



UNIVERSITY OF SAN FRANCISCO

CHANGE THE WORLD FROM HERE

**Communicating on the Countryside: Challenges and Lessons
Learned From Rural Nonprofit Marketing**

by

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of the Requirements for the
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This project is dedicated to my grandparents who have shown me what it is like to be from places where people have to go off the beaten path to find you.

Abstract

This research is aimed at understanding what rural nonprofits do to market themselves to their variety of stakeholders they have and to understand what mediums rural nonprofits use the most. This research also aims at what challenges are facing rural nonprofits when they try to market themselves and what makes them successful. Four semi-structured expert interviews and 24 surveys were analyzed to form a new recommendation for rural nonprofit marketing. These interviews and surveys focus on rural nonprofit practices and the challenges they face. Five recommendations and tenets of successful rural nonprofits were concluded: build meaningful relationships, localize your language, the duality of identity, social marketing, and the digital divide is closing.

Keywords: rural nonprofits, rural marketing, nonprofit marketing, digital divide

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Section 1. Introduction

This research project aims to see what makes rural nonprofit marketing different from typical nonprofit marketing as well as to compare it to urban and suburban nonprofits. This project aims to find out if there is a digital gap in rural areas, to see what different marketing techniques and mediums are being utilized, to see what rural nonprofits use more or less when marketing to their different stakeholders, and to see what strengthens or weakens their messaging.

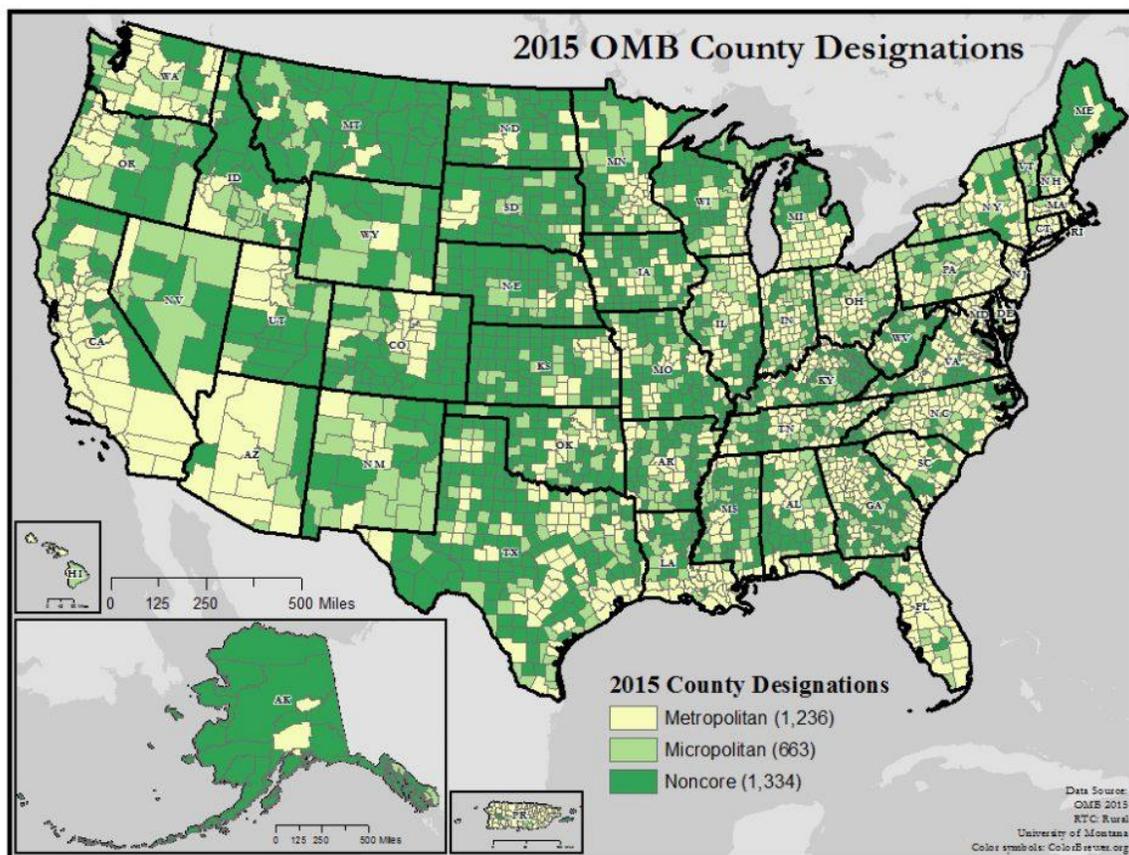
The elections of both 2016 and 2020 have both highlighted the difference between rural populations and suburban and urban ones. One of the biggest points during these elections was the messaging to rural America (Martin, 2020). These elections showed a huge difference in the messaging in a decade's time, where Obama won 40% of rural America to Biden only winning 20% (Martin, 2020). These elections show the power and importance of messaging, especially in rural areas. I was curious how this permeated the nonprofit sector. Knowing that different areas respond differently to messages, it is important we know how rural nonprofits are fitting their message to their stakeholders.

For this research, I need to define what constitutes a rural area is, define what nonprofit marketing is, and define what challenges are facing rural areas and rural nonprofits in marketing. Rural nonprofits are responsible for 49 square miles compared to ½ mile for urban nonprofits (Walters, 2020). Rural nonprofits are also more likely to collaborate than urban or suburban counterparts. (Snaveley & Tracy, 2000). Two of the biggest factors facing rural nonprofits are the high demand for services and the inability of the local area to donate to generate growth for the nonprofits. (Snaveley, & Tracy, 2000) The first question we need to be answering before we dive into marketing and communications is what constitutes a rural area?

What is a Rural Area?

There are 15 active definitions of what rural means from the federal government with the USDA owning 11 of them (Walters, 2019) This means that there are many definitions that constitute what a rural area is. One definition defines it as sparsely populated communities of less than 50,000 residents with a density factor of fewer than 1000 people per square mile (Tandoh-Offin, 2010). Even within the federal government, different definitions as to what makes a rural area. The Census Bureau uses a land-use definition, which identifies urban areas based on how densely settled the area is, such as having an area of over 50,000 people. (Cromartie, & Bucholtz, 2008) The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) defines rural areas using municipal and jurisdiction boundaries, which is called the administrative definition (Cromartie, & Bucholtz, 2008). The Office of Management and Budget applies an economic definition when defining rural areas. This definition requires core counties with one or more urban areas of 50,000 people or more and have outlying counties economically tied to the core counties by using the share of the employed population that commutes to and from core counties. (Cromartie, & Bucholtz, 2008) Many other organizations simply use a nonmetro definition of rural (Ajilore & Willingham, 2019). This definition indicates that if a community can not be counted in a metropolitan area, it is considered rural. The maps below show a handful of ways of how the different organizations classify rural areas in their own ways.

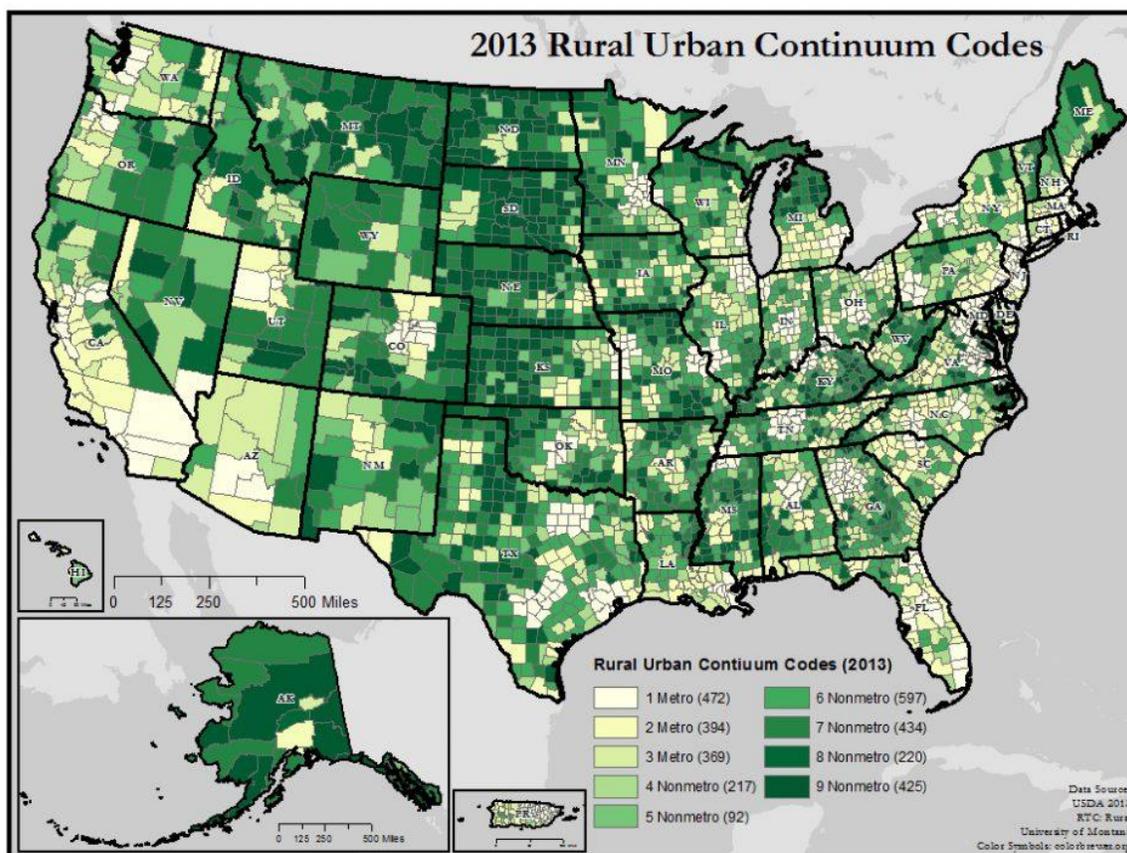
Figure 1



Map courtesy of the University of Montana: Research and Training Center

The Rural-Urban Continuum Codes is a classification that distinguishes metropolitan counties by the population size of their metro area, and nonmetropolitan counties by degrees of urbanization and adjacency to a metro area. Each county in the United States is assigned one of the nine codes listed below. Codes 4-9 are typically considered to be rural (*Defining Rural*, 2020).

Figure 2

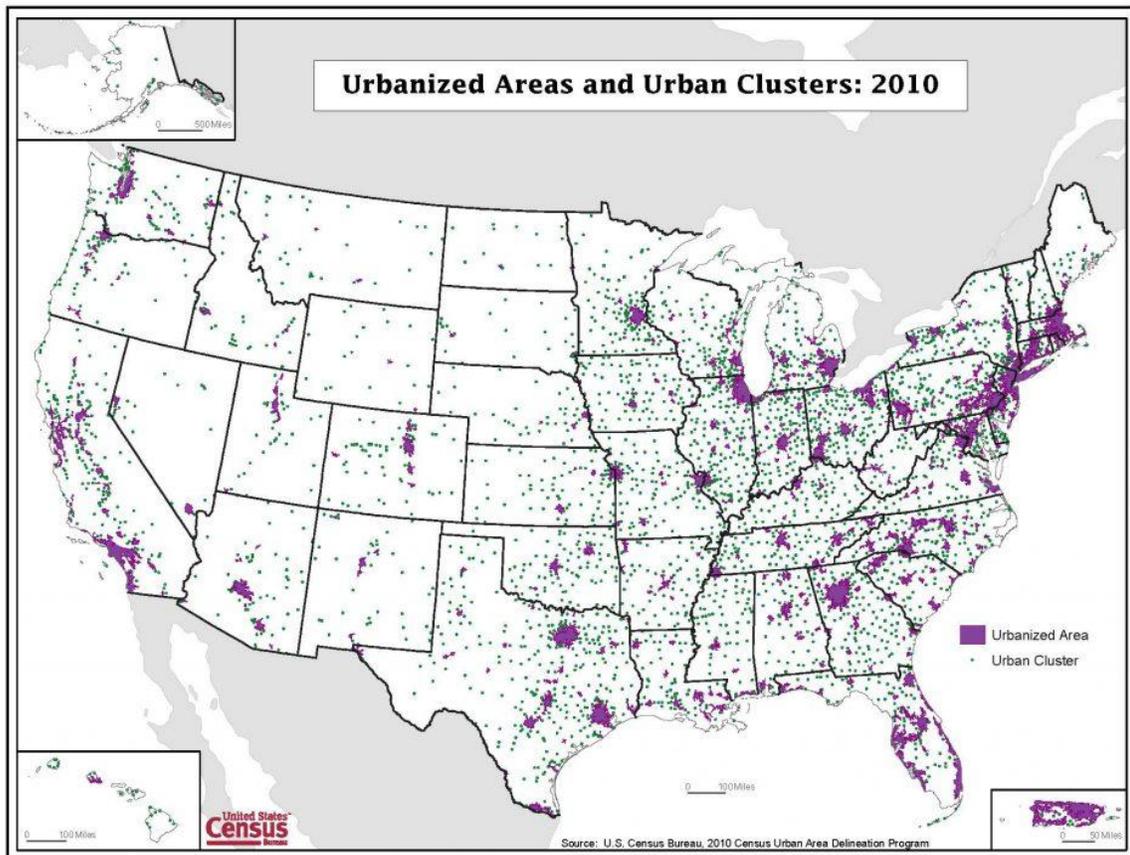


Map courtesy of the University of Montana: Research and Training Center

- RUCC 1: Counties in metro areas of 1 million population or more
- RUCC 2: Counties in metro areas of 250,000 to 1 million population
- RUCC 3: Counties in metro areas of fewer than 250,000 population
- RUCC 4: Population of 20,000 or more, adjacent to a metro area

- RUCC 5: Population of 20,000 or more, not adjacent to a metro area
- RUCC 6: Population of 2,500 to 19,999, adjacent to a metro area
- RUCC 7: Population of 2,500 to 19,999, not adjacent to a metro area
- RUCC 8: Less than 2,500 population, adjacent to a metro area
- RUCC 9: Less than 2,500 urban population, not adjacent to a metro area

Figure 3



Maps courtesy of the University of Montana: Research and Training Center

Keep in mind that when you look at a map that defines rurality through counties that not all counties are built the same. Some cover large swaths of land that differentiate throughout their boundaries. Also, some counties might be urbanized on one side of the county while the other side is rural. In these maps, sometimes these minor details are hard to differentiate or are non-existent.

Section 2: Literature Review

Challenges in Rural Areas

Rural areas have a poverty rate of 15% which is 2% over both suburban and urban areas. (Neuhoff, & Dunckelman, 2011) Another statistic to show the difference between the differences of rural life is, rural America accounts for 18 percent of the nation's population and 21 percent of those who live in poverty (Newstead, & Wu, 2009). Rural areas are facing many challenges that are idiosyncratic to them. Such as the issues of the rural brain drain. The brain drain is where educated individuals leave their small town for the urban areas, thus leaving their town with one less-educated worker. The brain drain can have this odd effect where a town can use its resources and invest in education but will receive little to nothing in return because of the people who were educated left (Carr, & Kefalas, 2011).

It is also pertinent to know why nonprofits are important to rural communities and what are some of the main challenges that manifest themselves in rural America. Factors include persistent poverty, rising crime, and increased neglect and abuse to women and children. (Walters, 2019) Other factors include that even though the life expectancy has improved over the past 40 years in the United States, the gap between urban and rural life spans is growing (Linker, 2018) Also from 2010 to 2017, rural wage and salary employment has grown at an average annual rate of 0.5 percent, compared to 1.8 percent in urban areas (Farrigan, 2019). Agriculture is a main tenant of rural life and the rural economy in America, though far from the only part of the economy. However, the agricultural sector is far from thriving right now. The farm income for 2019 was in the bottom quartile of all years since 1929 just before the dawn of the Dust Bowl (Ajilore & Willingham, 2019).

Healthcare is another big problem facing rural America, where nonprofits can play a major role, especially in the post-COVID-19 era. According to *Rural America at Glance 2020*

Edition produced by the USDA, 23.7% of rural residents had underlying conditions compared to only 3% of metropolitan residents. This study also indicated that a little of 20% of rural residents are uninsured compared to 10% in urban environments. There are 116 counties which equates to 4% of the counties in America that do not have a clinic (Cromartie et al., 2020). In addition to those 116 counties, another 22% of counties have to drive outside the county to find hospital care (Cromartie et al., 2020)

In rural areas, it can be more difficult for nonprofits to reach out to their constituents and find rural donors because of the digital divide facing rural communities. 34 million Americans lack an affordable and reliable broadband connection and of these, 23.4 million live in rural areas (Zerillo et al, 2018). Other barriers besides limited internet coverage in rural areas include lack of professional IT services, and lack of knowledge and online media expertise in nonprofits organizations (Vodopyanova, 2020).

Carr and Kefalas concluded that there are 4 groups of young adults who come from small-town America after their years-long study in rural America.

- **Achievers** - Ambitious and college-bound high school students. These are the people as they grow up are the ones who only come back to their small towns during major holidays because they have left their town for good. They have upper-middle-class upbringings.
- **Stayers** - Working class. Graduating high school will be a major accomplishment for the stayers. More likely to be male and more likely to be troublemakers in the community.
- **Seekers** - More likely to be working class, however, they are more likely to join the military and try to leave their small town. They are not college-bound, they often feel like there is no other way to get out of their rural environments, so joining the military feels like their only option.
- **Returners** - They might have started out as Seekers or Achievers, but they eventually found themselves back home in their hometowns. Returners can even be broken down further into the subgroups of High-Flyers and Boomerangs

- **High-Flyers** - The prodigal sons and daughters who come back with degrees to their hometowns
- **Boomerangs** - The people who either went to community college or tried going to a 4-year school only to return without a diploma. They generally return back to the Stayer category

Perceptions about rural areas create obstacles that make them more challenging to overcome. 77% of rural nonprofits said that sophistication is an urban characteristic and not a rural one (Swierzewski, 2007). This has made it harder for rural arts and culture nonprofits to get and sustain funding (Swierzewski, 2007). There is also a perception that rural America is not diverse, thus making it less attractive to national and urban foundations where diversity and race are paramount (Swierzewski, 2007). Perceptions about rural life and rural living are stuck in a by-gone era and making it harder for grantmakers to see progress in rural areas. It is challenging for these areas because funders and media see rural America for what it was and not for what it is (Swierzewski, 2007).

Rural Assets and Values

Rural communities tend to be closer-knit communities than their urban and suburban counterparts. This provides an asset to these rural communities known as social capital (Ajilore & Willingham, 2019). Social capital refers to social bonds, community interconnectedness, and the level of civic engagement. Larger and more urban areas may benefit from a larger amount of economic and social connections that yield network possibilities, smaller communities with strong social infrastructure tend to be more resilient than comparable communities without it (Ajilore & Willingham, 2019).

Another asset of rural living is Gemeinschaft (Community) and Gesellschaft (Society) which are concepts introduced by Ferdinand Tönnies. Gemeinschaft refers to personal social ties and in-person interactions (Crossman, 2020). Gemeinschaft is driven by emotions and by a sense of moral obligation to others within a community. Gemeinschaft is known to be more predominant in rural communities as opposed to urban ones. Gesellschaft on the other hand is more structured and more impersonal (Crossman, 2020). It consists of non-face-to-face

interactions. Gesellschaft is directed more by rationality and efficiency, and self-interests. Rational will is more likely to guide in this type of society and is found more in urban areas.

Rural areas also tend to be rich with natural assets. Natural assets can include the traditional ideas of what rural America looks like in terms of farming and mining. As well as the emerging renewable resources field (Maxon, 2018). Now, rural areas are adding more outdoor recreation to their economies and taking advantage of the natural beauty that is in abundance in these areas (Ajilore & Willingham, 2019). Activities such as skiing, rock climbing, white water rafting, and camping are diversifying rural economies and providing more opportunities to those who live in them (Ajilore & Willingham, 2019). The new outdoor recreation economy is providing revenue streams and is providing more opportunities for nonprofits in rural areas (Perkins, 2021). Outdoor recreation can provide much-needed capital to an area, and create financial flexibility for nonprofits to better serve their community (Perkins, 2021). This goes for both environmental and human services nonprofits.

Due to the inherited remoteness of rural America, self-reliance has long been a value cherished by rural residents (Keller & Owens, 2020) Rural regions of America also tend to be more religious than their urban counterparts, and is a part of the identity of oneself in these communities (Keller & Owens, 2020) Fatalism, which is the belief that all events are predetermined and therefore inevitable, is an also a value that ranks high in rural communities (Keller & Owens, 2020). There are also strong ties in rural communities to have an emphasis on families (Keller & Owens, 2020)

Rural Nonprofits

To understand rural nonprofits, one must understand who makes up the people in the nonprofit. It is important to know who is staffing rural nonprofits. A study done by Jayme Walters (2019), who focuses on human services nonprofits in rural areas can give us a peek into who is staffing most of these nonprofits. According to Walters' study, the average rural nonprofit worker is a white woman who is 37 years old. She has a Master's in Social Work and is spiritual/religious. She has 9 years of experience and has been working in the same position for a

little over 4 years. Her salary is a little over \$46,000 and she has a partner. Though the average rural social worker has a graduate degree, there is still a shortage of qualified social workers interested in rural areas. This has led supervisors in rural areas to seek and hire individuals without a social work degree to work in positions for which a social worker would be preferred (Walters, 2019). This applies to other positions within a nonprofit as well.

An important aspect of rural nonprofits is how it is viewed in the community. The private sector in many rural communities is hesitant to donate or fundraise for their nonprofits due to thinking that funding nonprofits are the government's responsibility (Besel, Williams, & Klak, 2011). Many times nonprofits in these rural communities are not viewed as good investments for the wealth holders of the community. According to Besel, Williams, and Klak, African-Americans are more likely to give to their local churches than to give to their local nonprofits. This can cause problems when rural nonprofits are trying to fundraise because they feel as though they can not compete with the local churches. This also applies to nonprofits that are located near prominent universities, such as the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville (Besel, Williams, & Klak).

Rural philanthropy only accounts for 6.8% of giving by the nation's top 1000 foundations (Newstead, & Wu, 2009). This is not necessarily a bad thing for rural nonprofits. According to Reid, et al. (2020), national foundations tend not to consult local rural nonprofits to understand the priorities or circumstances before investing in those communities. This has been described as National Foundation Colonialism. The lack of funding for rural nonprofits for Native Americans is even more lacking, which tend to be in more rural areas. Only .23% of philanthropic dollars are awarded to Native-led nonprofit organizations, even though Native Americans represent 2% of the national population and are among communities of greatest need in the United States (Barron, et al. 2018). In North Carolina, rural residents observed that they do not qualify for the funding opportunities that are available in larger population centers (Linker, 2018) This lack of funding tends to make people feel overwhelmed while at the same time they are under-resourced.

Working in nonprofits in rural settings has its own sets of challenges. One of them being the duality of roles within a community, such as being a youth basketball coach and being a

social worker (Walters, 2019). It can be hard for rural nonprofit workers to balance both of these roles in a small-town environment, especially if one sees their client outside the context of their nonprofit. Also in these rural settings, it can be hard to reach out to new clients and constituents due to the perception of rugged individualism and not needing to rely on anyone but themselves (Walters, 2019). This can cause friction and can make the work of a nonprofit in these areas more challenging. It is also important to note that marketers in rural areas are generally not rated high and these communities wish they could have better marketing in general not just for nonprofits but also for local businesses (Dickes & Robinson, 2014).

Rural Marketing

Nonprofit marketers and leaders who come in from the outside to rural communities face uphill challenges. In Duncan's *Worlds Apart*, it talks about outsiders coming into rural communities to help out and assist through public and nonprofit programs. She mentions that VISTAs (Volunteers In Service To America) would come to rural eastern Kentucky and complete their year of service. Most of the VISTAs are well-educated and are from eastern states. It is obvious to the people in these communities that they are not from the local community. These outsiders could shake up the community and as locals would say "put ideas in their heads" of the heads of vulnerable populations. These outsiders caused deep mistrust in this community by not understanding the local culture and politics and by not gaining respect from the community that they were living in. People in rural communities look for cultural norms and are distrustful of outsiders (Liegel, Southerland, & Baker, 2019) Rural communities respond positively to leaders and messages who look like them and have the same values.

Rural constituents have also long been a lucrative market for organizations. According to Steever of Forbes, there are 5 audience segments of rural communities for products and services.

The 5 segments are

- **Young Affluents** - They tend to engage more with active and DIY messaging. They are the youngest group. They are also more likely to look at Yelp reviews before purchasing a product or service.

- **Older Inactives** - They tend to respond to more of the traditional, rural values marketing message. Oldest of the groups. More likely to buy from a local store than a chain.
- **Retired Independents** - They tend to respond to DIY messaging and they take pride in the appearance of their home. Lowest income and 2nd oldest of the groups.
- **Middle-Aged Connectors** - More likely to be female and tend to trust the advice of their local stores. They are more likely to be invested in the community and respond to environmental messaging.
- **Young Learners** - This group wants to be DIYers but does not have the experience yet. They are the second youngest group. They tend to respond to the education and local messaging the best.

In a rural environment, marketing should try to be localized to reflect the values and lifestyle that the area is in. According to Grant Covell of Forbes, rural areas must localize their marketing and branding. He cites community engagement through regional activities, such as high school hockey in Minnesota and high school basketball in Indiana. Tying what the people like in a certain region to what you are trying to market can pay dividends and show that your organization cares about the community it serves. Celebrating the area one is in, especially a rural setting or celebrating a local quirky tradition, can give products and services an advantage when it comes to promoting a product or service (Richards, 2017). Covell shows that 95% of the participants in rural communities have a sense of pride, not just in their home country, but in the community they were currently living in. This makes it important for organizations to get to know the area they are serving and to not just come in as an outsider. According to a Saatchi & Saatchi report on small-town America, 75% of rural residents prefer to get news and other recommendations from friends and families (Richards, 2017).

Nonprofit Marketing

Nonprofits can also use their marketing to demonstrate to the public their openness and accountability (Vodopyanova, 2020). It is also important for nonprofits to remember to view

their stakeholders as partners in the process of mission achievement when marketing for their nonprofit (Vodopyanova, 2020). Other big factors that affect how rural nonprofits communicate are the lack of planning communications, and not having quality feedback loops on what types of messaging and marketing are working (Vodopyanova, 2020).

Trends in nonprofit marketing communications will always be something to pay attention to. Piggybacking on what is new and what is hot can be beneficial for a nonprofit for engagement and drawing new eyes to the nonprofit's mission. It is also important to note how COVID-19 is affecting nonprofit communication and how it will have a lasting impact on how nonprofit's communicate to their stakeholders. COVID-19 has exposed an overreliance on in-person events for nonprofits (*2021 Nonprofit Communications Trends Report*). It also further ingrained the communications departments to be siloed due to working at home as opposed to coming into the office (*2021 Nonprofit Communications Trends Report*). On a positive note, COVID-19 has made nonprofits plan more about their nonprofit communications and has led to more collaboration within the nonprofit in terms of marketing and communication.

A study done by the Nonprofit Marketing Guide had very interesting results in terms of who are the stakeholders one is trying to marketing to when:

- If you prioritize **Fundraising**, you are likely to place a bit more emphasis on events, direct mail, PR/media relations, and email and a bit less on websites/blogs and social media.
- If you prioritize **Volunteering** levels, you will likely place a bit more emphasis on email, events, and your website/blog, but less on direct mail.
- If you prioritize **Public Awareness** of your mission, you are less likely to use direct mail.
- If you prioritize the **Growth** of your nonprofit, you will likely put more emphasis on your website/blog, email, and social media and less on events, direct mail, and PR/media relations

An important factor for nonprofit marketing is how nonprofits use their social media accounts to grow their organization. Social media can help identify opportunities for positive interactions for nonprofits. One can use social media by seeing mentions of your organization, monitor one's partners, identify trends, and identify opportunities for user-generated content for one's nonprofit (Haddad, 2020). The most used social media for nonprofits is Facebook, followed by Twitter (Haddad, 2020) It is important for nonprofits to utilize Facebook because 39.5% of individuals find the nonprofits they donate to on Facebook first (Haddad, 2020). According to Liegel, Southerland, & Baker, they echo the problem of the digital divide for rural Appalachia in Tennessee. They noticed that social media was used as a secondary and supplementary strategy to their main marketing mediums. Building community relationships and word-of-mouth marketing are still the strongest way for nonprofits in rural Appalachia to get their message across. In Appalachian Tennessee, only 42.8% of the nonprofits felt they used social media effectively and 28.5% had a social media marketing plan. It is also interesting to note that even though there is this digital divide facing rural communities, social media can be an effective way to reach out to constituents. As one respondent mentioned:

Peoples' phone numbers and addresses change so much that we don't rely on them. It would be a waste of money to send things out by mail and almost a waste of our time to sit and try and call the people. We do not rely on those kinds of things in a poor area like we live in.

It is important to realize that even though poor rural constituents of nonprofits might not have reliable internet. It still might be the best way to reach them because traditional methods of contacting them change frequently and social media might be their most consistent form of contact. The greater number of social media posts a nonprofit can have, such as posting original content or reposting other organizations can increase stakeholder awareness of the nonprofit (Ihm, 2019).

According to Ihm, there are three main types of social ties one can see on a nonprofit's social media account. The first tie that is discussed is a flow tie. A flow tie is the nonprofit providing information and promoting the nonprofit. Flow ties consist of posting original content to their stakeholders. The second tie Ihm discusses is representational ties. Representational ties are reposting messages from other social media pages that say the nonprofit endorses the content creator to their stakeholders. By reposting another organization's message, a nonprofit can diversify its stakeholders and enhance its visibility to more individuals. The last tie Ihm talks about are affinity ties. Affinity ties are who the nonprofit follows and who the nonprofit is following. It is important for nonprofits to recognize what type of relationships they are building on their social media accounts, whether it is reposting another organization or following a new social media account.

A big factor for nonprofit marketing is the idea of Social Marketing. Social Marketing consists of focusing on the consumer's needs as a member of the public, rather than selling them on the idea of what they need to generate profit for a private company. (Spenser, 2013) Nonprofit marketing also relies on a bevy of different stakeholders to keep in mind when crafting messages for their organizations. Nonprofit marketing must simultaneously promote and balance such things as sales, like Girl Scout Cookies, corporate support, volunteering, individual giving and grants, and contracts from foundations and government agencies (Andreasen, 2012). According to Daw, Cone, Merenda, and Erhard, there are 7 ways nonprofits can improve their branding.

1. Find the authentic meaning of your brand - What is the singular, overriding idea that conveys what the organization stands for.
2. Embed your branding across the organization - Achieve results not just by what the organization says, but what it does.
3. Rally behind internal brand ambassadors - Model and lead by example what the brand means to the organization.
4. Develop 360 brand communications - Know the organization's audience and develop brand guidelines to provide consistency for the brand.

5. Expand your brand by mobilizing your community - No organization has a cause too narrow or obscure to be marketed and there is an audience for every nonprofit.
6. Cultivate partners to extend your brand - Build mutually beneficial, respectful relationships that empower both partners that also delivers on mutual goals.
7. Leverage your brand to extend revenue and value - Embrace social enterprises as a way to experience the brand and to strengthen relationships in the community.

Section 3: Methods and Approaches

The methodology of this project is a mixed-method approach. This includes a literature review of available material. For my literature review, I worked with the databases of USF's Gleeson Library and supplemented that with the databases of the USDA. I had 4 expert interviews and sent out surveys to nonprofits across the country.

Based on the lack of consensus of what constitutes a rural area, ruralness can differ greatly depending on who you ask. With that said, my surveys were sent to areas that had anchor cities of less than 50,000 people, however, sometimes this meant that the organization was based in a larger city, but the majority of the clients they served were in rural areas. 24 surveys were filled out by rural nonprofit professionals in 16 different states. Surveys were sent out to nonprofit executive directors and/or employees who had communications or had marketing in their title. Surveys were also sent out to individuals who had communications and marketing responsibilities at their respective nonprofits. Survey questions revolved around how these employees felt about their nonprofit's marketing as opposed to content analysis. I wanted to know what these employees/volunteers felt about what their organization was doing and what their thought processes were when marketing to their different stakeholders. Surveys were sent out to nonprofits that dealt with human services or worked in community foundations for their respective areas. The makeup of the participants is as follows: 19 participants were white (79.2%), 2 were African-American (8.3%), 2 were Hispanic/Latinx (8.3%), and 1 was Native American (4.2%). 20 were female (83.3%) and 4 were male (16.7%). In the surveys, there was an option to add additional comments which were also instrumental in getting deeper insights into rural nonprofit marketing.

To supplement the surveys, 4 expert interviews were done. The first interview was with Lauren Johns and Brandi Steelman of Gibson County CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocates). Gibson County CASA is located in southwestern Indiana. Lauren Johns is the director of Gibson County CASA and Brandi Steelman is the Administrative Assistant. Both of them handle marketing and communications duties. My next interview was with Meghan Creecy

of Northside Neighborhood House. Creecy is the Chief Stability Officer of the Northside Neighborhood House (NNH). She was instrumental in the outreach and marketing for establishing roots for their programs in Soddy-Daisy, Tennessee. Northside Neighborhood House was originally based in Chattanooga, Tennessee but has expanded to the rural town of Soddy-Daisy recently. Creecy and I discuss the challenges of establishing roots in a rural area for a nonprofit and how marketing plays a role in that.

My next interview was with Sarah Moore of Mission Minded. Moore is the Director of Brand Strategy at Mission Minded. Mission Minded is a branding firm that works exclusively with nonprofits. She has clients in both rural and urban settings and is an expert in nonprofit branding and marketing. My final interview was with Jayme Walter, Ph.D., MSW. Dr. Walters is a professor at Utah State University. She has been published in over 10 academic journals with many of her articles dealing with what challenges are facing rural nonprofits and social workers. She is an expert in the field of rural nonprofit and social workers.

Section 4. Data Analysis

Results from the Survey.

On a scale of 1-100 (1 being the worst and 100 being the best), survey respondents were asked how confident they felt about their nonprofit's marketing. The average score was 71.96 and the median score was 78. This is good to know that for the most part organizations are fairly confident about the messages they are sending out.

Table 1

Rural Nonprofit Marketing Medium Usage

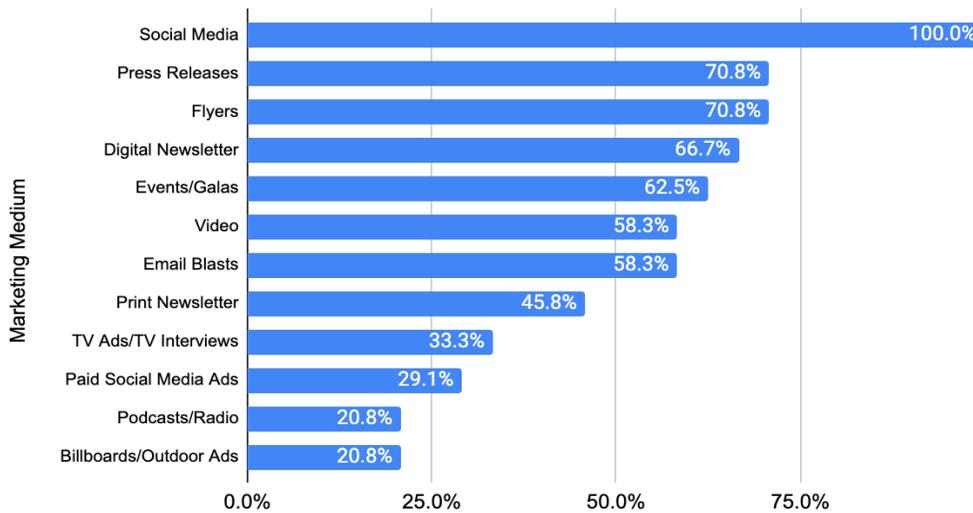
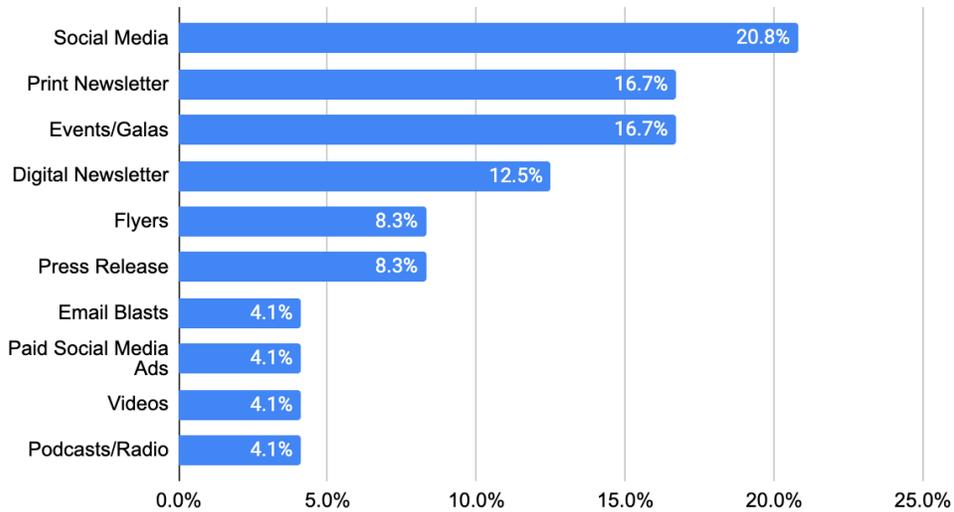


Table 2

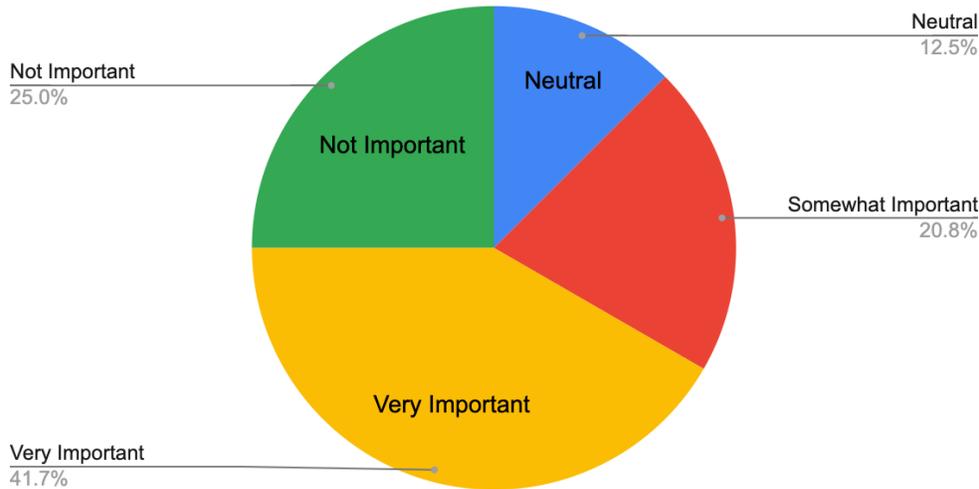
What marketing medium do you think your nonprofit does best?



It is interesting to note the low usage of outdoor ads/billboards because it has been an effective tool for Gibson County CASA. Gibson County CASA has an inventory of outdoor advertisements, such as they have had billboards along the highways to tell people about CASA. Gibson County CASA hands out yard signs to put in their volunteer yards that read “An Awesome CASA Volunteer Lives Here”. Gibson County also hands out blue pinwheels for National Childhood Abuse Prevention month. Both have been effective tools in spreading the message of Gibson County CASA.

Table 3

How important to your nonprofit is it to localize the language your nonprofit uses while marketing itself?

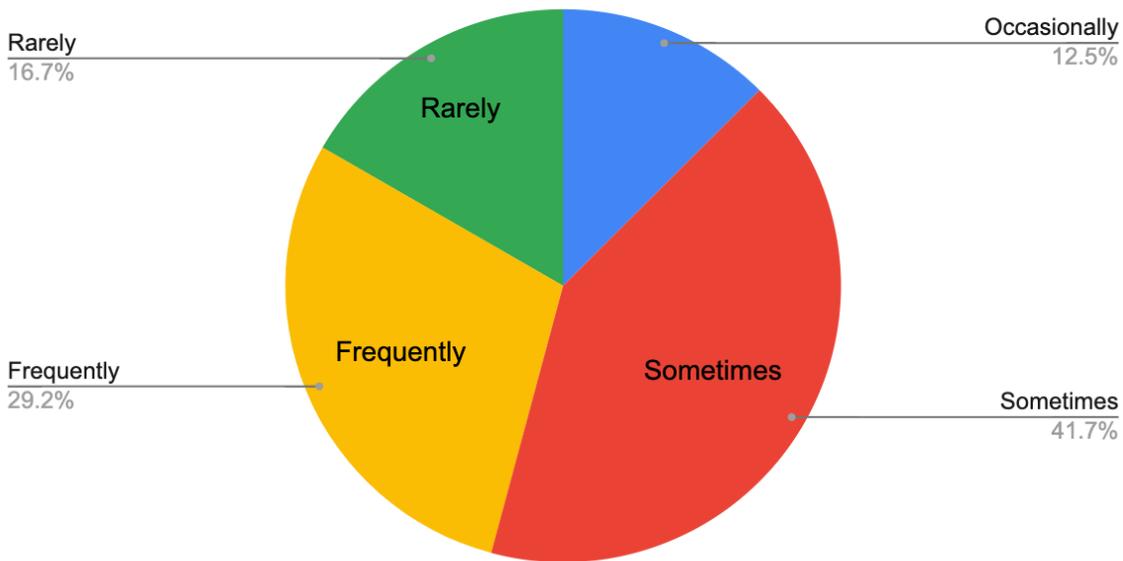


No respondents chose Low Importance

Creecy of Soddy-Daisy, Tennessee talks about the importance of localizing the language that NNH uses and how that gains trust in the community and shows that they are not outsiders. “We do a pretty good job of being really intentional. Certain people will call different landmarks and then community, nothing that has to do with its actual name like “Big Soddy Park” is doesn't exist on paper, it's what like neighbors will call it, and so it was very intentional like we have to also say those same phrases, instead of like being so formal because it makes us look like outsiders coming in.” This is important when making flyers in the community and when speaking to local businesses and churches in the area. Creecy’s statement confirms what was found in the literature review. However, it would be better to see more nonprofits capitalize on the language most familiar to their stakeholders.

Table 4

Has the digital divide been a factor when communicating to stakeholders?



Sarah Moore gave an example of how she is marketing in a Northern California coastal town. She emphasizes the need for rural nonprofits to have a strong digital infrastructure considering one nonprofit could be serving clients anywhere from 50 to 70 miles away in Humboldt County, California. She expounds that especially during COVID-19 your digital channels, whether it is the nonprofit's social media channels or their websites, are vital for a nonprofit's success, especially in rural environments. I asked her if there was a problem implementing a digital infrastructure in these rural settings where a digital divide could be more of a factor. She mentioned that 80% of the population resides in Eureka and the towns immediately around it have good Wi-Fi. She said that the other 20% of who they serve are way

outside those coastal towns that can have really spotty Wi-Fi and can make interacting with them digitally a little bit more challenging.

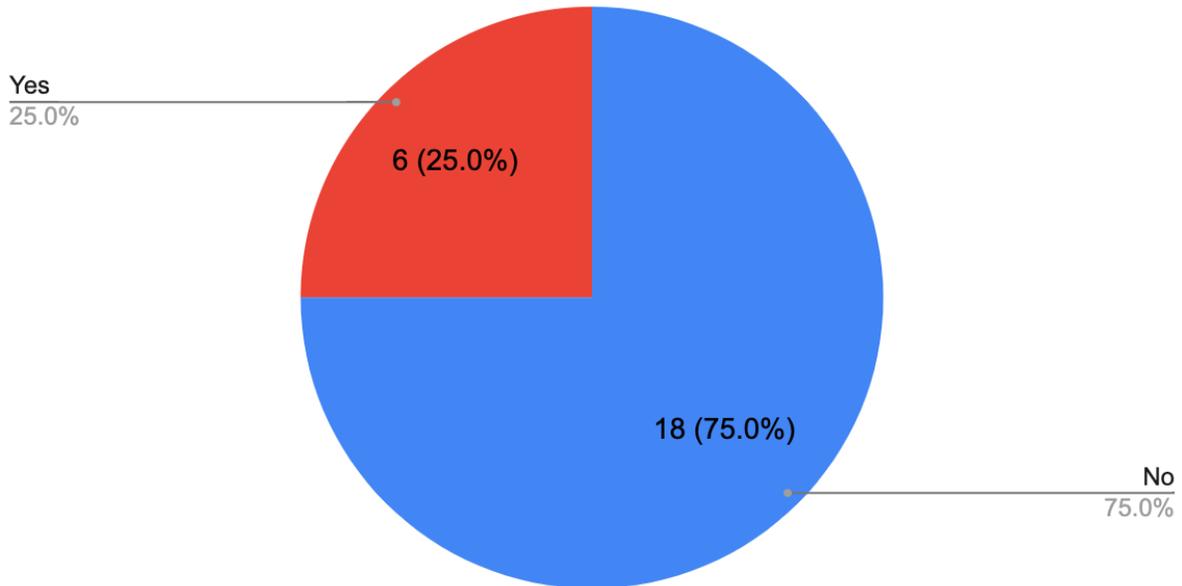
I also asked about how a digital divide could be affecting Gibson County CASA communicates, and it was interesting to know how the digital divide affects them. The digital divide is not so much that there is a lack of access to communicating digitally, but a lack of know-how by the older generation stakeholders. In fact, Gibson County CASA set up an extra laptop in their office to have it available for volunteers to come in and use at any time for the people that do struggle with just technology. Steelman also mentioned that there is “No Wi-Fi where I live so we have unlimited data through Verizon. It is the only way I can do anything digital.”

It is also interesting to note that the digital divide might be more a generational thing now as the gap of access is starting to close. According to Dr. Walters, the digital divide might not be based on lack of access but it is more of a generational divide. It is important for nonprofits leaders to look ahead. Market to funders, new and old. New marketing strategies are better for funders. The generational divide also spills over into other marketing mediums. According to Dr. Walters “The older generation are just not using social media the way that younger people are using social media. And so they're not very familiar with most of the platforms, they understand Facebook, but beyond that, it's really they're like, I don't understand the point of social media.”

The digital divide based on age rather than access is something that Gibson County CASA has noticed as well. Gibson County CASA tends to utilize social media for their volunteers in their 20-30s range, and for the retired-age volunteers, they utilize an information Buddy Brunch. The Buddy Brunch is where Gibson County hosts an information session at a local restaurant where they encourage their volunteers to bring a buddy or someone they know that might be interested in casa to come to learn more about CASA. Johns describes the difference between these two audiences such as, “Why would someone eat breakfast with a bunch of strangers just to find out things you can read online.” Johns says “There's a huge difference from in-person to social media I think with age.”

Table 5

Does your nonprofit have a full-time employee who is dedicated to marketing or communications?

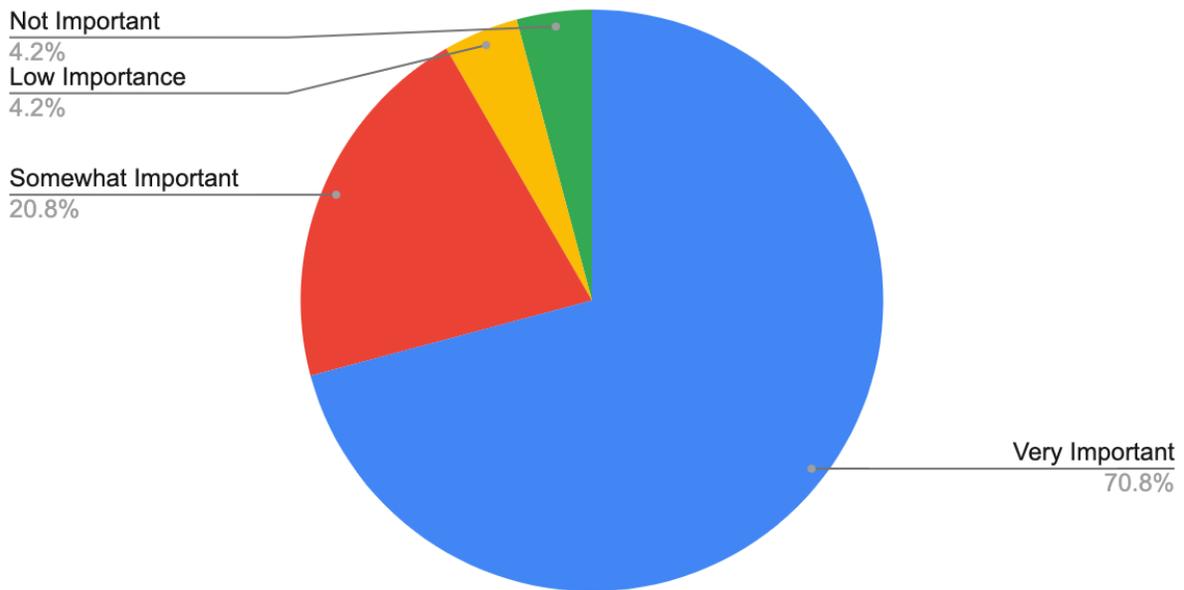


According to one nonprofit in North Adams, Massachusetts, “Our marketing/Communications person is technically part-time, but that is her dedicated role. A huge part of our success in reaching community members comes from relationship building and word of mouth. All other methods are really a supplement to this.” Another take on having a person dedicated to marketing and communications said this from Pittsfield, Massachusetts, “I feel we could benefit from a full-time marketing or communications specialist, but funding is often an issue. When it comes to hiring staff for a new program that could make a larger program impact, we will always choose that over a marketing person even though a marketing person could bring us more clients, donors, and volunteers.” This line of thinking is something that has been plaguing rural nonprofits. A big issue that has been affecting nonprofits for a long time is a lack of resources and funding. It is something that makes nonprofit marketing a little bit more

challenging as Dr. Walters states, “I think one of the really cool things about rural nonprofits is that they have limited resources. And they somehow find a way to do the work. They somehow find a way to make do with what they have. I think in terms of marketing, what you're seeing is that they don't have a lot of time, and they don't have a lot of money. But somehow they're able to get people to give to them to donate their time. So they're doing something right, you know, Certainly, there's many that are struggling, but there are many who are not. And they're finding a way to, to muddle through without that expertise.”

Table 6

How Important is Relationship Building for your Nonprofit's Marketing?



When asked what makes a difference when marketing for rural nonprofits, Moore answered, “Relationships matter, almost more than branding and marketing”. For instance, she talks about the importance of the local government as partners and gives the example that they are the ones who are voting to give your nonprofit more money as part of the local government’s budget. She also expounds how 1 or 2 of the major donors in the community can have influence on the nonprofits in an area. According to a nonprofit in Opelousas, Louisiana, “Rural nonprofit

marketing is not an easy fix. It definitely requires networking and lots of word of mouth. Relationship building is very vital and important to your nonprofit's success.”

Table 7

On average, how far do you believe your clients travel to receive the services of your nonprofit?

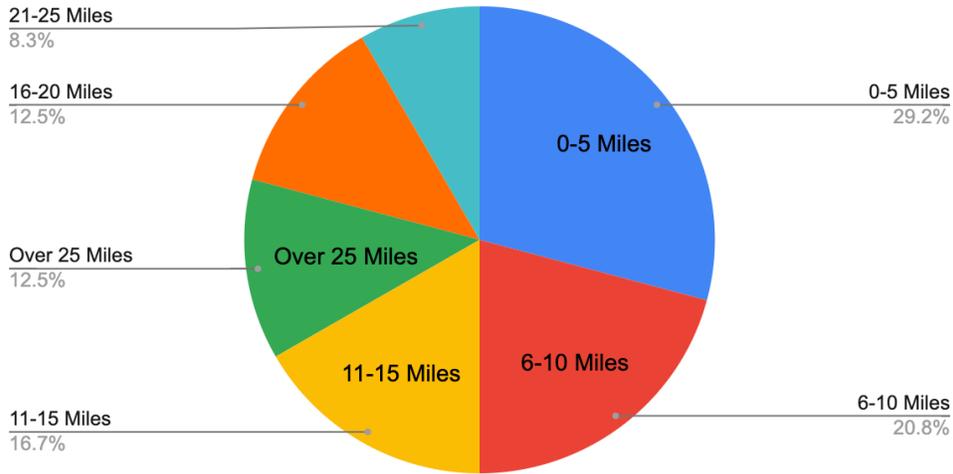
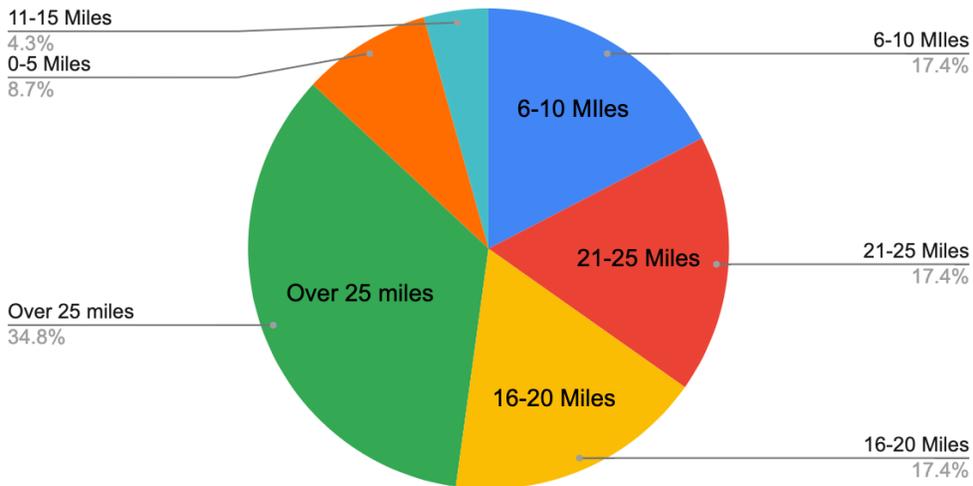


Table 8

On average, how far do you believe your donors are from your nonprofit?



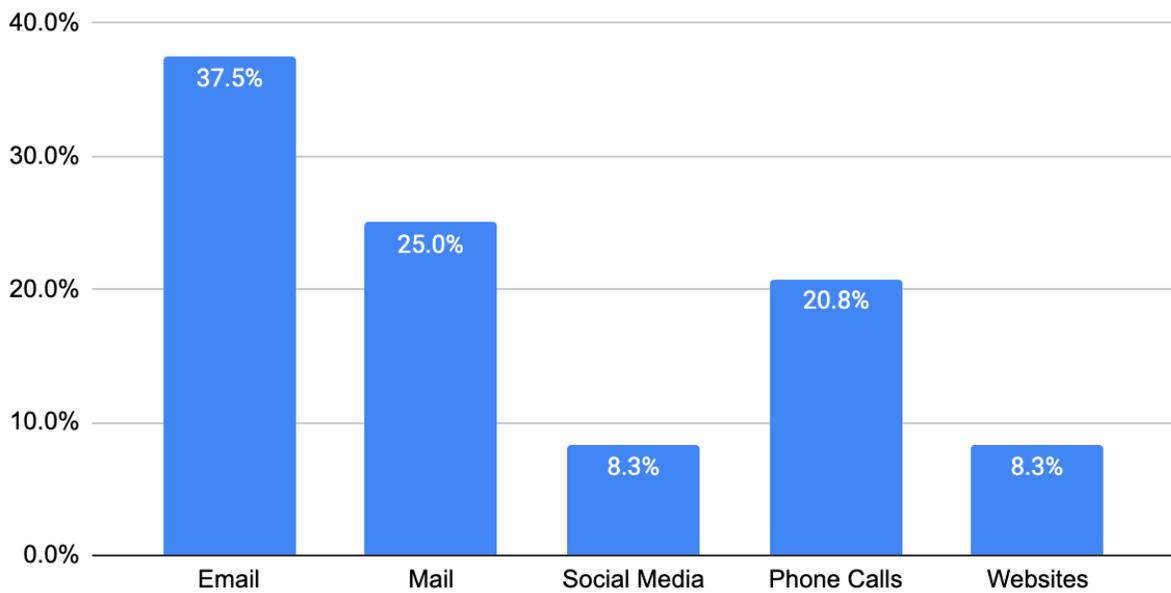
It is interesting to note the difference in distance between a nonprofit’s donors and its clients. 69.5% of donors are 16 miles away from the nonprofit, while 66.6% of clients are 15 miles or less from a nonprofit where they receive services.

In Soddy-Daisy, the opening of the thrift store was pivotal in how the NNH was received in the community, and its location was intentionally placed. Creecy said, “People are not going to drive somewhere unless they can have a one-stop shop, because our building was right beside the Dollar Tree. That is a pivotal landmark.” Creecy also emphasized the importance of drawing people into the store with a good deal but then providing services to help them make a resume and to let them know about open positions nearby. The thrift store is one way in which NNH informs people on the services they provide and its close location to its clients makes all the difference. The NNH was intentional about what their social enterprise was going to be. Creecy states, “Everybody loves a deal. It doesn't matter if you're a millionaire or like rubbing pennies together and feels brings people together.” However, it is also interesting to note that distance between clients and donors is not an issue for everyone. According to a nonprofit of Tulare

County, “Distance of our members and the public is not important since our organization covers all of Tulare County and we have people we serve and communicate with from 0 - 50 miles.”

Table 9

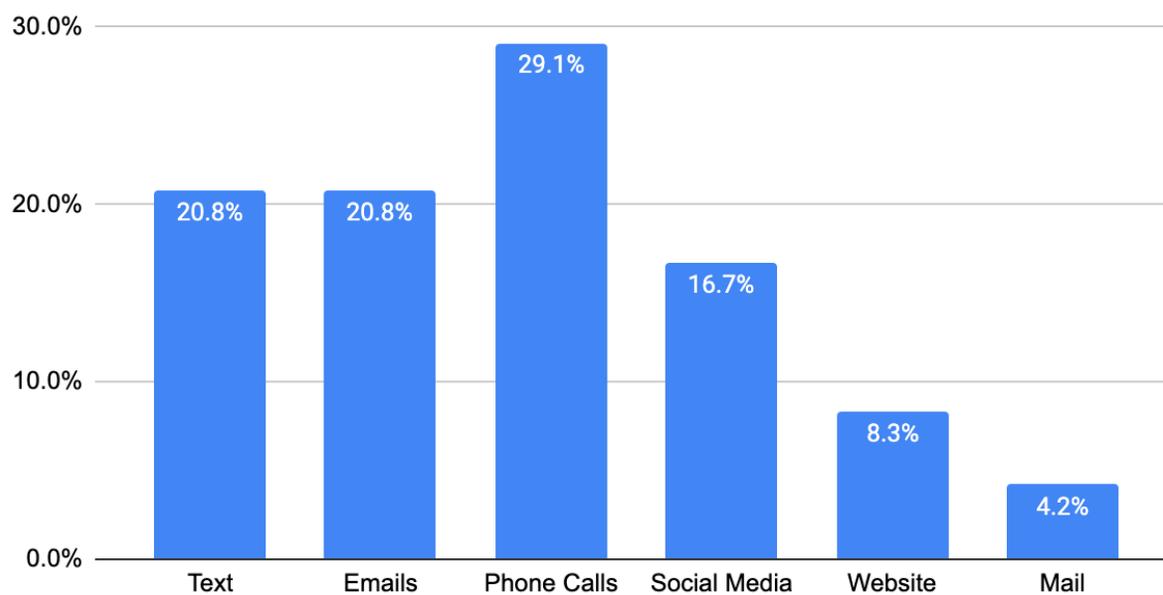
Which way is the best way your nonprofit to convey a message to your donors?



No respondent chose Text

Table 10

Which way is the best way your nonprofit communicates to its clients?



According to a nonprofit in Keene, New Hampshire, “I think that you also need to factor in the importance of talking directly to clients/guests in a rural nonprofit. Our guests are homeless, so they are typically onsite” This also highlights the importance of having strong relationships.

Table 11

Audience Most Important for Your Nonprofit Marketing

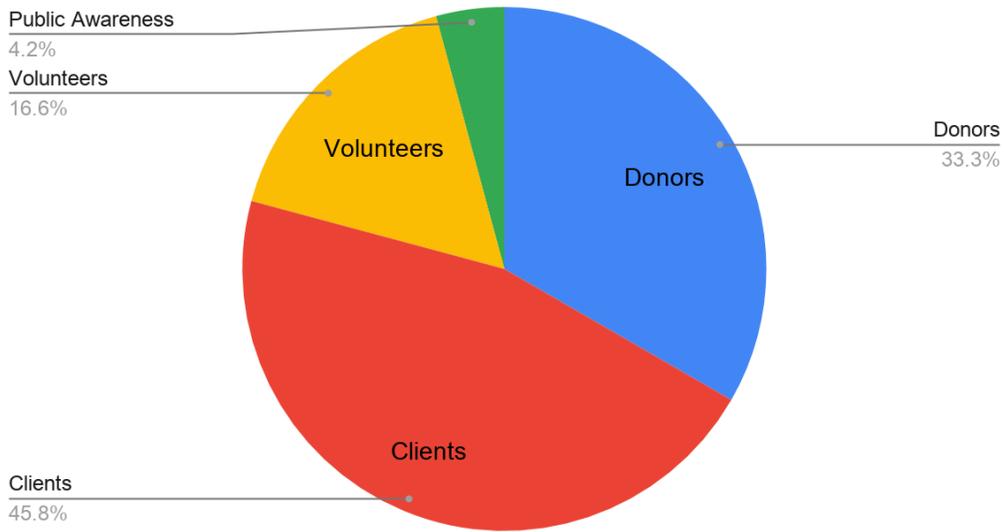
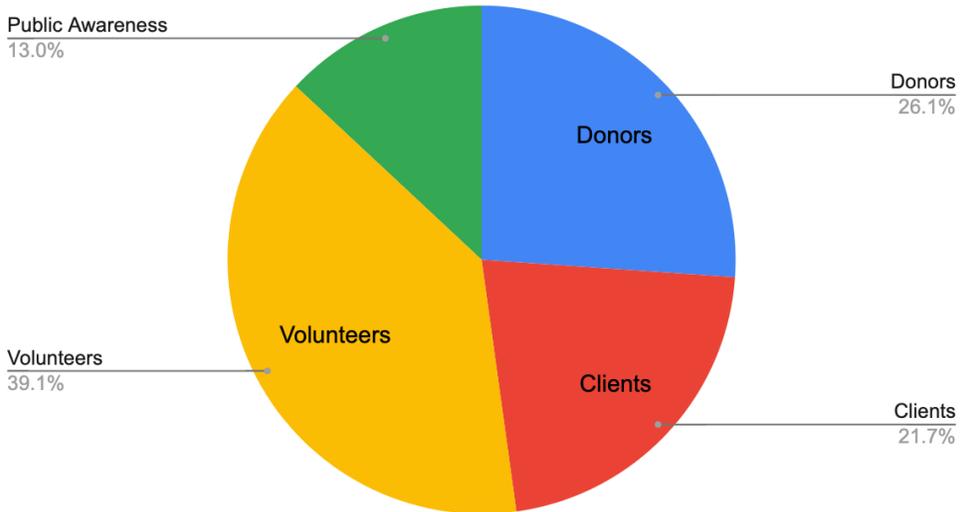


Table 12

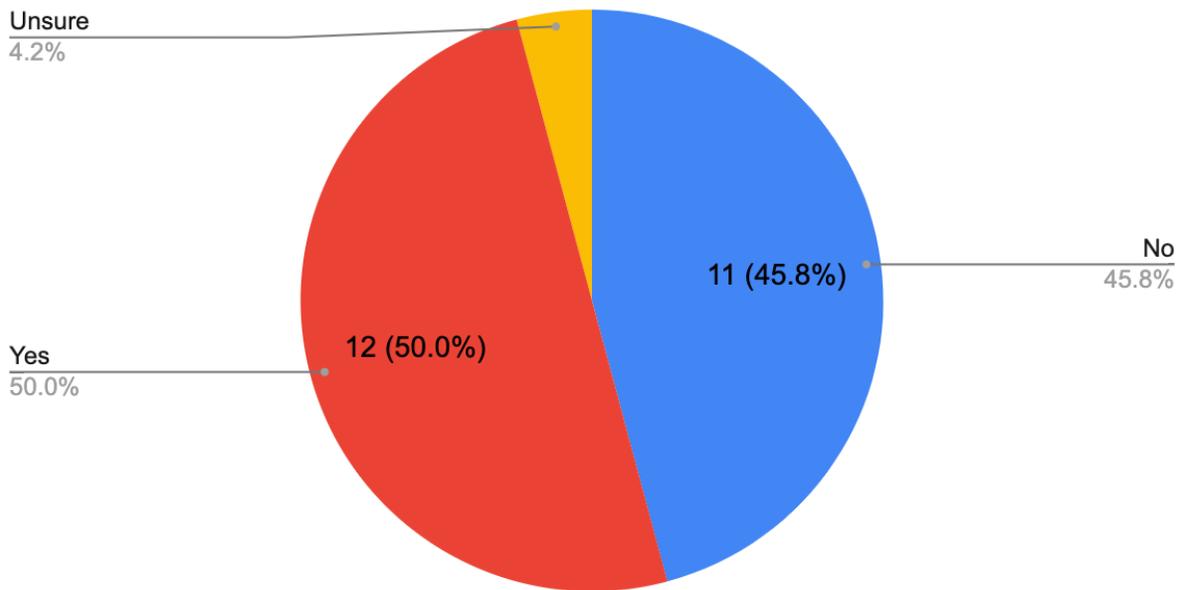
Audience Least Important for Your Nonprofit Marketing



Dr. Walters discusses how the different stakeholders of nonprofits makes it harder to market nonprofits. “One of their (rural nonprofits) main challenges was figuring out how to craft their message to the different stakeholders. So you know, they have a message for their clients, they have a message for donors, they have a message for volunteers, they have a message for the general public, and they really struggled with trying to figure out how to craft all of them and make them sort of work together and complement each other”

Table 13

Does your nonprofit marketing benefit from being a affiliate?
(i.e. CASA of ____, Habitat for Humanity of __)?



Dr. Walters explains one way rural nonprofits market themselves is by being an affiliate or collaborating with another organization., “There are a couple of organizations that are connected to a church in some way.” She also mentions the importance of being affiliated to a larger national organization can be beneficial, “Organizations mentioned that having that parent organization really helped them to get especially funneling in donors.” She was curious about

the differences between rural and urban affiliates, “How are they working with their rural partners, their role affiliates? Are they giving them specialized? training? Are they giving them specialized guidelines or expectations? based on geography?”

Creecy states in Soddy-Daisy to partner with local churches when they are trying to market their services and organization. Not only is the NNH trying to utilize their physical spaces, but also to get to know the pastors and to understand what the needs of their congregations are. Pastors in Soddy-Daisy are willing to be a third party to recommend someone receive services from the NNH, such as parenting help or afterschool programs. NNH would have a family dinner night at a local school and they would partner with a local church to help serve the meal. The family dinner also encompasses partnering with local businesses to sponsor the meal, restaurants to provide the meal, and bringing in a speaker to talk about an issue, such as cyberbullying or parenting. The monthly family dinners are a big deal in Soddy-Daisy and are a big way on how they outreach to the community.

Supplementary Data From the Interviews

Moore explains “The two most important tenets of nonprofit branding are focus and a subset of that is focus on why it matters what you do, and focus on the audiences that are most important to you.” Moore also talks about how marketing and communications can be equity tools, especially for nonprofits. She said, “We need to make sure that we are not exploiting or victimizing the very people that we're trying to serve.” This is an important notion to keep in mind that nonprofit marketing can have a significant impact both positively and negatively. I asked Moore about the importance of social marketing when it comes to nonprofit marketing and her response was enlightening, “That's a benefit to the nonprofit. Collaborating or partnering or at least understanding how the issue is being presented is probably important for a nonprofit. They still have their own unique contribution that they make to that issue area.” Moore’s analysis on social marketing provides a different look than previous research. It is important to remember as a nonprofit what your specific nonprofit can provide to the overarching cause your nonprofit is trying to achieve.

Gibson County CASA has also been piggybacking on popular trends in their community. Johns believes the social media campaign “Save Our Children” and the Jefferey Epstein ordeal brought attention to the cause of child advocacy and drew new eyes, attention, and volunteers to Gibson County CASA. This practice by Gibson County CASA using current trends is backed up by previous research in the *2021 Nonprofit Communications Trends Report*.

Creecy also talked about how people in a small-town one can have a duality in their identity. However, this deviates from previous research where the focus was between the social worker and their personal life. Creecy talks about a duality in terms of being a funder and their relationship to the clients receiving services. For instance, Creecy talks about housing and evictions are a huge problem in Soddy-Daisy. The landlords in the community are donors and supporters of the NNH, but at the same time, the landlords are the ones who are evicting individuals in the community. It is a fine line to walk, especially when the organization is trying to raise awareness about the need in the community for evictions but at the same time trying to raise funds and support for their services. For instance, the NNH had a social media post about a mother being “kicked out” of her home. When a landlord saw this language they pushed back and said “I’m a landlord and I support you all and you do not need to say someone got “kicked out”. You need to understand she probably didn’t pay her bills”. In another context, Creecy talks about how working with one difficult landlord could affect the other 12 units the landlord owns and how it’s important not to burn a bridge in her small community because it could affect her next clients.

Creecy also discusses the effect of COVID-19 having on the NNH and Soddy-Daisy. “We’ve kind of seen like all sides of it and then we’ve also seen landlords that are struggling and small business owners we never thought in a million years to come through our doors are now unable to pay their own mortgage and things like that. When the resources get tight, is when you kind of see even more like the disparities.” NNH’s family dinner nights at the local schools that would draw 300-400 people were also put on hold because of COVID-19. The family dinners being put on hold underscores the pre-COVID-19 era of where nonprofits had an over-reliance on in-person events as discussed in the *2021 Nonprofit Communications Trends Report*.

Section 5: Implications and Recommendations

Build Meaningful Relationships

_____ Building relationships is important for any nonprofits, but it is of special importance for rural nonprofits. Especially when a nonprofit is trying to market and brand themselves. Rural areas can be wary of outsiders or people who do not fully understand their customs, this further proves the importance of building meaningful relationships in rural areas. Relationships can not only improve a nonprofit's marketing but also their fundraising capabilities and their public perception within a community. One or two influencers in a community can make all the difference for a rural nonprofit and lead to fruitful inroads in a community.

Localize Your Language

_____ Understanding the language of your different stakeholders can have many benefits. Being a part of the local culture and speaking their language can improve your messaging and marketing effectiveness. Using words, phrases, and colloquialisms that are familiar to them can help gain stakeholder's trust and further ingrain yourself in a community. Also not using the language of a local area can make a nonprofit stick out very easily and make the nonprofit seem less trustworthy. If nonprofits are affiliates of national nonprofits, they might need to change the language they received from the national branch, in order to reach their local stakeholders effectively. Make sure nonprofits localize the messages they are trying to convey so they reach audiences they need to reach in rural settings.

Duality of Identity

_____ It is important to remember in small towns that different people can take on multiple public-facing roles that are easy to notice and see. When marketing nonprofits in rural areas, it is important to remember this to not cause problems for your nonprofit, such as the landlord who is also a major donor. However, this can also be a positive thing, such as a high school basketball coach, who is very influential and makes his players volunteer in the off season. Though people

everywhere carry multiple identities of themselves, it is more pronounced in rural areas and it can carry weight beyond their initial circle of influence.

Social Marketing

_____ Social Marketing consists of focusing on the consumer's needs as a member of the public, rather than selling them on the idea of what they need to generate profit for a private company. Incorporating the public need and awareness. In rural areas, some people believe some problems are just city problems as opposed to everywhere problems. According to one nonprofit in Indiana, "In small towns, I hate to say it, but a lot of people are close-minded and they don't think that things like they see on the news, are happening in their community. We try to bring that stuff to light" It is important to incorporate the public awareness of the social good your nonprofit brings and how that affects their life. This also includes piggybacking off of national social issues.

The Digital Divide is Closing

_____ For many years, the digital divide was a large factor in how people communicate with each other due to the lack of stable internet and Wi-Fi. Whether it was communicating through social media or mail, how you communicated your stakeholders depended on knowing their access to digital means, this is changing. However, this problem is still existent, but it is slowly dwindling. Instead of a lack of access to the digital divide, it is now becoming a more generational digital divide. Knowing that the lack of digital access is closing, rural nonprofits can further their marketing reach by using more digital marketing techniques.

Figure 4 Recommendation for Rural Nonprofit Marketing



Section 6: Conclusion

The research for this project began with a literature review defining what constitutes a rural area, defining rural challenges and assets, defining rural marketing, and defining nonprofit marketing. The literature review gave a robust background that allowed for expert interviews and a survey to collect data to further explore the challenges and lessons from rural nonprofits.

There are some distinct differences for rural nonprofit marketing that differs from urban and suburban nonprofits though the rift between them is not as deep or wide as initially thought. There are also many things that they have in common, such as the power of having meaningful relationships that can be converted to donors, volunteers, etc.

The recommendations concluded for rural nonprofits are as follows: build meaningful relationships, localize your language, the duality of identity, social marketing, and the digital divide is closing. Each recommendation comes from expert interviews and the results of the survey. Each recommendation exemplifies the importance of incorporating that particular aspect into a nonprofit's marketing communications plan to drive better engagement for a nonprofit.

Limitations of the research include that only human services nonprofits and foundations were surveyed. This left out arts, culture, environment nonprofits among other different types of nonprofits that were not included. The survey was also limited to only 24 respondents from only 16 states (AL, CA, CO, FL, ID, IN, KY, LA, MA, MI, MS, MO, NH, TN, WV, & WY) . This leaves out a swath of other states and a swath of different viewpoints. Limitations also revolve around that no donors or clients were interviewed about the nonprofit's marketing as well as other staff and volunteers at the nonprofit who do not have marketing roles.

Further research can look into the effectiveness of different types of marketing mediums that rural nonprofits utilize. Further research could also conduct a content analysis to see the particular outlay of a marketing medium and pick up on the minor details of different mediums.

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Appendix: Questions Used in Semi-Structured Interviews

- 1.) How would you describe your marketing and public relations and/or social media for your organization?
- 2.) How much has social marketing been a factor in your marketing/public relations approach? Social marketing focuses on the public good and the client's needs as a member of the public, rather than just trying to make a profit for the general public.
- 3.) Is your communication and marketing style been trying to be "localizing"?
- 4.) What would you say your strongest marketing medium is? Direct Mail? Email Listserv? Social Media? And Why?
- 5.) How does being in a rural area affect your marketing and communications?
 - a.) How rural would you describe your area?
- 6.) Biggest Challenges you face while marketing?
- 7.) How much collaboration does your organization do with other organizations?
- 8.) Have you noticed a digital divide for your constituents?
- 9.) Who are the hardest stakeholders to reach?
- 10.) What do you think would make your marketing better?

Author's Bio

Brandon Shepard is a recipient of the Presidential Gold Medal of Service and the Congressional Bronze Medal of Service through his time with the AmeriCorps National Civilian Community Corps. His service with AmeriCorps inspired him to make a career in the nonprofit sector. One of Shepard's earliest jobs out of AmeriCorps was at the Partnership for Family, Children, and Adults in Chattanooga, Tennessee as a Supervised Visitation Monitor, which entails supervising visits between children and their non-custodial parent. Shepard quickly parlayed this position into becoming a Nurturing Parenting Facilitator, which he quickly became nationally certified in and began conducting classes in the Tennessee Valley.

Shepard wanted to utilize his marketing degree from the University of Tennessee-Chattanooga for something within the nonprofit sector. Shepard then became a Volunteer Coordinator for Reading Partners San Francisco Bay Area. Shepard recruited and trained volunteers to become volunteer tutors. While at Reading Partners, Shepard also created the Neighborhood Ambassador Program. This program was designed to utilize highly engaged volunteers by giving them recruitment materials to take with them to places they normally go and socialize in order to attract more volunteers. Shepard also coordinated volunteer appreciation events around the Bay Area with many different business partners. Shepard then became the Volunteer Coordinator at Catholic Charities of San Francisco (CCSF). At CCSF, Shepard continued to recruit volunteers and build upon past relationships. Shepard was instrumental in recruiting volunteer entertainers, such as magicians, musicians, and choral groups for various programs. Shepard also began reinstating volunteers for CCSF's immigration programs in order to ease the burden of the Immigration Services' staff. Shepard was also utilized by the Marketing Department during COVID-19 and became in charge of their social media channels. Shepard quickly designed a social media calendar and increased followers and likes for CCSF on every social media platform.