

At Year-End, Nonprofits Must Make Their Case to Donors

By Rob Hoskins and Lamar Vest

The end of the year is fast approaching. It is a time of Christmas trees, Yule logs and year-end giving. But as millions of Americans prepare to get out their checkbooks, the decision of where to give has rarely been more difficult. In tough economic times, nonprofit organizations are vying for decreasing resources and facing an uphill battle in attracting the all-important year-end donor.

 (Rob Hoskins pictured left; Lamar Vest pictured right.)



For decades, year-end giving has often been driven by the stirred passions of a donor's heart. We give because we genuinely care. Our hearts are touched by images and stories of children in poverty. Families living in squalor. Individuals that have never heard the good news that God loves them. Driven by these heart tugs, Americans currently give more than \$3 billion to charitable causes each year according to the Giving USA.

But nonprofit organizations have to face facts. While it is the heart that often initiates a donor's decision to give, too many donors only ever glimpse the impact of their giving in a few glossy photos and a pie chart in an annual report. Many more give without ever knowing if

the organization to which they donated had any positive impact at all.

And that's only half the problem. Most nonprofit organizations have no way to measure whether their own initiatives are achieving the desired results, not just in the short-term, but over the longer test of time. We hear all the time, nonprofit leaders might say, that lives are being improved through our efforts. No we can't quantify it, but we're sure it's happening.

Especially when resources are short and needs are great, both donors and nonprofits need information to make limited funds go farther and achieve greater results.

Fortunately, nonprofit organizations have new tools available to them to be more strategic in both how they invest donor resources and how they report results—though most have yet to tap into these research tools. Over the past few years we have seen the positive impact of strategic research on our own organizations.

Through American Bible Society's Global Scripture Impact, the nearly 200-year-old Bible ministry has been able to modernize its approach to program development and donor reporting. For example, in 2009 the American Bible Society sought to significantly strengthen its work among America's incarcerated. Despite the program being America's largest Bible grant for correctional facilities—with a successful

distribution of more than 1 million Bibles and New Testaments—it was unable to clearly measure and to report on this Bible ministry's needed effectiveness in the lives of inmates. Action research conducted by Global Scripture Impact, which measured the specific impact of Scripture materials in the lives of prisoners, found that approximately 75 percent of inmates are functionally illiterate, making it difficult to comprehend the Bible's message.

As a result of this finding, the program was refocused to include literacy programs in the more than 500 correctional facilities. American Bible Society now also offers audio versions of the Bible, made available through the prison library system. Research conducted 12 months following the implementation of a recent Scripture distribution program found a 95 percent increase in Bible comprehension and a 96 percent increase in inmates adopting morally positive attitudes and behaviors as a result of increased Scripture engagement.

OneHope has also relied on research from an affiliated organization, Metadigm Group, to improve its efficiency and accomplish more with less. By using the feedback of research in all phases of a project—from planning to execution to modification—OneHope has been able to further advance its mission of reaching the world's children and youth with the message of the Bible

in a way that
addresses specific cultural challenges.

In 2008, qualitative and
quantitative research of youth in Ghana led to an exciting
restructuring of
youth ministry in the African nation.

While children and youth were consistent in attending
various faith-based programs in the region, research revealed
there was a lack

of understanding major biblical themes. Without understanding,
the young

people could not apply the truth of Scripture in a way that
affects their

behavior. With the research as its catalyst, OneHope
launched an oral storytelling-based program called 17 Stories.

Each child received a color, illustrated deck of 16 cards,
with each card representing an important story of the Bible.

During a weeklong program,
an indigenous language-speaking teacher took children through
the series of

cards. In a classroom setting, the teacher
would show each of the illustrated cards and verbally share
the Bible story

depicted on each card. Data collected before
and after the program revealed a 78 percent increase in a
child's comprehension

of the themes of the Bible stories, illustrated by their
ability and desire to

retell the story to a friend or adult. As a
result of the findings, 10 different organizations working in
Ghana are now

working more collaboratively and strategically to serve the
nation's youth.

Research can impact an organization's program components as
well as program

delivery. For example, because research findings uncovered concern among youth about the decline in family values as well as superficial beliefs about the existence of God, organizations like OneHope are now intentionally communicating about these issues through its outreach to Ghana's youth. Using more appealing presentations and sharper, less content-heavy materials, OneHope is now communicating these targeted messages through more youth-centric media. Finally, ongoing longitudinal research is being implemented by OneHope to track trends in the youth population and to quantify the scope and degree of behavioral transformation.

Ours are not the only organizations benefiting from strategic research. Since 2007, Global Scripture Impact has conducted research on more than 250 ministry programs in more than 70 countries for American Bible Society and 13 other organizations. Since being spun off from OneHope in 2008, Metadigm Group has provided its research expertise to nine other organizations serving in a combined 35 countries.

Nonprofit organizations are entrusted with both a tremendous opportunity and a tremendous responsibility. By using donor funds more strategically through research-driven program planning and execution, organizations can increase their effectiveness and, often, eliminate needless redundancies. Given the tremendous needs that remain unmet in the world, a more strategic approach to ministry,

relief work and humanitarian aid is not just timely, it is overdue.

For far too long organizations have tugged at heartstrings without an equal delivery of measurable results. It is time for donors and the organizations supported by them to engage both their hearts and their heads.

Rob Hoskins is president of OneHope (). Based in South Florida, OneHope is reaching the world's children and youth with the message of the Bible in a way that addresses specific cultural challenges. Founded in 1987, OneHope has reached some 680 million young people in 125 countries with the message of the Bible through its Book of Hope publications and The GodMan animated film.

Lamar Vest is president and CEO of The American Bible Society (). Headquartered in New York City, the mission of the 194-year-old organization is to make the Bible available to every person in a language and format each can understand and afford, so that all people may experience its life-changing message.