

Nonprofit Strategies



SAN LUIS OBISPO COUNTY COMMUNITY FOUNDATION

Nonprofits need to be smart about privacy

It may go without saying that it is important for nonprofit organizations to manage information wisely. This is especially true for smaller nonprofits that have few paid staff members or are run by volunteers.

Reviewing and updating policies regarding the collection and use of information is critical. Written policies must clearly state what is and what is not private.

Conducting a privacy assessment will reveal how well an organization is keeping private, or confidential, the information that needs to be kept private. Answering five questions will guide the development or refinement of a privacy policy:

1. What information are we making available? (Whose name, affiliations, gift levels, or volunteer assignments are publicized?)
2. How are we disseminating information? (What identifying information included in newsletters, Web sites, press releases, event invitations?)
3. Where are employee records stored?
4. How are our privacy policies communicated to staff, volunteers and donors?
5. Who is responsible for keeping the privacy policy up to date?

In creating or revising a written policy, an organization should address two audiences.

First, there are the employees and volunteers. Federal and state laws require that certain information be kept confidential by organizations, such as individuals' medical and employment records. Unless, of course, the individual talks openly about her or his own records.

Organizations need to maintain up-to-date information about each employee to properly administer various payroll and benefit programs and to assist employees in case of emergency. Other than that, says Betsey Nash, a certified senior professional in human resources, "People are responsible for keeping their own information private."

Nash suggests that organizations tell all employees and volunteers that items they want to be kept confidential or private not be discussed in the office. "It's like sending a postcard and hoping the postman won't read it," she said.

Nash recommends that all employees be told to expect no confidentiality regarding certain things.

"Anything on the organization's com-

puter or on your desk is public," Nash said. She added that some organizations allow that whatever is in one's desk is confidential.

Another audience that an organization should address is its donors. Donors want to know that the organization will use its money and its information wisely.

Standard practice is to have donors "opt out" of an organization's actions that publicize gifts and involvements. This assumes that donors want to be publicly thanked. Organizations are proud to let it be known who is supporting their work. Disclosing this practice to donors would build the nonprofit's credibility.

The adherence to a policy regarding donor confidentiality, therefore, must be made the responsibility of all employees and volunteers.

Many professional societies of nonprofits have donor bills of rights that can be adopted.

Because they engender trust that information will be used appropriately, organizations that have widely available privacy policies are more attractive to employees, volunteers and donors.

Resource Use

- Support nonprofit leadership
- Board development/training
- Strategic planning

Nonprofit Business Column of The Tribune

The San Luis Obispo Tribune publishes a column every other Tuesday in the Business section dedicated to the business practices of nonprofit orgs. Barry VanderKelen, Executive Director of the San Luis Obispo County Community Foundation writes the bi-

weekly column to help strengthen nonprofit organizations in the community. Each column is reprinted here as a one-page handout for use by local organizations. Barry can be reached at 543-2323 or by e-mail at barry@slocf.org.

