

The Marketplace of Words:

How Nonprofits Can Raise the Value of their Words

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## Executive Summary

In my experience and the experience of people I've spoken to in the nonprofit marketing field, word choice is an often-overlooked aspect of marketing. However, words are the building block of nearly *every single message* an organization sends out, both orally and written. A significant problem is that too many organizations use the same words. If everyone is using the same word, its value goes down. Why? Our brains are more likely to notice differences than similarities. This paper answers the question: What words are nonprofits using most frequently, and how can they use that information to improve their word choice?

To find the words most commonly used by nonprofits, I conducted research that counted the frequency of words used on nonprofit websites. The result of this research is a list of the top 1000 words found on nonprofit websites. The list also reveals how often each word is used as each part of speech, as well as the percentage of nonprofit websites that use each word at least once.

Nonprofits can use the results of this study to determine if their words are overused. I also offer advice on choosing powerful, high-value words. The criteria for high-value words are that they are unique, specific, and easy to understand.

Furthermore, I created an online tool that nonprofits can use to make the results personally useful to them. This paper will review this tool and how to use it. Overall, the mission of this report is to teach nonprofits how to raise the value of their words.

## Introduction

Imagine you're at your local market to buy ingredients for some homemade lemonade. As you're picking out lemons, you notice that they're more expensive than usual. You vaguely remember hearing about a lemon shortage this season – that must be the reason for the higher price. It's basic supply and demand: The less lemons there are, the more demand there is for lemons. Thus, their value, or price, goes up. If there were a surplus of lemons instead, you could expect to pay less for your lemonade.

Now, imagine yourself at a networking event. Inevitably, someone asks what you do. Take a moment to think about how you would respond. Which words would you choose to succinctly describe the nonprofit organization you are passionate about; the organization you dedicate your time to?

You might not think of words as commodities like lemons, but in a way, they are. If everyone is using the same words, their value goes down. Why? The human brain is wired to pay attention to new information and overlook the old (Poldrack, 2010, p.1). We stop noticing the same, tired language. Thus, the overused words lose their value.

Nearly everyone involved with a nonprofit talks or writes about their organization. However, they often don't choose their words intentionally. Therefore, many nonprofits end up using the same language everyone else is using. By using the same words, nonprofits are not getting the most out of their word choices. Clear, unique words have higher value than empty, overused words.

To determine which words are overused, I conducted a study to find the top nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs and pronouns nonprofits use on their most accessible communication tool: their website.

In this paper, I will describe the methodology I used to conduct this study. Then, I will showcase and interpret the results. Next, I will recommend how to use the information to make it personally meaningful for your organization by giving advice on how to choose unique, specific and easy-to-understand words. I also will explain the role of pronouns for nonprofits. Finally, I will introduce and describe an online tool created to give nonprofits direct access to The Marketplace of Words. In summation, you will see which words nonprofits choose most frequently and how you can use that information to improve your nonprofit's word choices.

### Methodology

I conducted my research in order to answer the question: Which words do nonprofits use most frequently? I determined that the most efficient way to collect this information was to pick a consistent communication platform that most nonprofits have. Since a website is easily accessible and is widely used by nonprofits, I chose nonprofit websites as the data I would analyze.

To begin the study, I first determined my sample set. I retrieved the list of currently registered 501(c)3 organizations in the United States from the Internal Revenue Service (IRS). A 501(c)3 is an organization formed for charitable or religious purposes. Some examples include health and education services, environmental protection agencies, art museums and theaters, and youth sports groups (Gross & Hopkins, 2010, p. 45). Organizations that have less than \$5000 yearly income or are a church or similar religious organization are not required to register with the IRS. However, they can choose to

register, and many do. The benefits are added transparency regarding finances and reassurance of tax-exemption to donors (Internal Revenue Service, 2014).

830,067 501(c)3 nonprofits were registered with the IRS in April 2014. This excludes organizations whose 501(c)3 status was suspended at that time (Internal Revenue Service, 2014). Based on this number, I calculated an appropriate sample size of 384. This achieves a 95% confidence level with +/- 5% margin of error.

To collect my sample data set, I selected every 2161<sup>st</sup> name from the IRS's list. If no website for that organization could be discovered after a reasonable effort, I went to the next name on the list. A reasonable effort for this purpose is defined as reviewing the first page of Google search results when an organization's name is searched for with and without city and state, as well as checking GuideStar.org for a website listing.

To gather the data, I recruited third-party help to write a program that scans and counts words used on the sample websites. The program scans one layer deep, i.e. the homepage and all links from the homepage. If one of these links is to an outside website, it will not scan this outside website. Also, the program will not count words in PDFs or images. It discards non-English words, words with two letters or less, and all articles, pronouns, prepositions, conjunctions and interjections. It consolidates words to their root, e.g. *give, gave, given, giving* and *gives* will all count as *give*. It breaks down how often each word was used as each part of speech. For example, *individual* can be used as both a noun and an adjective. The program gives a total count for use of the word *individual*, and then its adjective count, noun count, verb count and adverb count. In the case of *individual*, both the verb count and adverb count is zero, because it can never be used as those parts of speech.

Furthermore, in addition to the total count of words, the program shows the percentage of nonprofits that use a particular word at least once on their website. For example, *contact* will show up as a word with a high percentage, as many website have a “Contact Us” page. However, *contact* has a lower total count because it is usually mentioned only a few times across an entire website. The final list of words contains the total top 1000 words used by the sample set, with the 1000 determined by the total count rather than the percentage of use.

After the program collected data on adjectives, adverbs, nouns and verbs, it was then re-run to collect pronoun data. The reasoning behind this was that information about pronoun usage would be useful to nonprofits, however, since pronouns are used very frequently, they would be more useful viewed as a separate list than combined with the other parts of speech.

## Results

For a sample of the research results, please see Appendices I through VI. These include separate lists of the top 20 adjectives, adverbs, verbs and nouns. The pronoun list only includes 16 words, as that is the full list. There is also a list of the top overall words, which includes adjectives, adverbs nouns and verbs.

The full results can be found at <http://marketplaceofwords.com>. This website also includes instructions and tips for using The Marketplace of Words’ data. This website and how to use it will be discussed in further detail later in the *Online Tool* section of this paper.

When reviewing my study’s results, it is important to remember that the data is coming exclusively from websites and no other forms of nonprofit communications. Certain

types of organizations may be more likely to have a website than other organizations. Therefore, it isn't accurate to say this is a study of overall nonprofit word use. According to the The Urban Institute National Center for Charitable Statistics (NCCS), as of April 2014, 9.5% of 501(c)3s registered with the IRS were Arts, Culture and Humanities organizations. However, these types of organizations accounted for 14% of my sample set. My sample set also had a lower percentage of Religion-Related organizations than reported by NCCS. The likely explanation is that Arts, Culture and Humanities organizations such as art venues, museums and cultural societies are more likely to have websites than Religion-Related organizations such as churches and missionary groups. For the full list of percentages reported by the NCCS versus my sample set, please see Appendix VII.

Also, because this is an analysis of websites only, it is important to remember there are some words that nonprofits are more likely to use on websites than in other forms of communication. For example, *contact* is the word used on the highest percentage of websites. This is likely because many organizations have a contact page. This can also explain *home* as the top noun. Many organizations have a link to return the user to their home page. Just because these are common website links does not mean the words are overused by nonprofits. It also does not mean that they are *not* overused by nonprofits.

### Recommendations

What do the results of this study mean to you? The results are intended to help nonprofit organizations find the words that will have the most value for their organizations. High-value words are unique, specific, and easy to understand, and they will differ from nonprofit to nonprofit.

Why are unique words so important? People are much more likely to pay attention to new things. In fact, new information actually makes us feel good physically. Novelty causes a release of dopamine, a neurotransmitter that gives us pleasant sensations, from the brain stem. Because it causes excitement and pleasure, our brains are trained to pay attention to new things and overlook the old (Poldrack, 2010, p. 1-2). Choosing words that are unique will make you stand out and will draw people in.

A useful way to identify unique words for your organization is to start a list. Choose several nouns, verbs and adjectives that define your organization. Consider your organization's personality, its brand and its audience. Get input from multiple people in your organization. Check The Marketplace of Words' frequently used words lists, and reconsider any words you chose that overlap with the lists. You can also identify words you want your organization to avoid because they are overused or don't align with your nonprofit's personality (Mills, 2013).

Certain words may be irreplaceable for a certain organization, so it's up to you to determine whether a word is necessary. For some organizations, a frequently used word might be a necessary word. For example, some common words such as *school*, *art*, and *child* are likely irreplaceable for a school that teaches art to children. Just because a word may be frequently used doesn't automatically mean you shouldn't use it. If a word you use or are considering using is present in the research results, it should be critically examined, not immediately discarded.



Most people will probably find that they need to keep words such as *contact*, *donate* and *board* but can find better options for *provide*, *give* and *work*. More often than not, the most powerful word change you can make is choosing better verbs. According to nonprofit communications expert Erica Mills, verbs are “the superheroes of every sentence. They speak directly to the change you want to create in the world.” Every organization is a unique entity that does much more than *provide*, *give* and *work*.

Words like *provide*, *give* and *work* are empty words. This means that they don't say a lot on their own. Consider the sentence, “We need your support to help make our work more available to our community.” Most of the words in this sentence are among the top 10 used by nonprofits, including the first person plural pronouns. Based on this sentence, no one would have any idea what the organization actually does. Get specific! Replace empty words with descriptive ones. An organization that builds houses for poor families could replace the above-mentioned sentence with something like, “Housing is a right everyone should have. Create new neighbors by lending a hand.” This second sentence uses the same amount of words, but in this case only *have* makes the list of top 10 words from my research. The second sentence is also very descriptive of both what the organization does and the type of support the organization is looking for. Furthermore, it's engaging and interesting.

Jargon is a specific type of empty word. It is defined generally as language that is inaccessible to the public, often characterized by vague, pretentious, or industry-specific terminology (Merriam-Webster, 2014). According to Tony Proscio in his e-book *In Other Words: A Plea for Plain Speaking in Foundations*, “The repetitive, habitual use of insider lingo undermines the inherently public nature of the issues under discussion (2000, p.9).”

The very nature of a 501(c)3 is to serve the public. Nonprofits should obviously avoid isolating the people they are accountable to. Yet, jargon is commonly found in nonprofit language. While common examples of jargon such as *stakeholder*, *assets* and *capacity* did not make the list of most frequently used words, it is still important to remember to avoid them.

Some words that are on the frequently words list can be considered jargon. These include: *assistance*, *action*, *access*, *comprehensive*, *community*, *challenge (noun)*, *environment*, *funding*, *impact*, *initiative*, *outreach*, *partnership*, *provide*, *receive*, *resource*, *site*, *social*, *space*, *strategy* and *utilize* (The Communications Network, 2013). The reason these words can be considered jargon is that they are vague. What do you actually mean when you say *community*? How big is it and who is a part of it? There are a so many methods of *outreach*; which are you referring to? These are examples of unanswered questions left by vague jargon. Again, get specific with your word choices. Don't leave your audience wondering what you mean. Instead of “utilizing a community outreach strategy”, say you are “meeting face-to-face with residents of Seattle's Ballard neighborhood”. It's accessible to everyone and shows what you are actually doing.

Based on my experience, nonprofits overuse jargon and empty words because of habit. We match the language we hear others use and then get used to using those same words. Since people in the nonprofit sector spend much of their time interacting with others in the sector, insider and empty language becomes a problem. Without thinking consciously about choosing meaningful words, we automatically go to the words we have gotten in the habit of using. By becoming conscious of our word choice, we can break the habit of jargon and empty words.

However, identifying jargon and empty words can be difficult. It can be helpful to have someone outside of your industry review your text and point out words that are unclear to her or him. You can also isolate each word from the rest of your sentence. If few or none of your words can summon a concrete image on their own, then you should consider a re-write. Also, ask yourself if your sentence is unique to you or if it could describe multiple organizations. If the answer is the former, you should also consider a re-write.

Hand-in-hand with empty words and jargon is clarity. Paula LaRocque says, “For clarity, we need an open, informal, conversational style. Our schooling has taught us... to make a distinction between formal and informal communication, and that formal is superior to informal (2000, p. 39).” From what I’ve seen, it is a very common problem for nonprofits and other organizations to write formally because they believe it makes them sound credible. In reality, it alienates their audiences and makes them sound dull. Clear, informal language is more likely to grab attention than cold, formal language because it will connect with your reader on a more personal level (Davis, 2014).

The simplest way to achieve clarity in writing is to write like you speak. If someone has to take time to decipher your message, they most likely won't. You don't want people to have to re-read your mission statement multiple times to finally understand what you do. An easy test is to ask yourself, “Would I use this word, phrase or sentence in a casual conversation?” Read it out loud and see how it sounds. Also, when you are considering a few good words, opt for the word with fewer syllables. It will be easier for your audience to quickly read and comprehend.

A discussion of word use wouldn't be complete without mentioning pronouns.

Function words, which include articles, pronouns and prepositions, make up 60% of the words we use on a daily basis, even though they only make up less than 1% of the average English-speaker's vocabulary (Pennebaker 2013). For the purpose of my research, the only function words I analyzed were pronouns, because those are the most revealing. Pronouns surprisingly predict a lot about our personality, mood, confidence and more. Humans can pick up and read signals from pronouns subconsciously (Pennebaker 2013).

What does nonprofits' use of pronouns reveal? Nonprofit websites are in line with the rest of English communication in that *I* is the most commonly used pronoun (Oxford Dictionaries 2014). However, while *you* shows up next on the pronoun list for the general public (Oxford Dictionaries 2014), nonprofits use *we* and *our* nearly 20% more often than *you* and *your*. As mentioned previously, nonprofits exist and are accountable to the public. They are largely funded by donations and thrive because of volunteers. So why does the word *we* show up more than *you* when talking to the public? On a website, which may be someone's first introduction to an organization, it can make sense to see *we* frequently as the organization describes what they do. However, nonprofits should consider greatly increasing the amount of *you* they use. Based on my experience and research, this makes donors, volunteers, and even potential donors and volunteers feel included, appreciated and honored. The nonprofit itself shouldn't be the hero in a nonprofit's story. Every time you find yourself using *we* or *our*, think about if it can be reworded to include *you* instead. The exception is when *we* or *our* is being used in a way that includes the public in the group, such as, "Together, we will end homelessness."

Remember, it is not only marketing and fundraising teams that should pay attention to how they describe their organization. The results of The Marketplace of Words research can help everyone involved with a nonprofit make informed decisions about their word choice. Whenever someone talks about their nonprofit, their aim should be to engage their listener.

### Online Tool

To make my research accessible and useful to nonprofits, I created an interactive website, located at <http://marketplaceofwords.com>. The homepage contains a box in which you can type an adjective, adverb, noun or verbs. When you click *Go!*, you'll be shown the rank of the word you've chosen on nonprofit websites. If you type a word that is within the top 100 words most often used on nonprofit websites such as *provide*, you will get this message: *Provide is the 52<sup>nd</sup> most commonly use word on nonprofit websites. Think long and hard before using it!* If you type a word that ranks between 200 and 1000 such as *outreach*, you will get this message: *Outreach is the 291<sup>st</sup> most commonly used word on nonprofit websites. Make sure you've explored all your options before using it.* If you type a word that doesn't rank in the top 1000, such as *purify*, you will get this message: *Congratulations – Purify is not in the top 1000 words found on nonprofit websites!* Note that in order to get accurate results, you must type the root form of the word, such as *give* rather than *gave* or *giving*.

Additional pages offer information about the project, the creators, and how to use the tool. You can also view the full results in an interactive chart. You can sort by part of

speech and by percentage. You'll find additional tips on choosing powerful words. While the website doesn't contain the pronoun list, it gives advice for pronoun usage.

### Conclusion

Just like only you can know if you want to pay top dollar for a lemon, only you can decide which words you want to use. Because of The Marketplace of Words, you can now make an informed decision based on the value of the word. Remember, however, that value is relative, based on its context and based on your organization. As you choose your words, particularly verbs and adjectives, strive to make them unique, specific, and easy to understand. Try to use *you* and *your* as often as possible. The average vocabulary of an English speaker is about 100,000 words (Pennebaker, 2013). You have a lot to choose from.

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## Appendix I

<b>Top Words</b>				
	By Frequency		By Percentage	
	Word	Count	Word	Percentage
1.	school	25078	contact	54.17
2.	board	17222	support	51.56
3.	community	16838	please	48.96
4.	have	15954	more	47.92
5.	service	13991	first	47.92
6.	program	13202	need	47.66
7.	education	13089	help	46.35
8.	event	12463	make	46.09
9.	art	11043	work	45.83
10.	contact	10612	home	42.97
11.	more	10477	use	42.19
12.	new	10463	call	41.67
13.	resource	10061	get	41.41
14.	home	10059	name	40.36
15.	news	9131	click	37.76
16.	center	9115	program	37.50
17.	member	8976	not	37.50
18.	job	8559	view	37.50
19.	student	8529	learn	36.46
20.	type	8114	see	36.46

## Appendix II

<b>Adjectives</b>				
	By Frequency		By Percentage	
	Word	Count	Word	Percentage
1.	new	10463	new	34.64
2.	public	5390	other	34.38
3.	more	5236	more	33.33
4.	other	4552	first	30.99
5.	high	4266	many	28.65
6.	open	4082	local	27.60
7.	national	3620	last	27.34
8.	local	3554	good	27.08
9.	annual	3377	special	26.82
10.	professional	2746	such	26.82
11.	free	2611	full	26.04
12.	special	2337	available	26.04
13.	current	2249	free	25.78
14.	social	2241	great	25.78
15.	own	2201	public	25.52
16.	many	2172	open	25.52
17.	first	2089	small	24.74
18.	full	2068	late	24.22
19.	good	2050	current	23.70
20.	available	1864	high	23.44

## Appendix III

<b>Adverbs</b>				
	By Frequency		By Percentage	
	Word	Count	Word	Percentage
1.	not	6528	not	37.50
2.	more	5241	please	36.46
3.	here	4331	here	33.59
4.	also	3008	also	32.29
5.	please	2634	now	32.29
6.	now	2578	well	32.29
7.	long	2467	out	29.95
8.	well	2220	more	29.43
9.	out	2135	first	26.82
10.	only	1838	only	26.56
11.	first	1587	back	25.52
12.	just	1560	just	23.96
13.	together	1157	then	23.70
14.	very	1103	even	23.70
15.	back	1098	together	22.66
16.	yet	1017	always	22.40
17.	always	966	very	21.61
18.	little	875	there	21.61
19.	then	873	long	21.09
20.	there	800	once	19.79

## Appendix IV

<b>Nouns</b>				
	By Frequency		By Percentage	
	Word	Count	Word	Percentage
1.	school	25078	home	38.28
2.	board	17222	contact	38.28
3.	community	16838	program	37.50
4.	service	13991	service	36.20
5.	program	13202	support	36.20
6.	education	13089	life	35.68
7.	event	12463	community	35.42
8.	art	11043	event	35.16
9.	resource	10061	school	34.90
10.	home	9805	page	33.59
11.	news	9131	member	33.33
12.	center	9115	child	33.33
13.	member	8976	time	33.33
14.	job	8559	information	33.07
15.	student	8529	family	33.07
16.	type	8114	day	32.81
17.	year	8027	year	32.55
18.	child	7268	name	31.77
19.	state	7127	group	31.25
20.	information	7041	donation	31.25

## Appendix V

<b>Pronouns</b>				
	By Frequency		By Percentage	
	Word	Count	Word	Percentage
1.	I	23256	it	41.56
2.	our	19939	our	39.74
3.	we	18906	we	36.88
4.	you	17427	your	36.88
5.	your	15128	you	36.10
6.	it	14734	their	32.99
7.	my	7769	they	31.95
8.	he	6799	them	30.39
9.	their	6521	i	28.57
10.	me	5046	he	25.71
11.	they	4071	his	24.94
12.	his	3366	my	24.16
13.	she	2424	me	23.38
14.	her	2358	her	19.22
15.	them	2087	him	17.92
16.	him	875	she	17.14

## Appendix VI

<b>Verbs</b>				
	By Frequency		By Percentage	
	Word	Count	Word	Percentage
1.	have	15954	make	37.76
2.	make	5975	provide	35.42
3.	help	5643	have	34.90
4.	provide	5034	need	33.59
5.	contact	3867	give	33.07
6.	learn	3726	contact	32.03
7.	get	3655	work	31.77
8.	include	3586	help	30.99
9.	give	3571	take	30.21
10.	work	3414	support	30.21
11.	need	3093	include	29.69
12.	find	2982	use	29.17
13.	save	2869	see	29.17
14.	use	2572	get	28.91
15.	know	2517	find	28.65
16.	reserve	2426	come	27.34
17.	post	2417	become	27.34
18.	take	2404	receive	27.34
19.	serve	2250	learn	27.08
20.	meet	2136	serve	27.08

## Appendix VII.

	<b>Sub-sector</b>	<b>All 501(c)3s</b>	<b>Sample List</b>
I.	Arts, Culture and Humanities	9.46%	14.06%
II.	Education	15.03%	10.42%
III.	Environment & Animals	4.94%	9.64%
IV.	Health	7.59%	7.29%
V.	Human Services	25.01%	27.60%
VI.	International, Foreign Affairs	1.71%	0.52%
VII.	Public, Social Benefit	10.45%	13.28%
VIII.	Religion-Related	25.19%	15.10%
IX.	Mutual/ Membership Benefit	0.34%	1.82%
X.	Unknown, Unclassified	0.28%	0.26%