

# DISABILITIES FOUNDATION INSIGHTS REPORT 2023



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



As a part of a yearlong experience, our class of College of Charleston seniors have come together to create **The Comm Agency**, a student-led Communications Agency. We carefully picked through various applications and decided to service seven clients in their communication needs using what we've learned throughout our major coursework. The agency broke into smaller account teams to focus on each client closely. Each team has been conducting both secondary and primary research on the client, their situation, and their key publics/audiences since October. Our team is particularly passionate about advocating for a good cause, so we are thrilled to be working with The DisABILITIES Foundation this year.

In initial conversations with Ben and Evelyn, we came to understand that their main need now is **solidifying their brand identity** (mission, elevator pitch, etc.), **generating disability awareness**, and **increasing financial support**. To fulfill these needs, our account associates researched the DisABILITIES Foundation as an organization as well as disability awareness/etiquette. Our team did extensive research on how to best **communicate with and about individuals with disabilities**, which will go an incredibly long way in how we respectfully communicate everything going forward. Beyond this, we conducted secondary research on **rebranding, the power of media, and other successful non-profit organizations**.

The main takeaways from our research surround three different ideas: **branding, social media, and disability awareness**. We learned that **consistency in branding** and image is key to creating brand recognition and increasing donations. **Consistent social media use** is important for connecting with and growing your audience and potential supporters. Instagram and Facebook are the two most important platforms in terms of connecting with key stakeholders and are frequently used by nonprofit organizations. When researching about disability we found that one of the most important concepts to keep in mind when raising awareness is the **involvement of people with disabilities and their support systems** (family, teachers, friends) in the campaign process. It is also critical that we diversify our materials and deliver quality content moving forward.



# CLIENT BACKGROUND

Evidence from a report by the Centers for Disease Control in 2021 states that in the State of South Carolina, there are 1,160,293 adults with disabilities. To put it into perspective, about 29% or about 1 in every 3 people have a disability - intellectual, physical, sensory impaired, or behavioral. Many individuals with disabilities face challenges that may necessitate specialized care and services, but from a healthcare standpoint, the state's budget only allocates 36% to those with disabilities. As a result, the need for additional funding and support for the disabilities community is crucial.

Enter The DisABILITIES Foundation of Charleston County, founded in 2016 as *"The Disabilities Foundation of Charleston County"*. In 2017, they changed their name from the Disabilities Foundation of Charleston County to the *"Able Life Foundation"* as part of a re-branding campaign. In 2020 the foundation changed back to The DisABILITIES Foundation of Charleston County with the adjusted capitalization of ABILITIES. The initial brand change that included "able" caused conflict in its closeness to other agencies that served similar communities as well as the Able Act, so to distinguish itself from peer organizations, the foundation now spells Disabilities with "abilities" presented in capital letters. The foundation has 8-25 board members who are all volunteers. The foundation is currently made up of 100% volunteers.

The DisABILITIES Foundation of Charleston County provides immediate and ongoing financial support to the Disabilities Board of Charleston County. The financial assistance ensures that necessary services are provided to individuals with disabilities and their families, no matter their age. The foundation's slogan is *"No longer apart from the community, but a part of the community"*. The slogan emphasizes that individuals who are disabled are every bit a part of the community as those without disabilities. Through various events, such as the annual Avondale 5K, "Giving Tuesday" Fundraiser, National Autism Day Campaign, and the Celebrity Serve Fundraising Event, the DisABILITIES Foundation of Charleston County's goal is to connect disabled individuals with the surrounding community.

# SWOT ANALYSIS

The COMM Agency conducted research to inform our communication efforts for The DisABILITIES Foundation of Charleston County. That research produced key insights as well as a full SWOT analysis to capture the organization's internal and external position at this point in time. Below is a table that shares important elements of the developed SWOT.

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES	OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
Devoted board members with personal experiences	Limited online presence	Partner with Delicious Delights and other local foundations who support those with IDD's	The Foundation Board are all volunteers and do not get paid; limited bandwidth in human capital
The efforts of the foundation increase awareness of people with disabilities	Name change brings confusion and lack of consistent recognition for foundation	Educating the public on disabilities and accessibility through timely public panels and conferences	Lack of donor funding; economic uncertainty and donor hesitancy
#1 provider for individuals with disabilities in the Charleston area	100% volunteers	Email marketing to attract donors in order to increase revenue	Larger, more sophisticated peer organizations in the non-profit space
Established Avondale 5k brings significant attention to foundation	Lacking strong donor and volunteer network connections within the area	Establish an elevator pitch/brand story to increase identity and awareness	Non-profit workforce shortage crisis
Opportunity for growth within brand refresh	Multi-step approval process; hierarchy to move through before action	Online storytelling promotes emotional desire to get involved	Rapidly changing fundraising tactics
Impactful community involvement	Lack of alignment in mission and values	Expand community reach through additional service opportunities	Social stigma and societal lack of disability education and awareness
Participates with other organizations on national level (National Autism Day Campaign)	Solely relies on donations and state funding	Diversity in types of events hosted	Future funding cuts
Supported by government funding	Unclear brand connections to the DBCC	The population growth in Charleston County	Increase in assistive technology prices



# SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS



As mentioned, after a year of operation, The Disabilities Foundation of Charleston County underwent a name change to The Able Life Foundation, but after three years, changed back to The Dis**ABILITIES** Foundation of Charleston County. While these changes are understandable on the surface, the foundation is experiencing some of the challenges that accompany inconsistent branding, namely lack of awareness and public recognition. There is an opportunity to solidify brand identity and become a more recognizable organization within and among the communities they serve. More specifically, there are great possibilities to increase **brand awareness** and **organizational support through a stronger online presence**, namely strategic social media messaging, website updates, and even push communication like newsletters or blogs.

More broadly, The Dis**ABILITIES** Foundation is in a prime position to actively seek **community support** through increased online engagement and donations. Since the foundation is the **number one provider** for people with disabilities in the Charleston area, it also has the opportunity to capitalize on **local media coverage** and **business partnerships**. In short, the agency has uncovered an organizational situation that is ripe with opportunity.



# DISABILITY AWARENESS & ETIQUETTE

Individuals who have disabilities have largely been marginalized due to **negative stigmas and barriers to inclusion** in all aspects of life. The perpetuation of negative stereotypes has led to the harmful **isolation** of individuals with disabilities from society. **Ignorance** is a large reason for the marginalization of persons with disabilities which is why educating and raising awareness about disabilities and people who live with them is important (Ryan, 2023).

Recognizing the critical need for education and training, agency associates attended the **Disability Etiquette & Awareness Panel** at the College of Charleston with Accessibility Expert, Nadine Vogel, and several panelists. While we learned a lot from the discussion, we focused on takeaways that aligned with **respect for the disabled community, etiquette in communication with and for the disabled community, and creating inclusive environments**. The information we learned was incredibly insightful and necessary to the communication efforts we will be designing for the foundation.

Something that was stressed by the panel was the importance of **treating everyone as an individual and not a stereotype**. People with disabilities are often seen as an inferior and vulnerable population that needs to be protected and helped. While it is true that individuals with disabilities are victimized at an alarming rate and some do need to be protected, **they do not deserve to be treated as if they are wounded, or a child**. Of course, we also learned valuable information about using **person-first language** and how to interact with people who have disabilities in a way that makes them feel comfortable, safe, and respected. **This panel will go a long way in understanding how to best represent and advocate for individuals with disabilities.**



# AWARENESS RAISING CAMPAIGNS

Strong, well-targeted awareness-raising campaigns are needed to change the way we see individuals with disabilities. (Ryan, 2023).

**Our research suggests that strong awareness campaigns focused on disabilities awareness and support include:**

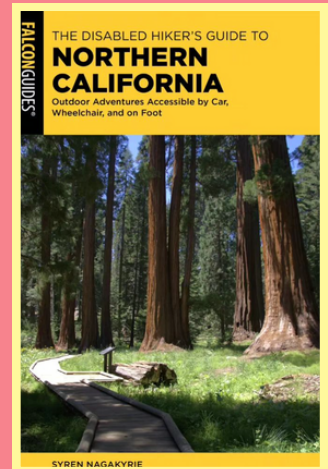
- Key stakeholders (individuals w. disabilities, their families, teachers) in developing strategies
- Diversify campaign materials (video, photos, social media, traditional media, posters, activities, testimonies, etc.)
- Involve individuals who have a disability and other stakeholders in co-creating
- Quality of content & design
- Involvement of people who have disabilities - **“nothing about us without us”**
- Desire to make a positive change to/in society



# AWARENESS RAISING CAMPAIGNS

Several disability awareness and support campaigns have been recognized for their efforts and impact. Here are three examples:

**Disabled Hikers** is a disability-led organization that celebrates disabled experiences in the great outdoors. The nonprofit facilitates group hikes and events while advocating for justice, access, and inclusion when partnering with National Parks. The organization's website provides resources for accessible programs, amplifies disabled outdoor voices, and aims to create systemic change in the outdoor industry. Disabled Hiker's campaign involves individuals who have disabilities in co-creating and diversifying campaign materials (Disabled Hikers).



## TOUCH CARD

Winner in **DISABILITY AWARENESS**

**Shorty Awards** is an annual awards show that acknowledges the best social media campaigns. There is an award that recognizes campaigns that make profound and positive differences in the lives of people with disabilities, both visible and invisible, that substantially limit one or more major life activities. The winner, Touch Card, enables blind or partially sighted people to tell, at a touch, what card they are holding, making the everyday act of payment simpler, more intuitive, and more inclusive (The Shorty Awards).

The **NOD (National Organization of Disabilities)** created 'Look Closer' a campaign that aims to increase employment opportunities for people with disabilities. The videos aim to challenge stereotypes and misconceptions about people with disabilities and promote their inclusion in the workforce. They describe what companies look for in ideal applicants then ask "Sound like Someone with a Disability? It Should." The organization's programs and services enable companies to realize the competitive advantages of hiring people with disabilities (National Organization on Disability, 2020).

**IDEAL APPLICANTS WILL BE:  
PASSIONATE STRIVERS  
HUNGRY TO UPEND OLD  
PRECONCEPTIONS.**



# CONSIDERATIONS FOR REBRANDING

Many of the communication opportunities for the foundation surround brand Identity and brand communication. It is worth noting that 93% of nonprofits believe that creating a strong brand identity can increase donor engagement, something that is crucial for nonprofits to continue to spread their mission within a community (Erikson, 2022). Additionally, 74% of nonprofits say that a strong brand identity leads to an increase in recurring donations and 79% believe that professional and concise branding increases donations during fundraising events (Erikson, 2022). Nonprofits that use professional branding to enhance visuals online and on social media experience a 50% increase in revenue compared to those who don't invest in it (Erikson, 2022).

There are a handful of organizations and nonprofit organizations whose main goal is to serve individuals with special needs and disabilities. One of the top organizations, Best Buddies International, is known for its mission of ending the isolation of individuals with disabilities and is recognized by its international logo. The logo for a brand is so powerful and influential that it does have a huge impact on the organization itself. 75% of people recognize a brand by its logo and 93% of the audience's first impression is focused on the look and logo of the certain organization (Erikson, 2022).

**Key elements of a successful rebrand for any company or organization include:**

- Consistent messaging
- Memorable visuals
- Clear and concise vision or values statement.

While strong rebranding efforts can help a nonprofit expand its reach, increase revenue and/or donations, and sustain the organization well into the future, it is crucial not to alienate the origins and history of the organization.



# MEDIA AND PARTNERSHIPS

## DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT OPPORTUNITIES

Non-profit organizations have begun to step up as digital leaders in the marketing space. According to the 2022 State of Nonprofit Digital Engagement Report, 65% of the engagement that nonprofits have with members and donors is digital whereas business to consumer companies engagement is around 55% (NTEN, 2022). Digital engagement is essential when it comes to enhancing a nonprofit organization's effectiveness. 89% of nonprofits that participated in the State of Nonprofit Digital Engagement Report said digital communications are critical to achieving their mission (NTEN, 2022). The use of digital communication has a great potential to impact nonprofit organizations given the number of people on earth who have access to mobile devices. The Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) is a nonprofit organization that has been very successful in using digital systems and personalized communication. Digital communication has allowed the organization to scale faster and in turn, generate more success. User-friendly website design, personalized communication via email, content marketing, and blogging are all digital tools that can positively impact a nonprofit organization.

## THE POWER OF MEDIA COVERAGE

Nonprofit organizations often do not have the funds to produce high-quality advertisements. Since this is the case for so many organizations understanding the power of media coverage is crucial. In the foundation's situation, earned media has the potential to be a real asset in growing recognition, reaching a wider audience, and sharing the mission of the foundation. Earned media is content that a third party publishes without any form of payment. By having media sources such as newspapers and magazines cover the events the foundation hosts or write a piece on a family that the foundation works closely with, the name of the organization will become more familiar to people in the Charleston area. An article from the University of Southern California Annenberg School of Communication and Journalism provided a few suggestions as to how to get news coverage for your business. The first suggestion is to have a newsworthy story. This story can be an event, a milestone, or a new service. Another suggestion is to keep a contact list of local news reporters and journalists. Being able to contact local news providers will help your chance of snagging a mention in their latest piece. Media coverage is a powerful tool to grow an organization.

## NONPROFIT-CORPORATE PARTNERSHIPS

A partnership between a nonprofit and a for-profit allows for long-lasting change, a pooling of resources, and building credibility. A nonprofit-corporate partnership can take shape in a few different ways. One model of partnership is cause marketing. The cause marketing model is when a for-profit promotes sales by explaining that a portion or all of the sale goes to the nonprofit. A for-profit has the chance to take social responsibility while the nonprofit financially benefits. Another model of partnership is corporate sponsorships. A common corporate sponsorship example is when a for-profit company's logo or name is on materials for the event. This model of partnership creates brand recognition for the company and funding for the nonprofit.

# SOCIAL MEDIA TRENDS

A recent survey concluded by Pew Research Center surveyed 1,502 U.S. adults from Jan. 25 to Feb. 8, 2021, by cellphone and landline phone. The survey was conducted by interviewers under the direction of Abt Associates and is weighted to be representative of the U.S. adult population by gender, race, ethnicity, education, and other categories. concluded the following; 47% of 30-49 use Instagram, and 23% of 50-64-year-olds use Instagram. The second most popular social media for our target demographic of ages 30-70 is Facebook. The study found 79% of 30-49 year olds use Facebook and 68% of 50- 64 year olds also use it. These were consistently the top 2 forms of social media among our target demographics. Facebook continues to be recognized as the largest social media platform worldwide, with approximately 2.9 billion users since January 2022. Nearly two out of every three of the 4.89 billion social media users worldwide are active users of Facebook. Facebook is the platform where the foundation should market to target the correct target audience.

## Social Media Trends

**Demographic gets updated on brands events with photos, videos and storytelling**

**Users engage more frequently with short-form videos**

**Facebook is the most used site in the U.S, followed by Instagram and TikTok**

**Link to website on social media pages**

## Motivations for Social Media

**Reach a larger demographic**

**Develop visibility for individuals with IDD's**

**Increase traffic to the website, events, and donation pages**

**Display organization mission across multiple platforms**

# NONPROFIT COMMUNICATION TOOLS

Lexis Nexis found many trends in 2023 for nonprofit professionals. Email marketing results in 1/3 of online donation revenue and organizations that use email marketing are 6 times more likely to get click-through than if they used Twitter. Lexis Nexis also found that younger generation donors are driven to donate to causes focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion. Younger donors are 4x as likely to learn about causes from influencers and celebrities and are 1.5x more likely to become aware of organizations through coworkers.

# MARKET ANALYSIS



The DisABILITIES Foundation of Charleston County is a nonprofit organization that operates for purposes other than generating a profit for its owners or stakeholders. Instead, it is a nonprofit dedicated to serving a specific mission, cause, or community need. Generally, the primary goals of nonprofit organizations are to make a positive impact on society or the environment, and any surplus revenue generated is reinvested into the organization's mission rather than distributed to individuals or shareholders. The DisABILITIES Foundation is currently the number one provider in Charleston County. This organization is known for the one-on-one services and support for children and adults with special needs through the South Carolina Department of Disabilities and Special Needs. The primary target audiences for the foundation are families and caregivers who care for an individual with a disability. Another important audience for the foundation is donors, those who give their resources of money, time, and talent to support the organization's efforts. Understanding these audiences as well as the work of aspirational peer organizations, enhances our ability as the agency of record, to design, craft, and implement a communication effort that advances the organization's mission.



# STAKEHOLDER ANALYSIS

## Stakeholder Audience

As mentioned, a primary stakeholder audience for the foundation is families and caregivers who either work with or care for an individual who has a disability. Demographics on people with disabilities in South Carolina vary. An article from the CDC writes that over 1,160,293 adults in South Carolina have a disability. This statistic is equal to 29% or about 1 in 3 adults in South Carolina. The South Carolina Statehouse came out with an article stating, that according to the 2018 Child Count, there are 9,792 children with disabilities aged 3 through 5. It is important for The DisABILITIES Foundation of Charleston County to target specific audiences to increase donor relations and expand their network of like-minded individuals.

A study in the Journal of Family Medicine and Primary Care assessed the demographic of caregivers for those with disabilities. 97% of caregivers were women and 82% were mothers of children with disabilities. Even with some state funding, additional resources are very important to the care of the child.

This will set them up for success having the people and funds to continue to expand. In order to reach fiscal goals, the organization will need to target a more diverse audience including volunteers, corporate sponsors, donors, and the general public.

Generationally, there is a gap between age groups and their giving trends. Charitable giving statistics from nonprofitsource.com list these demographics. 84% of millennials, 72% of baby boomers, and 88% of greatest gen give to charity. Generation X are more likely to make pledges, volunteer their time or fundraise on behalf of a cause. These are insightful statistics to gain knowledge of who is willing to donate.

## Breakdown of the Foundation and Volunteers

There are between 8-25 per Bylaws Board members who are all volunteers and an executive Director who is the director of the Disabilities Board of Charleston County, which is a paid staff position. This foundation receives only a small amount of administrative support from a fiscal/ accountant manager of the DBCC and another staff member who provides little type of administrative support.





# STAKEHOLDER DONOR STATISTICS

Donation revenue and interest in philanthropy continue to grow across the board, but it's still essential that nonprofits prepare to adapt their strategies to shifting demographic preferences. Pursuing diverse engagement methods that include events and volunteer opportunities continues to be a smart move. Boosting donor retention across both online and traditional donation methods should always be a priority.

Americans gave \$499.33 billion in 2022. This reflects a 3.4% decline from 2021.

Corporate giving in 2022 increased to \$21.08 billion—a 3.4% increase from 2021.

Foundation giving in 2022 increased to \$105.21 billion—a 2.5% increase from 2021.

Giving by bequest in 2022 was \$45.60 billion—a 2.3% increase from 2021.

In 2022, the largest source of charitable giving came from individuals, who gave \$319.04 billion, representing 64% of total giving.

In 2022, the majority of charitable dollars went to religion (27%), human services (14%), education (13%), grantmaking foundations (11%) and health (10%).

# PEER ORGANIZATIONS



In addition to its brand identity, Best Buddies is known for its pathos, touching stories shared across its digital platforms including a beautiful website. Their storytelling approach shares real individuals whose stories move the audience to action.

**"MY SOCIAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS, ESTABLISH CLOSE FRIENDSHIPS, ATTEND MANY FUN EVENTS, AND FIND A JOB I LOVE. I AM VERY THANKFUL FOR THE OPPORTUNITIES AND SUPPORT BEST BUDDIES HAS GIVEN ME SINCE JOINING."**



The Arc is known for using a little bit of pathos as well. Showing pictures that catch the eye of the people. Their approach/strategy is "Promoting and protecting the human rights of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities and actively supporting their full inclusion and participation in the community throughout their lifetimes.



Friends of Disabled Adults & Children (FODAC) provides "refurbished equipment and services for adults and children with disabilities to improve their overall quality of life". Their approach is to help people go through their daily lives way easier if they have a disability. They throw in people's stories to bring out our emotional side and prove that what they are doing helps.



# KEY RESEARCH INSIGHTS



1

## **Branding**

Branding is a key component that contributes to the success of nonprofit organizations. A brand must contain consistent messaging, a brand vision, value statements, as well as memorable visuals. According to Mallory Erukson, nonprofits that use professional branding to enhance their online and social media presence experienced a 50% increase in revenue compared to those who don't (Erikson, 2022). A brand's logo and image are very important in terms of first impression, recognition, and retention. 75% of people recognize a brand by its logo and 93% of the audience's first impression is directly impacted by the logo.

2

## **Social Media**

Connecting with your audience through online and social media platforms is highly relevant when it comes to growing and maintaining a brand's audience. Email marketing contributes to one-third of online donation revenue. Secondly, organizations that utilize consistent email marketing are six times more likely to get click-throughs than if they used Twitter. Facebook and Instagram are dominant platforms within the nonprofit sector. According to Lexis Nexis, 79% of people ages 30 to 49 and 68% of people ages 50 to 64 use Facebook. 47% of people ages 30 to 49 and 23% of people ages 50 to 64 use Instagram.

3

## **Disability Awareness**

As a part of the DisABILITIES Foundation's mission, raising awareness about disability is incredibly important. In order to do so we must take to heart the idea of "nothing about us without us" and involve individuals with disabilities in co-creating content and campaigns - all while diversifying our campaign materials.



# CAMPAIGN TAKEAWAYS

Moving forward, there are several preliminary steps to have a successful campaign and increase brand awareness.

## BRAND REFRESH

- New website design
  - New logo
  - New domain
  - Personal testimonies
- Clear mission statement
- Elevator pitch

## ESTABLISH MEDIA PRESENCE

- Update Facebook page
- Make Instagram Page
- LinkedIn
- Make content & schedule
- Reach out to local news sources with pitches

## INCREASE DONOR NETWORK

- Email marketing
- Expand contact list
- Target correct audience
- Gala and other events

## IMPROVE RESIDENTIAL PROPERTIES

- Campaign to fundraise for more residential properties
- Assistive technology
- Personal testimonies, compelling emotional stories

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