

# The Overlooked Marketing Asset: Using the Form 990 Strategically

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## **The Overlooked Marketing Asset: Using the Form 990 Strategically**

For many nonprofit leaders, the Form 990 is viewed as a compliance obligation. It is something to file accurately, on time, and then archive until the next year. In reality, the 990 is one of the most visible, credible, and underutilized marketing tools available to nonprofit organizations. It is often the first document donors, journalists, foundations, and regulators review when evaluating an organization. Whether leaders intend it or not, the 990 tells a story.

When nonprofits approach the 990 strategically, it becomes a powerful vehicle for building interest, confidence, transparency, and trust. It also provides an opportunity to educate board members about their fiduciary responsibilities and empower them as informed ambassadors for the organization.

### **Why the 990 Matters More Than Leaders Realize**

The Form 990 is public. It is easily accessible through platforms like GuideStar and ProPublica, and it is frequently reviewed by major donors, institutional funders, watchdog organizations, and prospective board members. Unlike marketing materials, the 990 carries a level of credibility because it is a government-required disclosure.

What makes the 990 especially powerful is that it reflects not only financial data, but also governance practices, leadership priorities, compensation philosophy, and organizational narrative. The way questions are answered, the tone of descriptions, and the clarity of information all shape external perception.

A poorly written or inconsistent 990 can raise unnecessary questions. A thoughtful, well-crafted 990 can reinforce confidence and alignment with mission.

### **Using the 990 as a Strategic Storytelling Tool**

Nonprofits have more control over their 990 than they often realize. Several sections provide opportunities to clearly and compellingly communicate the organization's value.

Program descriptions should be written with the same care as external communications. Clear outcomes, concise impact language, and alignment with



mission help readers quickly understand why the organization exists and what it accomplishes.

Governance sections signal leadership strength. Accurate and thoughtful responses about board oversight, policies, and decision-making processes demonstrate organizational maturity and accountability.

Compensation disclosures, when aligned with industry benchmarks and explained clearly, help normalize leadership pay and reduce misinterpretation. Transparency builds trust when information is presented confidently and consistently.

Consistency matters. Discrepancies between the 990, audited financials, website messaging, and donor materials can create confusion. Alignment reinforces credibility.

### **Engaging the Board as Fiduciaries and Ambassadors**

Board members have a fiduciary responsibility to understand the Form 990. Yet many never review it beyond signing off on its submission. This is a missed opportunity.

Nonprofit leaders should intentionally share the completed 990 with the board, walk through key sections, and explain why certain responses matter. This helps board members understand how the organization is viewed externally and strengthens governance literacy.

Equally important, leaders should equip board members to talk about the 990 with confidence. When board members understand how the document reflects the organization's values, financial health, and impact, they can respond effectively to donor questions and proactively share it with potential supporters.

A board that understands the 990 is better positioned to protect the organization's reputation and advance its mission.

### **Using the 990 to Generate Interest and Confidence**

Nonprofits can strategically reference their 990 in donor conversations, grant applications, and stewardship efforts. Sharing the document as a transparency tool signals confidence and openness.



Leaders can highlight key strengths reflected in the 990, such as program efficiency, governance practices, or growth trends. Rather than waiting for stakeholders to discover the document on their own, proactive sharing allows nonprofits to frame the narrative.

In an era of increased scrutiny and donor expectations around accountability, the 990 can reinforce trust rather than create concern.

### **Conclusion**

The Form 990 is far more than a regulatory requirement. It is a public-facing document that shapes perception, credibility, and confidence in an organization. Nonprofit leaders who treat the 990 as a strategic marketing and governance tool position their organizations for stronger relationships with donors, board members, and the broader community.

When approached intentionally, the 990 becomes an asset that supports transparency, storytelling, and long-term sustainability rather than a document to file and forget.

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