRANTS GUIDE

The Google Ad Grant Guide covers the full walkthrough of activating and managing Google Ad Grants, including eligibility requirements, account structure, campaign setup, compliance rules, and New Mexico-specific strategy. Available at [santafemarketing.com/resources](http://santafemarketing.com/resources).

#### REFLECTION PROMPTS

Is your organization currently using Google Ad Grants? If so, does your calendar include monthly management tasks for the program?

Is your Google Ad Grants account currently active and compliant?

Does your calendar include monthly review and optimization tasks for the program?

Are your Ad Grants keywords aligned with your current programming calendar?

## PRINCIPLE 05

### Year-End Giving Begins in September

Year-end giving is the highest-stakes fundraising period for most cultural nonprofits. The window from Thanksgiving through December 31 is competitive and unforgiving of late starts. Organizations that enter December without a cultivated donor list and a sequenced email plan consistently underperform.

Cultivation is not a fundraising technique. It is the sustained practice of sharing impact, building relationships, and demonstrating stewardship before making an ask. When December arrives with three to four months of cultivation behind it, the ask is a continuation of an ongoing conversation. When it arrives cold, it is a surprise. The full guide includes a month-by-month cultivation-to-close sequence.

#### WHEN EACH PHASE ACTUALLY BEGINS

	J	F	M	A	M	J	J	A	S	O	N	D
MEMBERSHIP	RENEWAL										CULTIVATION	
TOURISM/AUDIE				PEAK SEASON								
FUNDRAISING	CULTIVATION / RELATIONSHIP									YEAR-END ASKS		

## When Each Phase Actually Begins

PERIOD	PHASE	ACTIONS
SEP	Cultivation Begins	Recommended email, social, and print cadence for each of five audience segments.
OCT	Stewardship and Relationship	Typical timelines for print, broadcast, co-op applications, press, and photography vendors.
NOV 1-25	Positioning and Giving Tuesday	A 12-month view of recommended management activities aligned to seasonal patterns.
NOV 27	Giving Tuesday	A month-by-month year-end fundraising timeline from September through December 31.
DEC 1-27	Year-End Campaign	Downloadable calendar tool with annual overview, monthly grid, audience cadence guide, and vendor checklist.
DEC 28-31	Tax Deadline Close	Downloadable calendar tool with annual overview, monthly grid, audience cadence guide, and vendor checklist.

### REFLECTION PROMPTS

Is your organization currently using Google Ad Grants? If so, does your calendar include monthly management tasks for the program?

Is your Google Ad Grants account currently active and compliant?

Does your calendar include monthly review and optimization tasks for the program?

Are your Ad Grants keywords aligned with your current programming calendar?

## NEXT STEP

### From Principles to Planning Tools

The five principles above are the conceptual foundation. They identify where nonprofit calendars typically break down and why. The companion guide and planning template translate these principles into tools you can act on immediately.

TOOL	DESCRIPTION
Audience frequency matrix	Recommended email, social, and print cadence for each of five audience segments.
Vendor lead time reference	Typical timelines for print, broadcast, co-op applications, press, and photography vendors.
Google Ad Grants calendar	A 12-month view of recommended management activities aligned to seasonal patterns.
Cultivation-to-close sequence	A month-by-month year-end fundraising timeline from September through December 31.
Cultivation-to-close sequence	Downloadable calendar tool with annual overview, monthly grid, audience cadence guide, and vendor checklist.

## DOWNLOAD THE GOOGLE AD GRANTS GUIDE

[SANTAFEMARKETING.COM/RESOURCES](https://santafemarketing.com/resources)

Brian Bixby is a Fractional Director of Marketing & Communications serving nonprofit and cultural institutions in Santa Fe and New Mexico. This guide is part of a free resource series for organizations navigating marketing strategy without a full-time marketing department.

If your organization needs help building a marketing calendar, developing audience strategy, or establishing communications infrastructure, visit [santafemarketing.com](https://santafemarketing.com) to start a conversation.