



NONPROFIT COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY

INTRODUCTION

My Favorite Outfit (MFO) is a Chicago-based nonprofit organization that addresses the problem of low self esteem in underserved girls attending K-12 schools. MFO's mission is achieved through two main programs; pop-up shops and their Fashion 101 after-school program.

The following communications strategy was created as a final project for a NonProfit Communications course at DePaul University instructed by Andrew Soloman.

MISSION

MFO's current mission reads as, "Our mission is to use fashion to empower at-risk youth to succeed in middle and high school, college, and beyond." Secondary and primary research, discussed later in this document, informs our decision to use terms like "underserved" or "under resourced" in place of the phrase, "at-risk."

Additionally, MFO representatives consistently point to the organization's emphasis on self-esteem; a term currently missing from the mission statement. MFO also specifically works with girls, not youth in general.

Finally, recent pop-up shops have taken place at elementary schools, not just middle and high schools. With these observations in mind, we have reworked MFO's mission statement to read as the following:

"We use fashion to educate, empower and increase the self-esteem of underserved girls in K-12 schools."

ORGANIZATIONAL GOALS

My Favorite Outfit's core organizational goals contain factors of both internal and external importance. In line with their mission statement, the organization's primary goal is to **serve their target audience** of underserved girls in Chicago K-12 schools by boosting their self-esteem through MFO's educational workshops and interactive pop-up shops. In order to fulfill this mission and **remain financially stable**, another organizational goal for MFO requires **building a base of volunteers, donors and Chicago public schools** and nurturing those relationships.

Furthermore, MFO has also expressed that **continuously refining their curriculum** is a key organizational goal that is important to prioritize because it 1) improves the livelihood of their primary target audience (under-served Chicago schoolgirls) and 2) can illustrate the organization's educational development to potential donors, volunteers and schools.

COMMUNICATION GOALS

As explained by MFO's founder and CEO, Jacqueline Perlman, the organization's communication goals are as follows:

- Attract new donors and influencers
- Builds relationships with relevant schools and administrations
- Communicate MFO's impact more effectively with reports, case studies, etc.

In an effort to build upon these overall communication goals, we've adjusted these objectives and developed a few more that specifically target these needs based on the research we've compiled.

Encourage existing donors to become sustaining ones

Building MFO's donor base is extremely important, however, it doesn't necessarily have to be done by acquiring more donors. While this strategy should not be abandoned, we believe that encouraging existing donors to become sustaining donors could help leverage the relationships that are already established in order to maintain long-term funding.

Bring in a more racially-diverse group of Pop-Up Shop volunteers

MFO's primary target audience is underserved girls in grades K-12. More specifically, these girls are overwhelmingly Black and Latina. Through primary research and interviews with the MFO

staff, we've uncovered that the demographic of pop-up s`hop volunteers do not mirror the students served.

Research shows that Black and Latino children, especially in elementary schools, perform better with teachers of their same race (<https://goo.gl/Z9uaf1>). With that said, we recommend communicating to potential volunteers with the intention of attracting more diverse mentors for the students.

Boost social media engagement

The most commonly-used social media sites for MFO are Facebook and Twitter with postings nearly every weekday. Instagram posts are slightly less frequent. Continuing to utilize this social space to highlight MFO events is an effective way to showcase their mission and can also be used to engage the students.

By creating a singular hashtag that can be used on all platforms, MFO can help build the reputation of MFO as a consistent brand whose progress can be tracked by just searching for #MyFavoriteOutfit, for example. Additionally, students who want to engage with the brand, request its service at their school or show off the positive effects of MFO's programming, can easily use the hashtag to express themselves while helping MFO collect data and impact.

Establish organizational partnerships by leveraging relationships

With Chicago being a market that is ripe for networking and collaborating, MFO has the ability to partner with organizations that share similar interests surrounding fashion, media, empowerment and education. Continuing to partner with both nonprofits and for-profit organizations allows MFO to extend its reach to different industries, new audiences and potential donors while boosting awareness of their mission and overall brand.

TARGET AUDIENCES

When meeting with the MFO team they identified four target audiences that they believe to be important for the organization and its operations. These audiences included schools, students, volunteers and donors. While we agree that all of these audiences are important we do think that including a sector of the public and potential partners is also important to the growth of the organization.

When targeting the public we believe that MFO should focus on women who have shown interest in volunteer work or have a philanthropic background as these members of the public could turn into potential volunteers and or donors in the future.

In terms of engaging the public as well as boosting fundraising, MFO might consider hosting an annual event. For example, a large annual fashion show with MFO's partners, donors, volunteers, and invitations to the public could be beneficial. Some of the girls MFO serves could attend to share their stories and even walk in the show. Awards could be given out to highlight an outstanding volunteer, school representative, etc.

As far as targeting potential partners, MFO could benefit from connecting with influencers, thought leaders and other businesses that could help to promote their mission and the work that they are doing in the community.

KEY MESSAGES

Currently, we have only identified the following key message from MFO's website and materials; "We believe fashion can change lives." Additional key messages should emphasize the important work MFO does, such as "Boosting self esteem, one outfit at a time" or "Building confidence from the outfit in."

TEXT & SUGGESTED VISUALS

For an introductory piece about the organization we decided that it would be best to create a trifold brochure that would compile the major points about the organization. These major points would include:

- Why we exist: People want to know the WHY when it comes to non-profits. It is important to highlight the problem and how the organization plans to provide a solution.
- Fashion 101: Explanation of what the Fashion 101 course is and how it aligns with their mission.
- Pop Up Shops: Explanation of what the pop-up shops are and how it aligns with their mission.
- Our Impact: People who become interested in the mission overall goals of the organization also want to know what results have been produced.
- Sponsors: The big name sponsors that MFO has adds to the organizations credibility in a major way so it is important to highlight that

- Contact Information: Provides a call to action to visit MFO online for those who are interested in getting involved and learning more.

We also found it important to include women instructors of color inside of the trifold as it shows that the organization promotes diversity and that the girls are learning from women in which they can identify with.



STORIES

Stories are extremely important for non profit organizations as they can help create a narrative and allow target audiences to connect with the organization in a unique way. When we analyzed the stories from the MFO blog we noticed that they lacked elements of connectivity and emotion. We also noticed that the stories coming from the perspective of some of the young girls didn't feel like they were the authentic statements of a child.

For example, they included a story from the perspective of Amaria, a 7th grader at one of the schools they serve. They include a quote from Amaria which reads, “The pop-up was special for me because it was my first time shopping and having a say in what I like. I learned that it’s ok to not fit into a mold and that I’m happier just being me!” While these could definitely be Amaria’s words, it doesn't strike us as authentic and other readers may have a hard time connecting emotionally to the quote due to the language.

When creating our stories we decided to create a segment for the MFO blog entitled “Behind The Curtain.” This blog segment will include interviews and behind-the-scenes footage with MFO staff, donors, volunteers and students. We thought it would be unique to have some of the stories take the form of videos. Videos provide viewers with direct emotion and authenticity can be easily recognized.

Our first story includes an interview with MFO's program manager Rebeca Valencia. Rebeca talks to us about what MFO means to her, how volunteers really make an impact and how MFO is changing lives one outfit at a time.

Link to video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=laH-DAw3dMk>

Our second story includes a short post written from the perspective of a volunteer. Because Valencia had the chance to volunteer we thought this piece would be great coming from her. She writes about her experience with the pop up workshop and how important an organization like MFO is.

Blog Post:



OVERALL STRATEGIC APPROACH

Our overall strategic approach includes using a four part strategy brought to you by the letter "E." Our strategy includes engagement, empowerment, expansion and evaluation.

Engagement

Engagement is an important part of organizations and tactics for engagement vary depending upon the audience in which one is trying to engage.

Internal

When speaking with Jasmine, the Fashion 101 instructor, she mentioned that she hadn't met some of the board members and other organizational representatives. We think it would be a great idea to ensure that internal engagement is up to par and that all involved parties are on the same page and acquainted with each other. This could be solved by hosting annual organization events such as mixers or meetings.

The Public

The founder of the organization, Jacqueline Pearlman, expressed that she wanted to engage the public more through emotion. We believe that this could be done through creating captivating stories for their blog and utilizing social media efficiently to share their mission and ventures.

The Girls

It is so important to ensure that the girls in which they serve are engaged with the organization as they are the primary audience. MFO can take steps to engage with the girls by creating special hashtags for them to use online and maybe even creating a Facebook group to start an online community to continue enforcing their message of self-esteem.

The Curriculum

In order to engage the students, MFO should create an engaging curriculum outline. In our interview with Jasmine, she mentioned that the Fashion 101 curriculum may need to be refreshed. We came up with a 5 week plan to give an example of what they could implement into their program.

Week 1: What's Your Style: Start by learning the students overall style. However not just their style of dress but also include their style of learning, style of dealing with challenges, style of communicating, etc.

Week 2: Perfect Your Pattern: Teach the students about different patterns and textures. The have them relate 5 patterns to themselves and tell why it represents them. This activity encourages individuality.

Week 3: Find Your Muse: Have a successful speaker from the field come in to talk to the girls about what it takes to succeed, not only in the fashion industry, but in life overall.

Week 4: Little Miss Stylist: Have the girls pick a partner that they don't know. Give them a worksheet to complete that encourages them to learn more about each other. From that sheet they are to develop an outfit for their partner and then introduce them to the class. The class will then give the girl 5 compliments. This encourages sisterhood and builds self esteem.

Week 5: Put The Buck To The Brand: Give the girls a \$10,000 imaginary budget to create their own fashion company. They must consider all elements of building a business and cannot exceed the given budget. This encourages entrepreneurship and money management skills.

Empowerment

MFO's mission includes their aim to empower the girls they serve. Representation among role models and volunteers, language (terminology), and effectively reaching target audiences are all important to the empowerment process.

Dr. Kerry Ann Rockquemore, President of the National Center for Faculty Development & Diversity, discusses the importance of finding role models that you can identify with:

“For underrepresented scholars, role models have the power to open up previously unimagined possibilities. For example, when I was an undergraduate student, I knew that I wanted to be a teacher. But it wasn't until I encountered Professor Geneva Smitherman that the synapses in my brain formed the thought “I could be a professor.” Nobody ever told me I couldn't be a professor, but I completed four years of college before I encountered an African-American female professor” (<https://goo.gl/ApCcHX>).

Dr. Rockquemore's experience points to importance of seeing yourself in the role models around you. My Favorite Outfit regularly posts “Women Who Inspire Us” blog posts. Currently, the majority of the featured women do not represent the majority of the girls that MFO serves. Interviewing a more diverse group of women for these blog posts, along with recruiting more diverse volunteers for the pop-up workshops, can go a long way in empowering the girls and showing that successful women do look like them.

With regards to language and terminology, it would be best if the term “at-risk” was replaced with “underserved” youth. “At-risk” is accompanied with a certain stigma whereas “underserved” points to systemic limits; emphasis placed on the under-resourcing of certain communities. An NPR story titled, “Delinquent. Dropout. At-Risk. When Words Become Labels,” addresses various issues with labels like “at-risk;” a term that “focuses on the negative” (<https://goo.gl/MhfA8w>).

Similarly, an article by Dr. Kristin Anderson Moore featured in Child Trends interrogates the use of “at-risk” and points out that it is a “term has no consistent definition and can be viewed as stigmatizing certain groups” (<https://goo.gl/jaNbXP>). Finally, an MFO employee, who grew up on the South Side of Chicago, was asked about the term and responded emotionally:

"It's a category that identifies a lot of the people from Brighton Park, however personally I wouldn't identify myself as at-risk...those are certain categories that are placed on certain neighborhoods on the south side..." [more of a criteria than an identity] (Rebeca Valencia 2017).

While “underserved” youth might not necessarily be an empowering identity in itself, it does hold a less stigmatizing weight than “at-risk,” and as stated previously, places emphasis on the limits of society, systems, and lack of resources and services.

Effectively reaching your target audience is crucial to the success of nonprofit organizations. In terms of MFO’s Fashion 101 after-school program, the question arises of whether or not the organization is reaching its target audience of underserved girls in Chicago’s K-12 schools. MFO’s website cites research about CPS students:

“Only 8% of Chicago Public School students obtain bachelor's degrees within 10 years of starting high school, and only 49% of college-going CPS students graduate within six years. This is representative of the alarming college enrollment rate gap between students from low-income and non-low-income schools” (www.MyFavoriteOutfit.org).

In contrast, the Fashion 101 program is currently only taking place at Evanston Township High School. The website, Illinois Report Card, shows that over 60% of the students at Evanston Township High School are not low income and the majority are white students (<https://goo.gl/vhsK5Z>). MFO staff stated that only a handful of students were enrolled in Fashion 101, in part because Evanston has a wealth of after-school programs. Organizational leaders mentioned that their main form of outreach to potential partner schools is through word of mouth. A more targeted and strategic effort to reach out to low-income schools should be implemented.

EXPANSION

Donor Base

To strategically meet the organization’s goals via communication, MFO can expand in a few different areas. For example, MFO should consider expanding their pop-up shop programming. Rather than simply doing the program twice a year, it would be more impactful to connect and reconnect with the students more times per school year. This requires additional funding. To take on this challenge, MFO aims to expand their donor base.

By utilizing the already-established partnerships with large names like Groupon and Bloomingdales, MFO can illustrate that backing of these brands means that MFO is doing meaningful work that corporations can get behind. For example, is it possible for Groupon to highlight MFO’s work on their website, blog, social media, or in an email announcement? In addition to highlighting its relationships, MFO can also leverage the actual impact of their work

on the girls they serve once they find a way to measure the self-esteem boost that the organization aims to provide.

Public Awareness

Bringing the brand into the public spotlight is a mission of the incoming Executive Director. With her relationships in public relations and the fashion world, she aims to get the brand more recognition and develop long-lasting partnerships that help the brand meet its goals. To be more specific, gaining more public knowledge among women who have shown interest in volunteer work would help MFO spread its message and help the organization when it comes to recruiting volunteers for their Pop-Up Shops. MFO can achieve this by targeting the media publications that cater to this same demographic and highlighting their current sponsors to build upon its reputation.

Online Presence & Social Media Engagement

Communicating with the primary target audience of the underserved girls in K-12 schools requires meeting them where they are — online or on social media. As we'll expand in our Communication Tactics section, using consistent messaging goes a long way in creating a digital thread of their key messages.

Furthermore, using emotional content and media draws more interest than simply using text and cold, hard facts. "Leveraging your audience's emotions will increase engagement with your business, convert leads and drive sales," (<https://goo.gl/U5X1qX>). By using video footage as suggested in our "Behind the Curtain" video, it can be assumed that visitors of MFO's website and social media profiles will be more interested in its services as they are able to visually see the impact of MFO's work.

EVALUATION

Donor, School & Volunteer Feedback

To ensure continuous improvement in all areas of MFOs communication, evaluation plays a large role. The first of evaluation areas involves the relationships that help MFOs initiatives run. The importance of routinely checking in with your stakeholders is not only to gauge the relationship, but to also see if your stakeholders view MFO in the same way that the staff does. (Ex. Where are the organization's blind spots and are they factors that can be improved with communication?)

Refining Curriculum

Using the data collected from the aforementioned self esteem measurements allows for MFO to find ways to better its programs. Along with the Fashion 101 program that's catered to high school students, feedback should always be encouraged in order to find out what students are wanting and what MFO is providing. The relationships that are built with schools and their administrations prove critical here as feedback need not only come from the students, but also teachers, parents and other members of school faculty.

Self Esteem Measurements

Arguably the most important of evaluations involves the work that MFO does on the ground. With the intention of improving self esteem, how does MFO track their progress? With it being stated that "refining the curriculum" is a major goal for MFO's new ED, there must be a starting point from which to measure. The staff had stated that it was logically difficult to measure the girls' self esteem before and after the MFO program, but perhaps the measurement of self esteem could come from observations from the teachers who know these students best.

Regardless of how MFO decides to measure, it's important to note that these metrics are key in communicating the good that MFO does in the community in which it serves. For donors (especially), volunteers and the public, knowing the impact helps establish MFO as a reputational brand that accomplishes its mission and continuously builds upon its progress. And having that quantitative or qualitative data to back up the mission is key to communicating that to MFO's multiple audiences.

CHALLENGES

Metrics

One of the biggest challenges that MFO faces is measuring the success of their programs. While going into a school and teaching them about self-esteem is noble, MFO needs to find a way to prove its efficacy. Prior methods included handing out surveys to the students, but it proved to be too logistically difficult to implement.

Measuring the effectiveness of the programs are dually important for the students and MFO's other target audiences. Determining what works and how it works with verifiable data helps inform MFO on what to fine-tune. With solid feedback, MFO can improve on its mission and use their data to prove the organization's worth to donors, volunteers and partners.

Sustaining Relationships with Students

Another challenge that MFO is trying to reconcile is how they follow up with students who have been part of their programs. Often times, the students want to reach out to MFO or share stories about their progress. A potential solution for this issue, along with social media engagement, could be a mentorship program where interested volunteers could serve as continuous mentors. Especially if it came from volunteers who looked like the students, this mentorship program could go a long way in building lasting relationships of value for both the volunteers and the students.

Los Angeles Expansion

The last major hurdle involves MFO's desire to expand to the Los Angeles market. Planned for sometime in 2017, this expansion, we believe, may be premature. By extending one's mission to a new market without fully-tested programs, communication strategies or proof of effectiveness, it is possible that MFO could deplete its resources quickly.

Extending the work of the MFO staff to an entirely different city before Chicago has even experienced the potential of the Fashion 101, while optimistic, could potentially do more harm than good for the target market of underserved girls.

RECOMMENDED COMMUNICATION TACTICS

- Remove “at-risk” language and replace with phrasing like “underserved students” or “under-resourced schools”
- Partner with diverse employee groups and volunteers
- Implement pre- and post- evaluation processes to produce better metrics of self esteem increases
- Meet and greet or some other yearly event for employees to meet board members and other organizational stakeholders
- Authentic storytelling to spark emotion and better engage the public
- Emphasize more women of color for the “women who inspire us” blog posts
- Provide consistency in messaging between MFO statements and statistics (CPS low-income schools) with Fashion 101 workshop locations. Targeted partnerships.
- Consider hosting a large annual fashion show event to fundraise and show off MFO's important work to the public
- Highlight MFO's impressive corporate donors. Partner with these donors, like Groupon, to feature MFO's work in an aspect of their communications (social media, email, website)

WEBSITE AUDIT

We believe that the MFO website is designed perfectly and is a great example of a clean layout with direct links to important information. We do think that it is important for them to consistently check for spelling and grammar errors as we noticed a few while scrolling through the content. We also look forward to seeing more pictures and features of diverse volunteers and instructors as it can only enhance their organization and show the young girls they serve reflections of themselves.

SOCIAL MEDIA AUDIT

With such a great mission and unique programs MFO should have a large following online. Because they only have a few followers (78 Twitter & 134 on Instagram) MFO should be taking steps to increase their digital followers. This could include using hashtags, having exclusive social media content and utilizing Chicago influencers. We noticed that the content that they post is great and relevant to the mission however it's not impactful because very few people are receiving the message.

CONCLUSION

My Favorite Outfit is an inspiring organization and it was an honor to work with them. We hope that they can implement our four "E" strategy to ensure the success of their organization for years to come.