

How the ways people describe your organization may affect your fundraising strategies



# Up for Review

BY ANDREW WATT, FINSTF

If you conducted a survey of your organization's leaders, volunteers and donors, what words do you think they would use to describe the positive qualities of your organization? Perhaps, you may hope, terms such as "accountable," "effective" and "ethical" would be among those used most frequently. At the same time, what would the people involved with your organization change to make it better?

Since 2007, GreatNonprofits ([www.greatnonprofits.org](http://www.greatnonprofits.org)) has provided a forum where volunteers, donors and people served by charitable organizations can tell their stories and describe their experiences with various nonprofits (see sidebar). GreatNonprofits helps inform prospective donors and volunteers, and assists them in differentiating among nonprofits, finding ones they trust and being more confident in giving or signing up to volunteer. At the same time, the site



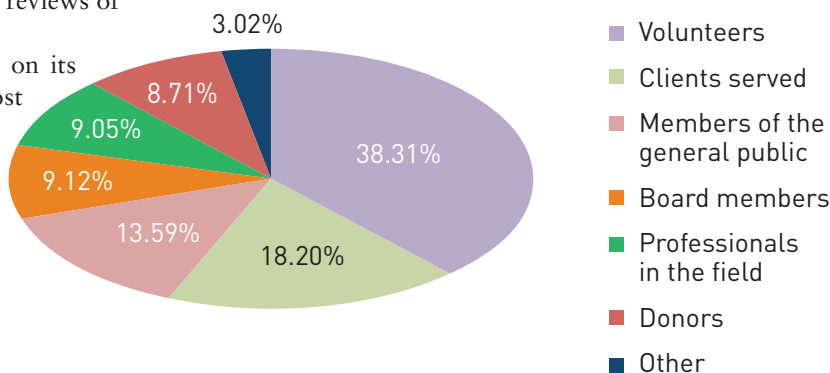
promotes greater nonprofit excellence through feedback and transparency. (There are now more than 80,000 reviews of nearly 10,000 nonprofits.)

GreatNonprofits decided to analyze reviews on its website in order to identify the words used most frequently in comments about charitable organizations and to better understand the attributes of nonprofits that are most important to the people who work with and benefit from them. The results—surprising, to say the least—have interesting implications for fundraisers.

### From the Heart

In early summer 2010, Nguyen (Tinu) A. Ngo, a psychology major at Stanford University in Palo Alto, Calif., analyzed 38,058 reviews from GreatNonprofits. In the reviews, people are able to give nonprofits in various sectors an average rating (5 for best to 1 for worst) and check how they are involved

**Figure 1. Reviewers**



with the organization: volunteer, client served, professional with field expertise, general member of the public, domain expert, board member, donor, former staff, former volunteer and adviser.

## Hearing the Voices of People Directly Involved With Nonprofits

BY PERLA NI

When Hurricane Katrina hit, I was the publisher of the *Stanford Social Innovation Review* ([www.ssireview.org](http://www.ssireview.org)), and we started looking into how nonprofits were helping the victims. Even though we had access to far more information than the ordinary donor or volunteer, we found it difficult to find out exactly which nonprofits were doing a good job of helping those in need.

We actually started to get a clearer understanding of which nonprofits were rising to the challenge when our former managing editor, David Weir, flew out to Biloxi, Miss., and walked up and down the streets, asking people which nonprofits had been out there helping them. The locals told him about several excellent small local nonprofits that provided supplies and help. One survivor suffering from a broken hand and severe emotional stress had been living in his car until volunteers from a nonprofit found him and took him to a doctor. The organization in that case was unknown to the larger world and received little public attention or funding.

I've gotten to know a lot of nonprofits and most of them are honest and hardworking. And some of them do darned great work. I've known nonprofits personally as a client of their services. My family had \$100 when we immigrated, and countless nonprofits helped us. When I was a kid, practically everything I wore came second hand from nonprofits. My cavities got filled

for free at a nonprofit community dental clinic. I know how much the help of a nonprofit can mean.

As I searched professionally to find great nonprofits for our magazine to write about, it struck me that there needed to be an online *Zagat*, if you will, for nonprofits that would collect stories and reviews from people—people like me, the victims of Katrina and hundreds of thousands of others—who have seen the impact of nonprofits up close and can speak personally and firsthand about it.

GreatNonprofits allows people to find, review and share information about admirable—and maybe not yet admirable—nonprofits. The reviews are written by people who have volunteered or donated to nonprofits or have benefited from their services.

The review methodology takes into account the diversity of the nonprofit sector, from the smallest grassroots groups operating on the local level to large regional, national and international organizations. The site was beta tested and launched with the Greater Pittsburgh Nonprofit Partnership and its 300 nonprofit members. Currently, users can rate more than 1.2 million nonprofits directly on the website or, via syndication, on partner sites such as GuideStar, Charity Navigator and GlobalGiving.

The resulting reviews show the vivid, human impact of the work of a nonprofit. They help potential supporters see nonprofits' work in a deep and personal way.

*Perla Ni is CEO of GreatNonprofits ([www.greatnonprofits.org](http://www.greatnonprofits.org)).*



## Terminology



In the reviews analyzed, most responses came from volunteers, clients served and members of the general public, and a vast majority of the reviews had high ratings (see Figures 1 and 2).

What did reviewers like so much about the organizations? The staff. The care. The love they felt. Surprised? Rather than focusing on the bottom line and using more business-like terms, the various reviewer groups—whether clients served by the organization, volunteers or professionals in the field—used more emotional terms, such as “helpful,” “caring,” “great,” “kind,” “friendly,” “passionate” and “dedicated” most often.

To illustrate, consider the following review, which was written on June 4, 2011, by a professional with expertise in this field who has helped with events and donated money: “What an amazing NPO. Their programs are state of the art and completely innovative. The staff is extremely knowledgeable and very motivated. They have built great affiliations with other reputable NPOs across the nation, and they have grown exponentially within the past year. Great job, guys, keep it up. Our kids and this community need organizations such as yours in order to make a difference. Looking forward to following up and continuing to donate.”

### GreatNonprofits—Did You Know?

- More than 1.2 million nonprofits are available to be reviewed and rated.
- Nonprofits can ask their clients, volunteers, board members and donors to write a candid review about them.
- Nonprofits can send out an e-mail to their reviews page link on GreatNonprofits, or post it to Facebook or Twitter.
- Reviews that are written are syndicated and shared on GreatNonprofits.org, GuideStar, Pittsburghgives.org, Charity Navigator, GlobalGiving and soon on several other online sites.
- Supporters can easily share reviews on Facebook and Twitter.
- Nonprofits can comment on any review written about them.


Another reviewer, who is a general member of the public and works in accounting, had this to say about an organization on March 5, 2011: “Meals on Wheels does so much more than provide hot meals. Their compassion for people (and their pets) is endless. Totally selfless in their mission to provide assistance in our community.” No mention of cost of fundraising or ROI.

At the same time, some groups of reviewers used words more frequently than other groups did. Volunteers used more words that reflected the work of particular organizations and the people who benefit: “people,” “children,” “community,” “women,” “students,” “families,” etc. Board members mentioned “services,” “results” and “efforts” more than other groups. (See Figures 3–7.)

So what does this mean for fundraisers? Know what your supporters’ “hot buttons” are. The people who love your organization not only admire the wonderful work you do but also appreciate the staff and others involved who make the programs possible.

Equally important, these passionate supporters wish they could do more and know all too well that more funding would make your organization even better.

When asked, “If I had to make changes to this organization, I would ...” the various reviewer groups agreed that more “funding,” “money,” “funds,” “resources,” “support” and “donations” would improve the financial situation and make an organization more effective. (See Figure 8, on page 47, and Figure 9.) Reviewers wrote they would “give it millions of dollars” if they could and “expand it so that even more people could benefit from it.”

This is good news for fundraisers. Donors are giving not only funds but also their time for causes that touch them and the people they know in the community. They are ready to help. All you have to do is ask. 

*Andrew Watt, FInstF, is president and CEO of AFP. Jacklyn P. Boice contributed to this article.*

Figure 2. Ratings

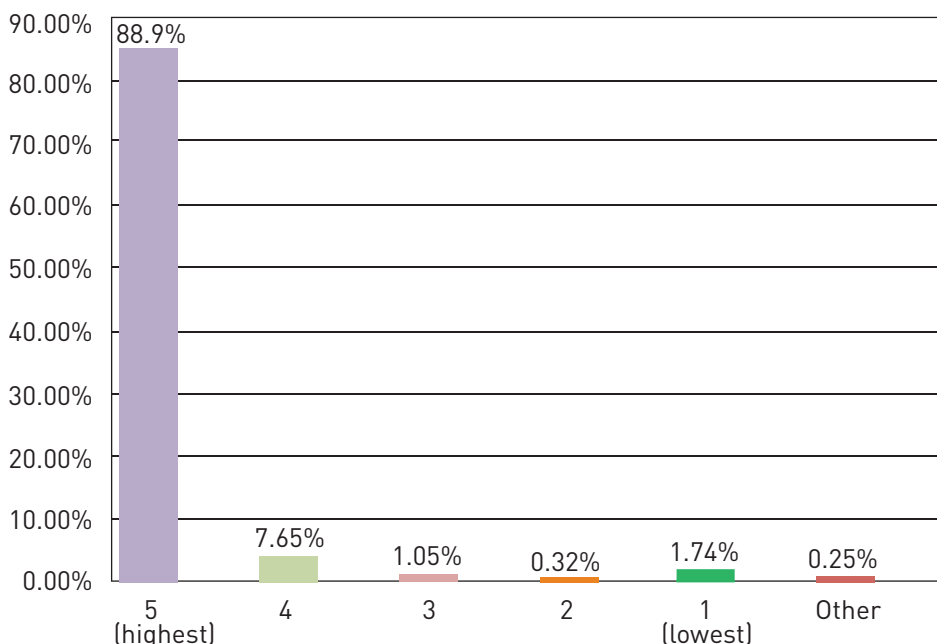


Figure 3. Great Things About the Organization

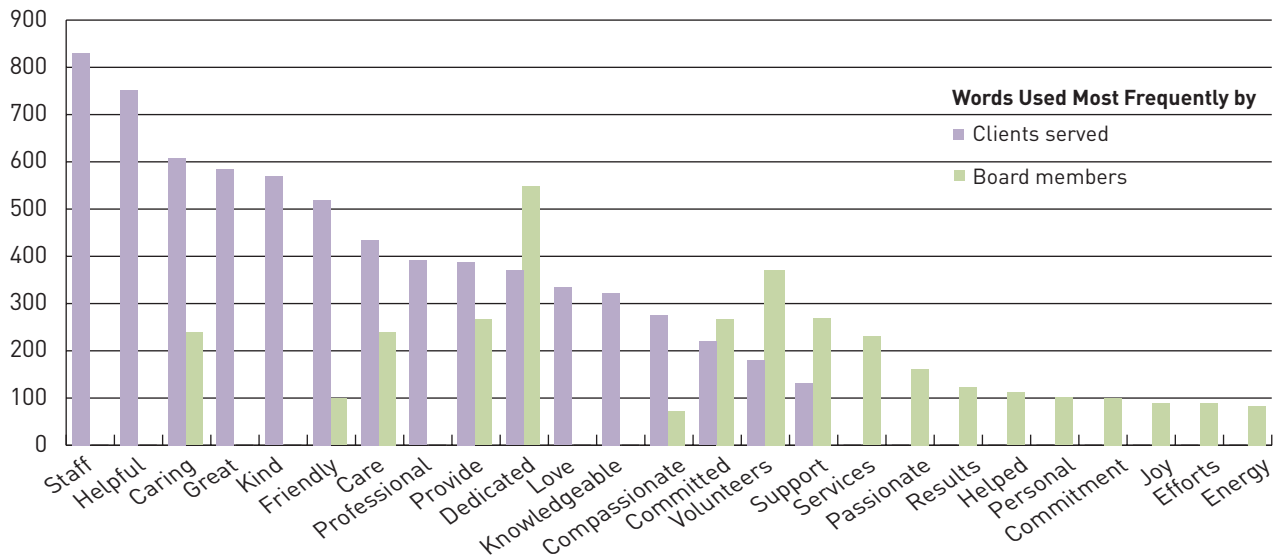


Figure 4. Great Things About the Organization

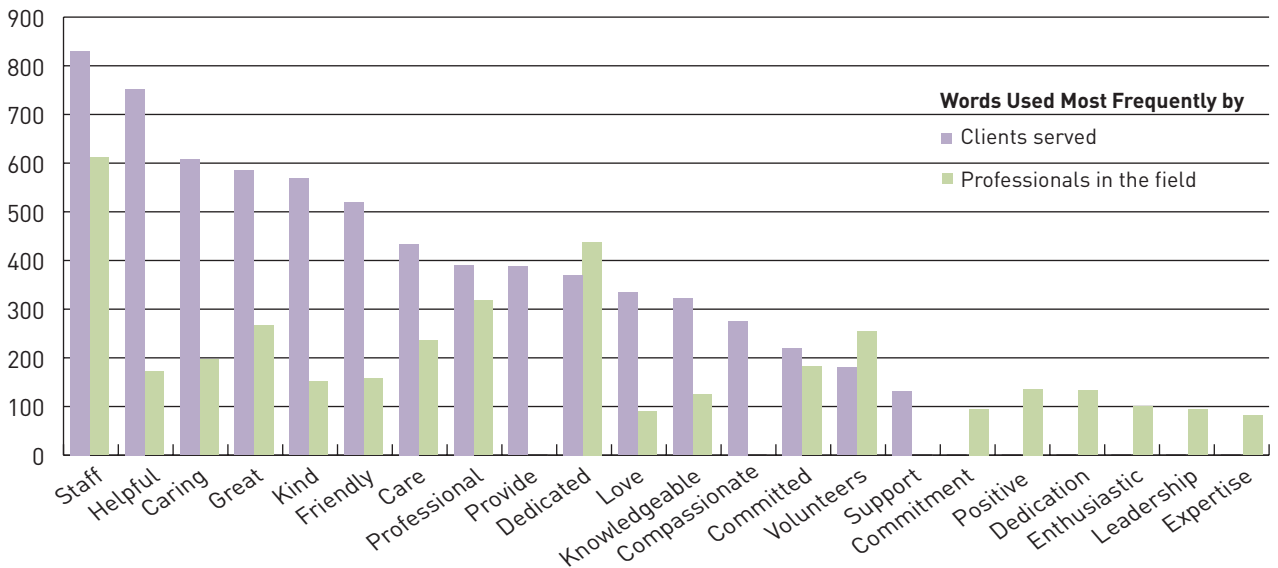


Figure 5. Great Things About the Organization

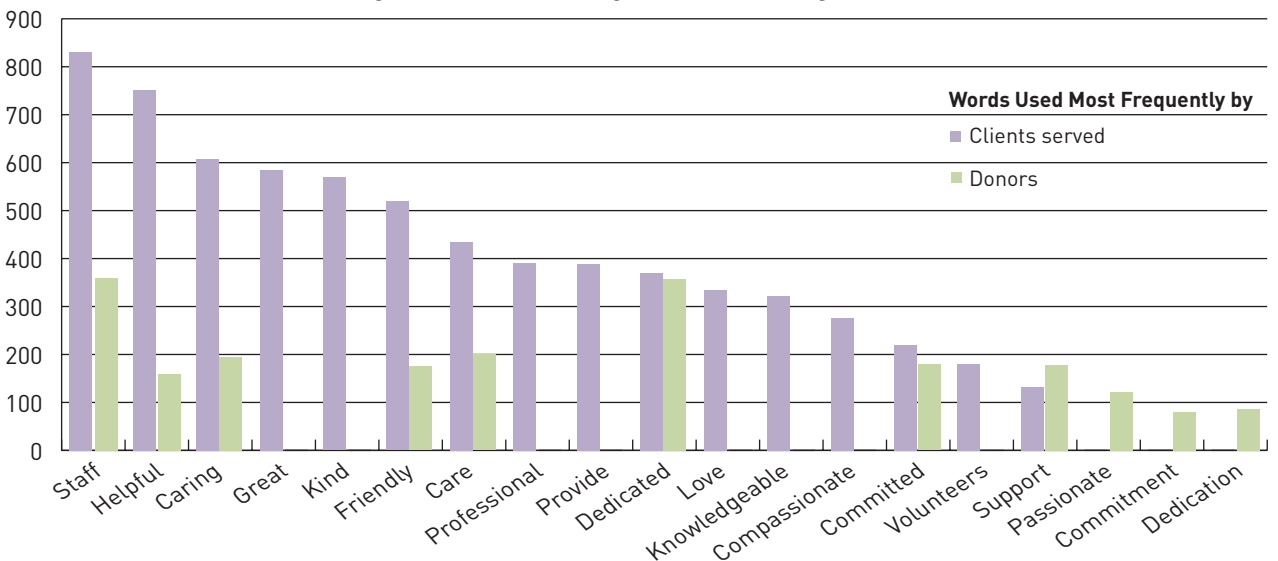


Figure 6. Great Things About the Organization

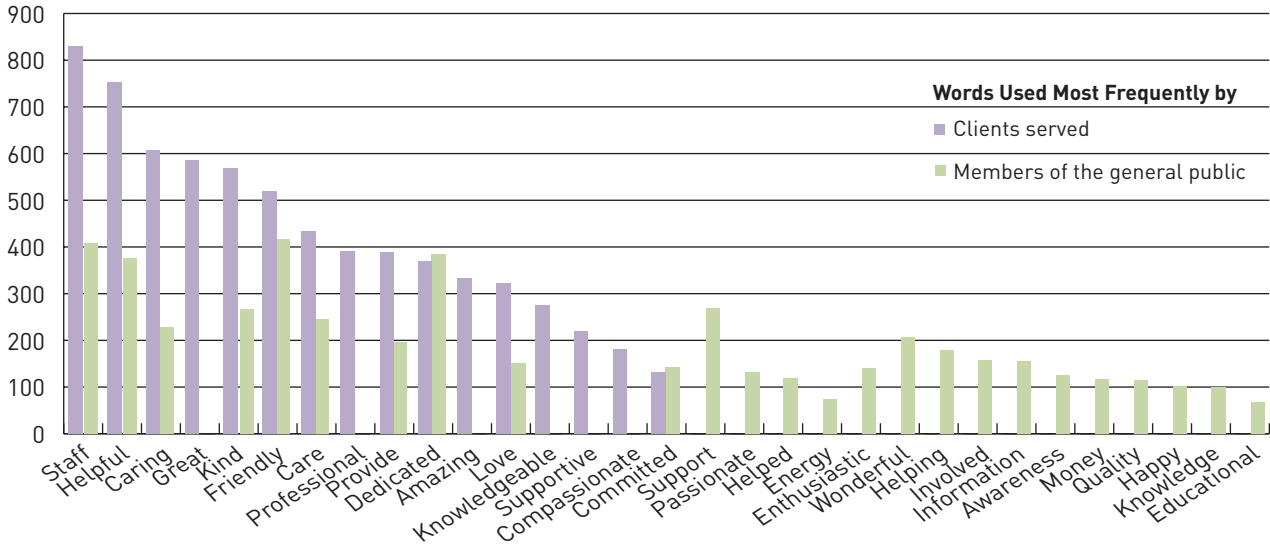


Figure 7. Great Things About the Organization

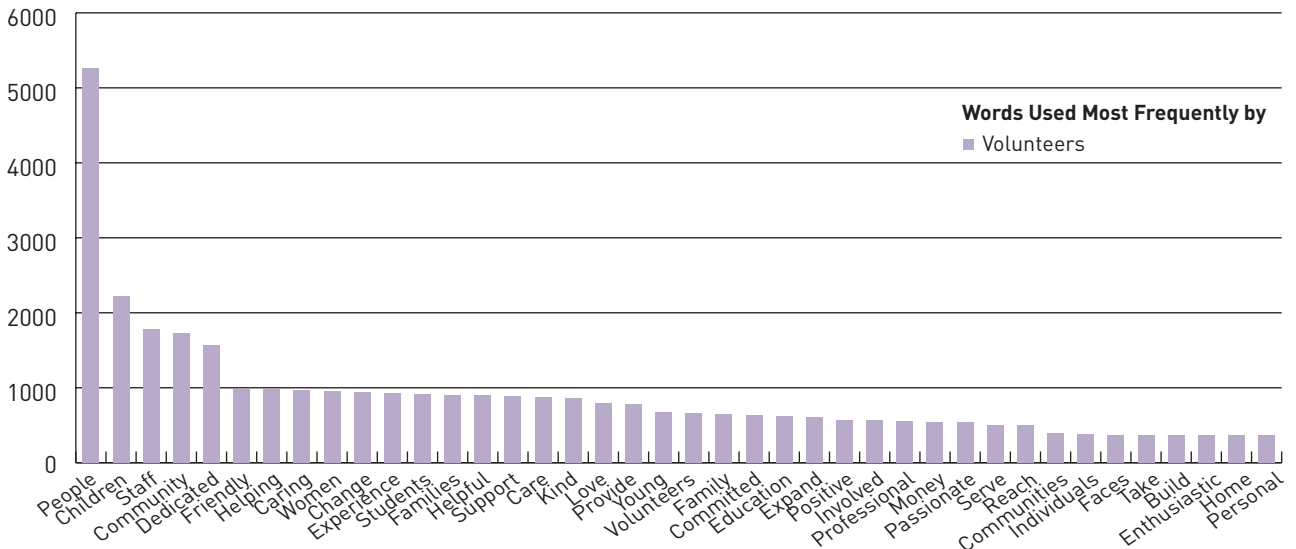
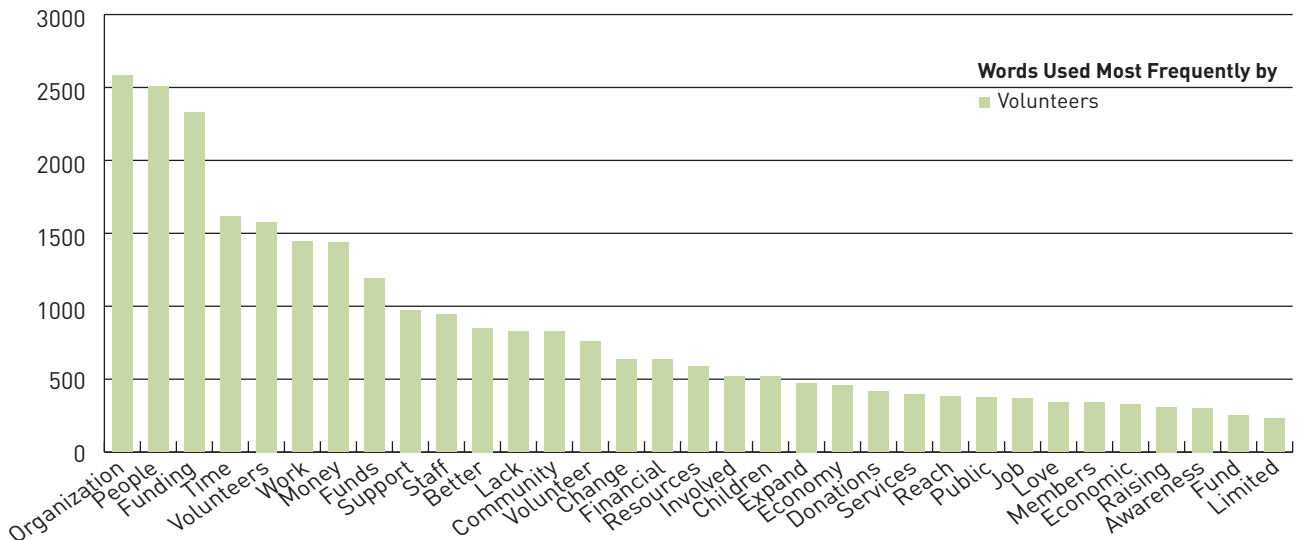


Figure 9. Ways to Make the Organization Better



**Figure 8. Ways to Make the Organization Better**

