25 Metaphors Nonprofits Can Use to Get Their Messages Across—and the Decrepit Dozen to Avoid
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Why Nonprofits Need Metaphors

Much of the work that nonprofits do is either so familiar that it’s easily overlooked or so technical that it’s hard to understand. Nonprofit staff also frequently suffer from the “curse of knowledge” – because they know so much about their fields, they lose the ability to speak about that work in clear, simple terms.

When we use metaphors, we say that some new idea or approach is like something else that we already understand. We help people see us from a fresh new perspective. Or we take a complicated or foreign idea and make it feel simple and familiar.

Nonprofit communicators can use metaphors in several different ways.

Clarifying Your Niche

Lillian’s List of North Carolina, a political action committee that raises money for progressive women candidates, uses “Feel the Power of the Purse” as a tagline accompanied by an image of a fashionably dressed woman with a big purse. They also use actual purses like the ones in the photo at fundraising events. The imagery nicely ties together the ideas of today’s women, money, and political power.

Using a metaphor as a tagline is another good way to clarify your niche.

*Because the earth needs a good lawyer.* -- Earthjustice

*Nothing stops a bullet like a job.* -- Homeboy Industries

*Open hearts. Open minds. Open doors.* -- The United Methodist Church

These three winners of the [2009 Nonprofit Tagline Awards](http://www.nonprofitmarketingguide.com) all have one thing in common: They skillfully use metaphors to convey very quickly what the organization is all about.

Making the Technical Feel More Touchy

Metaphors can also turn what might normally be perceived as something cold, scientific, or technical into something that’s more touchy-feely, which can be very helpful when communicating with individual supporters.

The [Nature Conservancy](http://www.nature.org) refers to a coral restoration project at the Mote Marine Laboratory as “The Coral Nursery.” The word *nursery* conjures up images of babies that need tender care and attention, which is probably not how most people would describe rough coral on the bottom of the ocean. It’s a simple metaphor that instantly changes the way we think about coral.
Overcoming Resistance

If you suspect some reluctance on the part of potential supporters to follow through on your calls to action, metaphors can help you overcome that resistance. Aid organizations often have trouble raising funds for projects on foreign soil because they are “out of sight, out of mind” or donors don’t feel like the plight of people in other nations is their responsibility.

Beyond Borders is overcoming that resistance with a series of animated images on its homepage, two of which are featured here. The images use travel metaphors of airplane flights and border crossings to help supporters understand why they should help Haiti.

Bringing Data to Life

Health and nutrition experts know that a diet of fresh foods – vegetables, fruit, meat and dairy products – can help prevent many diseases and obesity. Yet the residents of large sections of many major cities don’t live anywhere near a grocery store and are often forced to rely on processed foods from convenience stores and fast food for most meals.

But quoting statistics about the number of people who live a certain distance from a grocery store doesn’t convey the significance of the problem. Neither do maps alone.

The metaphor food desert, on the other hand, does. The depth of the metaphor allows advocates to also talk about thirst, starving, shifting sands, oasis, and more.
Metaphors can also be used as presentation themes, as provocative headlines and email subject lines, and more.

**Coming Up with the Right Metaphor for Your Organization**

**Step 1: Relax!**

Thinking metaphorically is a creative process that’s hard to force. Give yourself some time and space to think.

**Step 2: Understand Your Goal**

What does the metaphor need to accomplish?

**Step 3: Review the List of Metaphors and See What Pops**

Look at the list of 25 metaphors and see if anything jumps out at you. If not, randomly select a category and start working through the questions in Step 4.

**Step 4: Explore Your Metaphor**

Take a few minutes to brainstorm as many elements of your metaphor as you can. Use these questions to help you think through the possibilities.

- Who does this? Who else is involved?
- What do people physically do?
- What things or tools do they use?
- What categories are used?
- What decisions do they make?
- What mistakes are common?
- How do they learn?
- What’s the timing?
- What are the stages or steps in the process?
- Where does it happen?
- What defines success?
- What defines disaster?
- What are the special occasions or milestones?

*When we use metaphors, we say that some new idea or approach is like something else that we already understand.*

*What is your idea or approach like?*
• What are the levels of mastery?
• Who are the celebrities?
• In what movies, books, or stories is this featured?

With this long list of metaphorical elements in hand, think about how they are similar to the different aspects of the programs or services you are trying to explain (e.g., areas without grocery stores are like food deserts and growing coral on the ocean floor is like a coral nursery). Pick a handful of the best matches and start to build your explanation or story around them.

Step 5: Decide Based on Your Audience’s Experiences

As with any good communications, your audience is the ultimate decisionmaker on whether something works or not.

How well will your audience relate to your metaphor given their professional and personal experiences? For example, a 60-year-old would draft a very different list of iconic movies and television programs than a 25-year-old would. People who have never worked in a cubicle won’t understand office life metaphors in the same way as those who have.

25 Metaphors for Your Nonprofit

Below are 25 metaphors that I think can work well in the nonprofit world. This is by no means a comprehensive list, but it’s long enough to get you thinking more creatively.

The metaphors are grouped into two categories: Deep metaphors (based on the research explained in Marketing Metaphoria: What Deep Metaphors Reveal About the Minds of Consumers by Gerald Zaltman and Lindsay Zaltman) and surface metaphors. **Deep metaphors** are large, complex themes that work at the subconscious level. People often can’t articulate these feelings directly, even though they drive their decisionmaking. **Surface metaphors** are those found throughout everyday language and are therefore much more easily recognized and understood.

When trying to come up with a metaphor for your work, it’s often helpful to pick one deep metaphor and then explore how several surface metaphors can work within the deep metaphor (e.g. exploring how surface metaphors like weather, exercise/fitness, or fashion can be used to elaborate on the deep metaphor of balance.)

Next to each metaphor, you’ll find a handful of elements related to it to get you started. Remember to use the questions in Step #4 to fully explore the metaphor's potential.

Deep Metaphors

**Balance.** Equilibrium, justice, interplay.

**Transformation.** Changes in substance, circumstance.

**Journey.** Meeting of past, present, future.

**Container.** Inclusion, exclusion, boundaries.
Connection. Relating to self and others.

Resource. Acquisitions and their consequences.

Control. Mastery, vulnerability, well-being.

Surface Metaphors

Parenting. Growth spurts, stages, giving birth, pregnancy, nursery, family dinner, sibling rivalry, Brady Bunch, discipline, adoption, empty nest, sleepless nights, divorce, packing school lunches.

Travel. Planes, trains, cars, delays, road trips, adventure, exploration, tickets, routes, missed flights, concierge, maps, mileage, speed, tourists, airport screening, motions sickness, souvenirs.

Gardens, Forests, and Other Landscapes. Growth, blooms, weeds, mulch, annuals, perennials, insects, fertilizer, harvest, planting, plow, grasslands, ecosystems, mountain peaks, horizon.

Sports. Teams, teaming up, scoring, winning, losing, competition, practice, game face, slam dunk, heavy hitting, goal, touchdown, three strikes, penalty, take aim, best shot, marathon, sore loser.

Cooking, Food and Beverages. Recipes, cookbooks, ingredients, shopping list, bar tab, chefs, chopping block, culinary school, winemaking, baking, mixed drinks, burning, boiling, raw.

Arts and Crafts. Cutting, pasting, scrapbooking, paint, color palettes, textures, galleries, shows, brushes, sketching, inspiration, patterns, decorating, stringing beads, finger painting, frames.

Shopping. Sales, bargains, prices, mark-downs, close-outs, grocery lists, shopping carts, aisles, cash register, lines, secret shoppers, credit, returns, eBay, QVC, yard sales, convenience store, coupons.

Banking and Economics. Savings, spending, budgets, balance sheets, investing, overdraft, insurance, refinance, equity, sell off, fees, loans, debit card, keep the change, wealth, deposit, withdrawal.


Science and Technology. Formulas, white coats, DNA, computers, wireless, programming, research, experiments, injection, immunity, data, inventions, space, labs, results, findings, cells, Bill Nye.

Games. Puzzles, chess board, video games, steps, solving, shell game, shuffle cards, house of cards, target, strategy, arcades, party games, players, family game night, bingo, prizes, Solitaire, patterns.

Fashion. Styles, trends, trendsetter, tight fit, sales, fitting room, designers, collections, catwalk, models, Vogue, make-up, body image, out of style, chic, shape, cut, craze, back in style.

Television and Movies. Soap operas, blockbusters, sequels, Oscars, supporting cast, three-act play, drama, clues, black-and-white, reception, 3-D, A Christmas Story, The Simpsons, the big screen.
Literature. Fairy tales, Disney stories, classics, Shakespeare, how the story unfolds, translation, mysteries, autobiography, writer’s retreat, hard cover, book stores, libraries, better than the movie.

Weather. Clouds, lightening, taking cover, drought, forecasting, outlook, Katrina, soaking rains, sun shining through, storms, clear skies, temperature, floodgates, radar, TV weatherman, sunburn, frostbite.

Superheroes. Special powers, villains, x-ray vision, comic books, flying, virtue, cape, costumes, idols, good v. evil, crime fighting, police dogs, firemen, save the day, dare devil, Captain __, Doctor __.

Faith and Spirituality. Revival, believe, pray, divine, worship, religion, values, soul, healing, practice, devotion, spirits, astrology, reincarnation, yoga, angels, Heaven, meditation, pagan, gods, shaman, sins.

Fitness, Exercise, and Dieting. Weighing in, food diaries, treadmill, pedometers, calories, sweat, personal trainer, food pyramid, 100 calorie packs, body mass index, scales, heart rate, binging, nutrition.

The Decrepit Dozen: 12 Worn-out Metaphors Nonprofits Should Avoid

I’m declaring war on building bridges and helping hands!

While the 12 metaphors listed here may still work at some level because they are very familiar, I believe they have been used so many times and in so many different ways in the nonprofit world that they are effectively meaningless. If you are using them, it’s time to get more creative and search for phrases that are both clear and truly meaningful for your supporters today.

Building Bridges. This is probably the most common metaphor used to explain how nonprofits make connections between people or ideas. But it tells us nothing about the benefits of those connections or why we really need to make them.

Changing the World/Lives. Change isn’t always for the better. Every one of us could argue that we change someone else’s life every day.

War on (Fill in the Blank). I don’t think the military metaphors work all that well in the social service fields that most often use them. And with lagging public support for the real wars our nation is fighting, I don’t think this metaphor conjures up the sense of common purpose and focus it once might have.
**Making a Difference.** If every nonprofit on the block can use the same phrase, that’s a sure sign that it won’t help you stand out in your marketing and fundraising. Every nonprofit is trying to make a difference. While the idea behind it is still relevant, this particular phrase isn’t.

**Helping Hands.** "Help" is just too generic. And much of the help that nonprofits provide isn’t manual labor or physically in person, which "hands" implies.

**Cutting Edge.** This refers to the newest, leading research or thinking – the state of the art – but it’s another worn-out cliché that says more about your lack of creativity than your approach to your work.

While I think these first six are the worst, I’d also avoid these six too:

- **Strengthening Community**
- **Creating Hope**
- **Stand Up for . . .**
- **Brighter Future**
- **Turning Lives Around**
- **The Voice of . . .**

**EXAMPLE**

"Giving Aid" Metaphors: Replacing “Helping Hands” with “Travel” Metaphors

- Concierge
- Flight attendant
- Buses stopping to pick people up
- Making airplane connections
- Tow truck
- Air bags
- Roadside assistance
- Changing a flat tire
- Paving a road
- Coast Guard rescue helicopter

**Sources and Resources**

To learn more about how your nonprofit can use metaphors, check out these sources, many of which I used in my research for this e-book.

*Metaphorically Selling: How to Use the Magic of Metaphors to Sell, Persuade, and Explain Anything to Anyone* by Anne Miller.


**The Metaphor Project**, led by Susan Strong. www.metaphorproject.org

delicious.com/ecoscribe/metaphors. Online articles I’ve saved.

Search “visual metaphor” on YouTube. You’ll find many student projects and examples.

*Don’t Think of an Elephant: Know Your Values and Frame the Debate* by George Lakoff, the language expert on the political left.

*Words That Work: It’s Not What You Say, It’s What People Hear* by Frank Luntz, the language expert on the political right.