

# The Power of Effective Communications

by Ezra Milchman and Maria Elena Campisteguy

The average 6-year old in the United States is exposed to 30,000 advertisements per year. As a result, most children can recognize 1,000 corporate logos but cannot identify 10 plants or animals native to their own region.<sup>1</sup> They can recite advertising jingles and the menu at their favorite fast food restaurant, but few can name a nearby farm that brings food to their local community.

Corporate America has become a master of marketing and messaging, effectively leveraging communications to build customer loyalty to their corporate brand and products.

If the land conservation community is to achieve its mission, we too must become masters at leveraging communications to engage more people in our work. This will require a change in the way we communicate about land conservation. Typically, as land trusts, we talk about the “what” and “how” of the deal. We talk in code among ourselves about easements and fee land, acres protected, and dollars leveraged. But our messages would be more powerful and engage more of the general public if we focused instead on *who* benefits from our work, and *why* a neighborhood, a state, our country and even the world is a better place as a result of what we do.

In addition to emphasizing the “who” and the “why” over the “what” and the “how,” we also would benefit from telling a fuller story about the reality of our land protection work. A typical land trust newsletter is filled with stories about places saved, but how often do we hear the tale of the project that got away? While promoting our success on the land is important, we should also consider the value of more candidly discussing our losses. Here we have an opportunity to show people how each loss eats away at what they value in their community, and galvanize their action to prevent additional losses.

These ideas are not entirely new to the land trust movement. Many organizations, having already proven themselves to be great dealmakers, are now focusing on becoming

expert communicators.

When eight local land conservancies in Ohio made the decision to merge into one, the new organization, Western Reserve Land Conservancy, had to tackle complex communications and branding challenges. Rich Cochran, the new president and CEO of Western Reserve, and his colleagues made the decision to approach communications from the perspective of their customer. “We realized that most land trusts portray the customer as nature. Our mission is about land. But our work is about people,” says Cochran.



Teton Regional Land Trust

As a result, the logo for the new organization reflects this major communications shift. It shows eight human figures coming together in a circular partnership, which evokes a sun or a flower.

**THE TETON REGIONAL LAND TRUST in Idaho learned the power of storytelling through its “Stories of the Land” gatherings.**

This past year, the Land Trust Alliance teamed up with Metropolitan Group, a national strategic communications firm, to undertake an extensive review of our own communications program. A number of exciting changes resulted from this period of intense introspection.

**Mission:** The board took a close look at our reason for existence and ultimately adopted a new mission statement

that better marries what we do with the ultimate purpose of our work. The newly worded mission statement for the Land Trust Alliance is “to save the places people love by strengthening land conservation across America.”

**Tagline:** Our new mission statement is reinforced by a new tagline: “Together, conserving the places you love.” This tagline better evokes an Alliance that is the sum of its member organizations, supporters and partners, all working together to advance a shared vision.

**Name:** Many people interviewed said that the acronym “LTA” is void of meaning and emotion, while the words “land,” “trust” and “alliance” are powerful. To connect with more people, we have made the decision to evolve away from “LTA,” and instead use our full name “Land Trust Alliance,” or “the Alliance” for short. We hope you will join us in reinforcing this change.

Metropolitan Group also worked with us and a small cross section of the land trust community on an evolved set of core messages that underscore the importance of private land conservation to everyday life. The messages were purposely created to mesh with local land trust stories and images that convey the beneficial impacts of conserved land on people. The message language is simple, clear, and free of jargon and acronyms—not as an effort to “water down” our work—but rather to present it in a way that non-land trust professionals can understand us and be moved to action. By transitioning to this type of communications platform, we aim to increase and diversify the community that actively supports and engages in the work of land trusts.

The first communication piece produced with the new message platform is a Philosophy Statement for private land conservation. The piece is intended for an expanded audience that includes all people concerned with clean air and water, locally grown food, recreation, and places to explore. The Philosophy Statement begins by explaining why the air we breathe, water we drink, and food we eat depends on land protection, then describes how traditional patterns of land development are destroying the places we need and value, and concludes with a call to support land trusts in order to turn the tide on the critical loss of land in America.

When she first saw the Philosophy Statement (which can be found at [www.lta.org/newsroom/alliance\\_philosophy.pdf](http://www.lta.org/newsroom/alliance_philosophy.pdf)), Margie Latta of Mesa Land Trust in Grand Junction, Colorado, said: “Wow! The pictures, sayings, and stories were very powerful. You’ve captured so much of the importance of what we do and why we do it. I love the new approach and think it *will* grab those that we may not have reached before. Who can argue with saving beautiful places forever? Thank you for continuing to raise the bar and for making the land trust movement more powerful every day!” You are invited to contact the Land Trust Alliance to request free hard copies of the Philosophy Statement to review, com-

ment on, and use as you see fit.

And if you are one of the many land trusts that is already using communications successfully to broaden your base beyond “the choir,” we hope you will use the Land Trust Alliance as a vehicle for sharing your winning strategies with the larger land conservation community. For example, the Vermont Land Trust has grown into one of the largest, most successful organizations in the country, in part by prioritizing communications to convey their impact on people and natural communities. Vermont Land Trust frequently communicates through storytelling, capturing how people’s daily life intersects with the organization’s land conservation program. Elise Annes, vice president for community relations, says that “at the Vermont Land Trust, we have found that by expressing our values and then relating local stories of land conservation, we have built relationships, created a better environment in which to do our work, and have had a greater impact on the future of Vermont communities.”

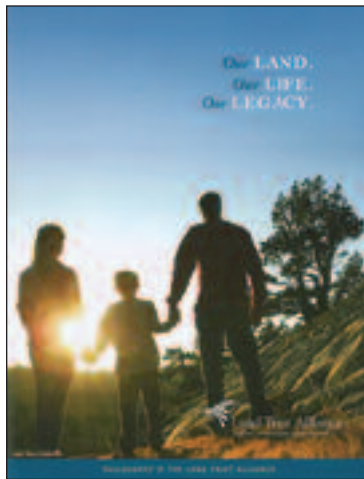
The Western Reserve Land Conservancy couldn’t agree more. They recently changed their vision statement so the words “in perpetuity” were changed to the more evocative “now and forever.” Adds Cochran, “We were always pretty aware of the importance of language and telling a story instead of just reporting. But now, 90 percent of our communications is storytelling.”

As the land conservation community increases its focus on communications, how might we all guide this work to produce the maximum return on investment? In 2004, The Nature Conservancy and The Trust for Public Land commissioned Public Opinion Strategies to test language used by the conservation community with a national cross-section of American voters. The survey produced compelling findings on how well particular words and phrases influenced support for land conservation (see a copy at [www.ltanet.org/objects/view.acs?object\\_id=14184](http://www.ltanet.org/objects/view.acs?object_id=14184)).

With some good information on language in hand, perhaps it is now time to develop a suite of best practices for putting the language to work for conservation. The *Land Trust Standards and Practices* Standard 1, Practice 1C: Outreach, recommends that:

□ The land trust communicates its mission, goals and/or programs to members, donors, landowners, the general public, community leaders, conservation organizations and others in its service area as appropriate to carry out its mission.

This practice emphasizes that a land trust must establish public support for its programs. Securing the permanent conservation of protected land will depend on the public’s support of the land trust’s conservation efforts. Land protection is accomplished within a social, political and legal framework that allows for nonprofit organizations, public funding, tax incentives and conservation easements. Ultimately, the law will govern whether land conservation projects withstand the test of time, and laws can be changed if the public





Charlie Rahm / NRCS

**EVERYONE NEEDS CLEAN WATER; it is a message that resonates throughout the world.**

does not support land conservation efforts. Therefore, a land trust should identify the community it serves and then develop mechanisms to build and maintain support for its programs.

Increasing the effectiveness of our communications is essential to strengthening public support for land conservation. But how is this best done? Building on the winning communications practices of individual land trusts, could we pull together the most universal communications truths and practices to help more land trusts successfully engage in this work? What would that universal guidance look like? Might it include such things as:

**1** Communications should focus less on the “what” and “how” and more on “who” was affected and “why” their life is improved.

**2** Communications should connect land conservation to people’s daily quality of life—clean air and water,


locally grown food, recreation, and places to explore.

**3** Communications should advance a positive, hopeful vision that together, we *can* turn the tide on the critical loss of land in America.

**4** Communications should engage and educate new and diverse audiences and dispel any reputation of exclusivity in the land trust community.

**5** Communications should express a sense of urgency about the need to conserve land, while also offering a clear call to action.

*What else?* We want to hear from you. What effective communications practices guide your work? How might the land trust community begin to create and use a collective set of universal practices and core messages that will widely resonate across this nation and motivate others to join us in the act of saving land? Send your feedback and ideas to: [communications@lta.org](mailto:communications@lta.org).

And thank you for being our partners in this journey. 

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#### ENDNOTE

- 1 From “Loving Children: A Design Problem,” by David Orr, professor and chair of the Environmental Studies Program at Oberlin College. [www.designshare.com/Research/Orr/Loving\\_Children.htm](http://www.designshare.com/Research/Orr/Loving_Children.htm).



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