NONPROFIT MARKETING RESOURCE SERIES / GUIDE 02-A

8 MINUTE READ

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 stop working by February
- Five structural principles for a calendar that works year-round
- Audience rhythm visualization and channel frequency guide
- Year-end campaign timing — the cultivation-to-close sequence
- Reflection prompts for immediate team use

Brian Bixby

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

NONPROFIT MARKETING RESOURCE SERIES · GUIDE 02-A

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 actually 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, when donors are most responsive, or when print vendors need lead time. A calendar designed around those realities performs differently from the start.

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. The calendar becomes aspirational rather than operational.

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 does not account for those realities, it stops serving the team by the time the season actually begins.

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. The audience does not receive conflicting messages. The team does not split its attention. Both communications perform better.

FIVE STRUCTURAL PRINCIPLES

01 Align fundraising and marketing calendars

02	Assign each communication to the right audience
03	Build in vendor and production timelines
04	Treat Google Ad Grants as a calendar fixture
05	Begin year-end cultivation in September

PRINCIPLE 01

FUNDRAISING AND MARKETING MUST SHARE ONE CALENDAR

Many cultural organizations treat development and marketing as separate functions with separate calendars. The result is predictable: a major donor appeal launches the same week as a ticket promotion. A grant report consumes staff time during the spring campaign. A year-end email conflicts with a membership renewal sequence.

Fundraising cycles are marketing activity for much of the year. Cultivation, acknowledgment, impact reporting, and stewardship all require communications infrastructure. When those activities live in a shared calendar, the team can sequence rather than compete.

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 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.

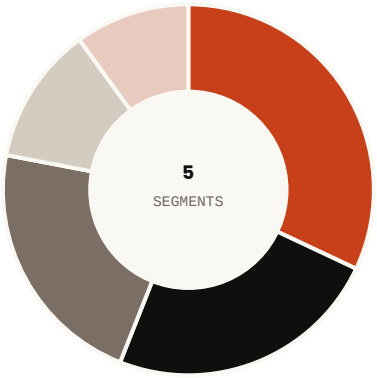
AUDIENCE × CHANNEL FREQUENCY

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

LOW MED HIGH

HIGH = recommended baseline. MED = occasional or seasonal. LOW = minimal or event-driven.

AUDIENCE SEGMENT COMMUNICATION PRIORITY



GENERAL AUDIENCE 32%

Highest volume. Email 2–3x/month. Social 4–5x/week.

DONORS 24%

Impact-first. Never lead with an ask. 1–2x/month.

MEMBERS 22%

Exclusivity and early access. 2–4x/month. Renewals 60 days out.

PRESS 12% · BOARD 10%

Event-driven and structured monthly. Brevity above all.

REFLECTION PROMPTS

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

Which audience is most underserved by your current email cadence?

PRINCIPLE 03

VENDOR TIMELINES BELONG ON THE CALENDAR

Most marketing calendars plan what to say but not when vendors need to hear from you. Print production, broadcast negotiation, co-op marketing applications, and press kit distribution all have fixed lead times. Missing them means either rushing production at a premium or missing the window entirely.

VENDOR TYPE	LEAD TIME REQUIRED	CONSEQUENCE IF MISSED
Print (programs, postcards)	3–5 weeks	Rush charges or missed event
Radio / broadcast	4–6 weeks	No availability; market to competitors
Co-op applications (NMTD)	6–10 weeks	Missed funding cycle for the year
Press kit distribution	4–6 weeks	No coverage for opening or event
Photography / videography	3–4 weeks	No visual assets for campaign

The quarterly vendor checklist in the companion calendar template maps these deadlines to specific months so they appear as calendar items rather than as last-minute emergencies.

REFLECTION PROMPTS

Which vendor relationships are you currently managing reactively rather than proactively?

What is the lead time for your primary print vendor?

PRINCIPLE 04

GOOGLE AD GRANTS BELONG ON EVERY MONTH OF THE CALENDAR

Google Ad Grants provides qualifying nonprofits with up to $10,000 per month in search advertising credits. The program requires ongoing management to maintain compliance and spend effectively. Organizations that treat it as a one-time setup consistently underperform against those that build it into monthly calendar activity.

GOOGLE AD GRANTS: RECOMMENDED MONTHLY CALENDAR PRESENCE

JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC

Review keywords	Check CTR	Spring campaign	Grant deadlines	Update pages	Summer campaign	Max spend	Max spend	Fall campaign	Donor keywords	Giving Tuesday	Year-end campaign

DARK RUST = peak spend period. MID = active campaign. LIGHT = maintenance and review.

For a complete guide to activating and managing Google Ad Grants, see Resource Series Guide 01 at santafemarketing.com/resources.

REFLECTION PROMPTS

Is your Google Ad Grants account currently active and compliant?

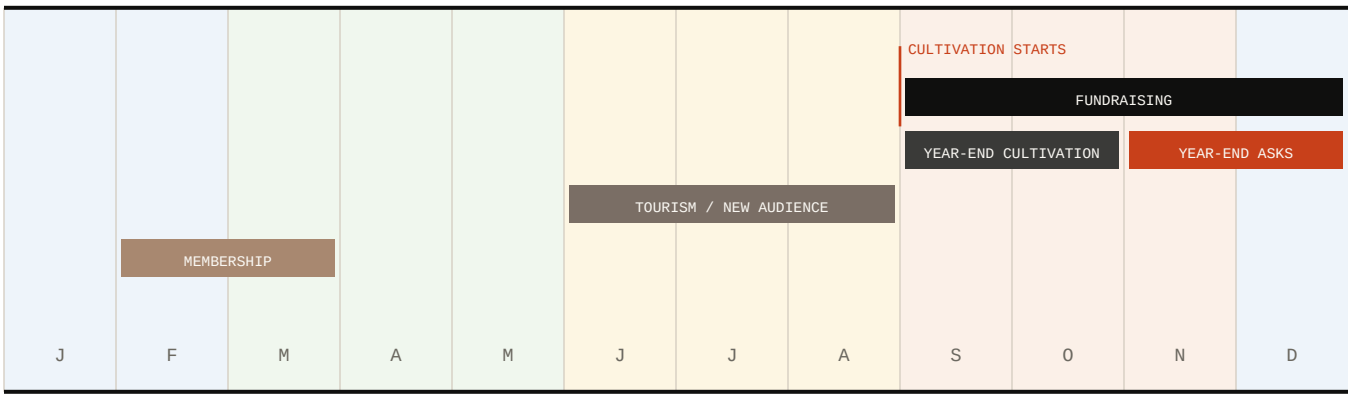
Does your calendar include monthly review and optimization tasks for the program?

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. Organizations that enter it without a cultivated donor list, a tested message, and a sequenced email schedule consistently underperform against those that started building in September.

THE YEAR-END SEQUENCE: WHEN EACH PHASE ACTUALLY BEGINS



THE CULTIVATION-TO-CLOSE SEQUENCE

SEP	**CULTIVATION BEGINS**	Impact stories and program outcomes to major donor list. No ask. Reactivate lapsed donors with meaningful updates.
OCT	**STEWARDSHIP AND RELATIONSHIP**	Personal outreach to top donors. Annual report distribution begins. Board members activated for peer-to-peer asks.
NOV 1–25	**POSITIONING AND GIVINGTUESDAY**	GivingTuesday campaign assets live by November 1. Pre-Thanksgiving donor email with impact framing sets the ask context.
NOV 27	**GIVINGTUESDAY**	Coordinated campaign across email, social, and direct donor outreach. First Tuesday after Thanksgiving. Peer asks active.
DEC 1–27	**YEAR-END CAMPAIGN**	3 to 5 email sends. Personalized outreach to major gift prospects. The ask is a continuation, not a surprise.
DEC 28–31	**TAX DEADLINE CLOSE**	Final appeal to the full list. Subject line urgency. Gift processing confirmation immediate. Thank-you within 24 hours.

REFLECTION PROMPTS

When does your donor cultivation for year-end currently begin?

Do you have a sequenced 3 to 5 send email plan for December?

Is GivingTuesday integrated into your year-end strategy or treated as a separate campaign?

NEXT STEP

FROM PRINCIPLES TO A WORKING PLANNING TOOL

The five principles above are the conceptual foundation. The companion calendar template translates them into a working planning tool that organizations can adapt to their own program cycles, staffing, and funding timelines.

ANNUAL OVERVIEW	A single-page view of program dates, campaign windows, fundraising seasons, and blackout periods across 12 months.
MONTHLY PLANNING GRID	Channel-by-channel planning across email, social, print, web, press, Google Ads, and partner coordination.
AUDIENCE CADENCE GUIDE	Recommended send frequency and guidance for each of the five audience segments.
VENDOR COORDINATION CHECKLIST	Quarterly tasks for print, digital, broadcast, and internal coordination so vendor timelines never slip.

DOWNLOAD THE FULL TEMPLATE

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. Visit santafemarketing.com to start a conversation.