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Analysis of NEDA's Website: Stewardship on Eating Disorder Nonprofits' Websites

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## ANALYSIS OF NEDA'S WEBSITE: DEPLOYING STEWARDSHIP STRATEGIES ON EATING DISORDER NONPROFIT'S WEBSITES

### **Abstract**

Kelly's (2001) stewardship model of public relations has proven effective for fostering ongoing organization-stakeholder relationships and has been of particular interest in the nonprofit sector. Effective manifestations of stewardship have been studied and explored in various contexts, including nonprofit websites. The purpose of this study is to detect how eating disorder nonprofits—particularly those whose missions are highly stakeholder-relationship focussed—can effectively deploy stewardship strategies on their websites. A case study of the National Eating Disorder Associations's website is presented.

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The success of a nonprofit organization often hinges on the relationships it has with donors and other stakeholders. Pressgrove (2017) says that in order to cultivate and maintain stakeholder relationships, many nonprofits rely on public relations (PR) strategies. Nonprofit PR practitioners have been increasingly adopting Kelly's PR model that includes a step called stewardship (2001). Scholars have found that stewardship strategies have a positive impact on nonprofit–donor relationships (Waters, 2009). Because of this, stewardship has recently been studied and explored in various contexts, including online. Research has found that nonprofit organizations can effectively demonstrate stewardship through the use of organizational websites (Pressgrove, McKeever, and Collins, 2015). Large categories of nonprofits have been studied to understand how they deploy stewardship strategies online. One nonprofit subtype that has not been studied in connection to stewardship yet is eating disorder (ED) nonprofits. This study

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inaugurates the body of research by focussing narrowly on effective manifestations of stewardship on ED nonprofit organizations' websites. A case study of the National Eating Disorder Association's website is presented here. A case study of how a leading ED nonprofit manifests stewardship on its website provides an excellent example of how other nonprofits of this type can most effectively exhibit stewardship on their websites. Utilizing websites to display stewardship can potentially strengthen these organizations' stakeholder relationships and improve organizational and PR goal-attainment.

### **Literature Review**

#### **Nonprofits and Public Relations**

As Pressgrove (2017) points out, the success of a nonprofit often hinges on its relationships with donors and other key stakeholders. Many scholars affirm this notion (e.g., Brinckerhoff, 2012; Waters, 2009). Ledingham & Bruning (1998) say that many scholars have recognized that PR can be an important organizational management function, because PR uses strategic communication to build mutually beneficial relationships between and organization and its key publics. Because relationships with stakeholders are vital to nonprofit success, PR functions are of interest to the nonprofit field. Pressgrove (2017) affirms this, saying that in order to cultivate and maintain stakeholder relationships, many nonprofits rely on PR strategies, which tend to be more cost-effective than traditional advertising campaigns (p. 103). For those in the nonprofit sector then, best practices in PR are often discussed. In the past two decades, the nonprofit field has been increasingly interested in a PR concept called stewardship.

#### **Stewardship**

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In 2001, Kelly introduced a concept called stewardship to PR. Implementing stewardship in PR programs is the way Kelly proposes practitioners can and should best manage ongoing relationships with key publics. In addition to the four steps often included in traditional models—typically a mix of research, programming, implementation, objectives, and evaluation—Kelly's model includes a fifth called stewardship (2001). Stewardship is about continually attending to the stakeholders who have previously established a connection with or shown support to an organization in the past and nurturing relationships with those publics in the future. Kelly (2001) points out that stewardship keeps dialogue and exchange with supportive stakeholders going.

Stewardship is comprised of four elements or distinct strategies: reciprocity, responsibility, reporting, and relationship nurturing (Kelly, 2001). Recently Pressgrove (2017) refined the definitions of the four strategies, using Kelly's definitions as a guide and building on previous studies that have explored stewardship. Pressgrove (2017) defines responsibility: "Initiatives organizations engage to fulfill their missions and demonstrate to the public they are good stewards" (p. 106). Reporting is defined: "A strategy differentiated from responsibility by focusing on precise descriptions and quantifiable statements that demonstrate the organization is meeting legal and ethical requirements of accountability" (Pressgrove, 2017, p. 106). Pressgrove (2017) defines reciprocity: "Public acknowledgment of support or displays of sincerity and friendship between an organization and its publics" (p. 108). Pressgrove (2017) defines relationship nurturing: "Maintaining regular open communication between an organization and its publics with the intention of engagement in mission fulfillment" (p. 109)

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### **Stewardship and Nonprofits**

Scholars in the nonprofit sector have shown particular interest in stewardship. One reason is that stewardship's roots are in fundraising (Kelly, 2001, p. 282). Kelly explains: "Most annual gifts, and nearly all major gifts, come from individuals, corporations, and foundations that have given to the organization in the past. Therefore, how donors are treated *after* they make their gifts largely determines future success" (2001, p. 283). Waters (2009) finds that donors do favor the four stewardship strategies, and Pressgrove (2017) finds that stewardship has proven to positively impact the nonprofit's ability to develop successful donor relationships. The display of social responsibility that is inherent to stewardship also makes it relevant to nonprofits. Jeavons (1994) explains that for nonprofits to prove that they are worthy of support from key stakeholders and donors, they must demonstrate socially responsible management of resources.

### **Growing Research on Stewardship**

Pressgrove et al. (2015) point out that because of the success of stewardship, many nonprofit and PR scholars have studied it in different contexts (e.g. Worley & Little, 2002; Patel & McKeever, 2014; Waters, 2011). Some research has found that nonprofits can effectively demonstrate stewardship through the use of organizational websites. Pressgrove et al. (2015) studied how top nonprofits from several large categories of nonprofits deploy stewardship strategies online (p. 3). Such studies aid in clarifying the definitions of each of the stewardship strategies, offer indicators to measure the dimensions of the construct, and indicate how other nonprofits can best deploy stewardship on their websites. One nonprofit subtype that has not been studied in connection to stewardship yet is eating disorder (ED) nonprofits.

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### **Eating Disorder Nonprofits**

Several ED nonprofits exist in the United States to aid the problems related to EDs (The Eating Disorders Coalition for Research, Policy, and Action, 2019). However, in this niche field there is a great lack of research related to PR and managing stakeholder relationships. This study inaugurates the body of research by focussing narrowly on how the National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA) deploys stewardship strategies on its website.

Muhlheim (2020) explains that there are different types of ED nonprofits—some primarily focussed on funding treatment grants for individuals or influencing federal policy on eating disorders, for example. But NEDA is the leading exemplar of the nonprofits whose missions are more aimed at supporting individuals who are directly impacted by eating disorders. These support-type organizations are of primary interest in this study because they are more relationship-focussed and by nature aim to display ongoing regard for stakeholders—making them especially relevant to stewardship.

### **National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA) Background**

Again, NEDA is a leader in the field of ED nonprofits. Becker & Stice (2017) report that NEDA is the largest grassroots ED association in the United States. A NEDA representative says:

“NEDA is the leading not-for-profit organization in the United States advocating on behalf of and supporting those affected by eating disorders. NEDA’s lifesaving programs reach millions every year. . . .NEDA focuses on individuals and loved ones, and serves as a catalyst for prevention, cures and access to quality care” (NEDA Representative, personal communication, February 15, 2020).

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NEDA facilitates interpersonal connection with and among stakeholders through such activities as organizing “support networks” (Eating Disorder Hope, 2018) and fundraising walks that aim to “unite communities”(Muhlheim, 2020). NEDA is highly stakeholder-focussed.

The author of this study chose to do a case study of NEDA's website. A case study of how the exemplar support-type ED nonprofit manifests stewardship on its website provides an excellent example of how nonprofits of this type can most effectively do the same.

### **Research Question**

Past studies have explored the evidence of stewardship on nonprofits' websites. One study investigated the presence, absence and dominance of the four strategies of stewardship on the websites of the largest U.S. nonprofit organizations in seven major categories (Pressgrove et al, 2015). Yet no research has investigated stewardship on the websites of ED nonprofits. The following question will guide this study of the National Eating Disorders Association's website:

**RQ1:** What evidence of the four strategies of stewardship appears in the manifest content of the National Eating Disorders Association's website?

### **Method**

This case study of NEDA's website employed qualitative content analysis of NEDA's website. A detailed codebook was created to measure the four stewardship strategies. The coding took place on March 28, 2020 and March 29, 2020.

Three aforementioned studies that analyzed stewardship on websites used content analysis and coding procedures to analyze the websites and gather data (Patel & McKeever, 2014; Waters, 2011; Pressgrove et al., 2015). Following their model improves the reliability and

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validity of this study. Content analysis was chosen for this study also because, as Neuendorf (2002) says, content analysis is often used for web analysis (p. 1); and easily measurable, manifest variables can be used to represent and detect latent variables (p. 23). In this study, the latent variables are stewardship strategies, and they will be measured by the presence or absence of predetermined manifest variables. The author reviewed definitions and examples of each stewardship strategy in related studies to create the codebook for this study. Definitions of each strategy as presented in the codebook are as follows:

**Responsibility:** acting in a socially responsible way; keeping promises to important publics; conveying how resources are used to support the organization's mission; something organizations do to fulfill their mission and then demonstrate to the public to prove they are good stewards.

**Reporting:** meeting legal and ethical requirements of accountability; an organization explaining how organizational assets are used; demonstrating accountability; providing updates on goal achievement.

**Reciprocity:** general demonstration or evidence of gratitude for supportive publics; public acknowledgment of support; personalized acts of appreciation; displays of sincerity and friendship between an organization and its publics.

**Relationship Nurturing:** maintaining regular open communication between an organization and its publics; initiating and/or participating in dialogues with various publics; providing stakeholders opportunities to engage with the organization and engage in mission fulfillment; expanding current involvement of individuals or publics into long-term relationships.

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### **Coding Procedures**

Pages coded in similar studies were: home, about us, get involved (or the closest equivalent), donate (or the closest equivalent), and contact us. According to Patel and McKeever (2014), these pages are the most common and important pages for visitors to nonprofit organizations' websites. Therefore, these pages were selected to be coded for this study. It was decided to additionally code NEDA's ways to give page. It is difficult to determine which page visitors would be more likely to visit because of their similarity. Thus, both pages were coded.

The coder analyzed each webpage entirely, scrolling from top to bottom. The coder did not click any buttons or links; they only analyzed the content on a given page. If any manifest variables representing a particular stewardship strategy were present on a page, the strategy was coded as present (1), and if variables were absent, the strategy was coded as absent (0). The findings are displayed in Table 1.

### **Analysis**

Reporting was the least present stewardship strategy, and reciprocity was the second most present stewardship strategy. Responsibility and relationship nurturing were the most frequently observed stewardship strategies, found on every coded page.

### **Reporting**

Evidence of reporting was only found on the donate page, indicated by a line of text stating: "By donating to NEDA you are reaching those in need with prevention programming, education and support resources, and helping to move research forward."

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**Table 1**

*Presence of Evidence of Stewardship Strategy by Page*

	Responsibility	Reporting	Reciprocity	Relationship Nurturing
Home	1	0	1	1
About Us	1	0	1	1
Get Involved	1	0	0	1
Contact Us	1	0	0	1
Donate	1	1	1	1
Ways To Give	1	0	0	1

*Note.* 1 = present, 0 = not present

**Reciprocity**

Evidence of reciprocity was found on the home, about us, and donate pages. Notably, it appeared less times per page and in less obvious ways than responsibility and relationship nurturing. On the home page, it was seen in some text acknowledging partners and organizations and thanking supportive public members. The text was part of the descriptions of some of the “latest blog posts.”

It was most evident on the about us page and donate page. On the about us page, it was seen in some lines of text acknowledging NEDA's partnership with other organizations and in some text that acknowledges and expresses gratitude toward supportive “organizations, corporations and philanthropies.” On the donate page, reciprocity is seen in some lines of text expressing that NEDA can not do its work without the financial support of its publics.

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### **Responsibility**

Responsibility was one of the two most prominent stewardship strategies manifested on NEDA's main webpages. Evidence was found on every page coded. It was most prominent on the about us page and get involved page.

The most commonly observed indicator was a link to the "about us" page. The "about us" button is always visible in the main menu near the top of the page, thus responsibility is present on every page (except for the donate page, which is housed in an external donation website). The other most frequent indicators of responsibility were: general information about the organization and its value-driven work, and information concerning programs and programmatic successes. Other common indicators were: links to trustee and staff listings, text related to the mission, and statements conveying how resources are used to support the organization's mission.

### **Relationships Nurturing**

Relationship nurturing is one of the two most prominent stewardship strategies manifested on NEDA's main webpages. Evidence was found on every page coded. It was most prominent on the home page and ways to give page and was the dominant stewardship strategy on the home page.

The most commonly observed indicators of relationship nurturing were buttons that say shop, donate, call helpline, chat now, get involved, contact us, and ways to give. All of these buttons were either in the main menu or a smaller menu near the top of the screen. Links to social media were also present at the top and bottom of every page. Thus, these indicators were present on every page. Other indicators of relationship nurturing were: invitations to participate

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in events; a variety of different calls to additional action; initiating two-way dialogue; contact info; upcoming events listings; and join mailing list.

### **Discussion**

#### **Reporting**

The absence of reporting on the six main pages of NEDA's website is noteworthy, because a user of the site may not encounter any evidence of reporting when they visit the site. In light of the findings from similar studies though, it is not surprising that little evidence of reporting was found on NEDA's website. One study that analyzed the manifestations of stewardship on 70 nationally ranked nonprofits' websites found that even the nation's largest nonprofits fail to manifest reporting (Pressgrove et al, 2015, p. 13).

As a leading ED nonprofit in the United States, NEDA's success does not seem to be hindered by a lack of reporting. But this does not indicate that other support-type ED nonprofits should also neglect to display how organizational assets are used, because reporting remains a key strategy of good stewardship. Indeed, Pressgrove et al. assert that a lack of reporting on nonprofit websites is "disconcerting," and further: "Those who have or are contemplating contributing to a nonprofit need specific financial information...to assure them that the organization is being a responsible steward of organizational assets" (2015, p. 14). Without reporting, any organization fails to display full stewardship.

Other research has found that all four stewardship strategies have proven effective for relationship building and fundraising by nonprofits (Pressgrove, 2017). So, while reporting may not be as vital to NEDA's success, findings from other studies would indicate that NEDA and

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other organizations could attain more success by displaying stronger evidence of reporting. The research that continually finds a lack of reporting across nonprofit websites reveals an area for improvement.

### **Reciprocity**

While reciprocity was not a highly prominent stewardship strategy on NEDA's main pages, its presence on the home, about us, and donate pages may indicate that NEDA believes these pages are good places to acknowledge and display gratitude and friendship toward their supportive publics. To meet the standard of the leader in the field then, other support-type ED nonprofits may benefit from also displaying reciprocity on these pages at minimum.

The significance of the stronger presence of reciprocity on the donate page may be explained by Pressgrove et al. (2015) who says: "Those who have contributed to a nonprofit are more likely to continue to donate if they feel their actions are appreciated" (p. 14). Thus, it may be a good strategy for an organization to communicate to the contemplative donate page visitor that the support of its donors is significant, and that the organization is sincerely grateful to its donors. It should be noted, however, that the discovery of reciprocity on NEDA's donate page does not have particular implications for other support-type ED nonprofits. Rather, displaying reciprocity on a donate page seems to be a best PR practice for all nonprofits.

The display of reciprocity on NEDA's about us page may have more significant implications for others ED nonprofits whose missions are also directed at supporting individuals. Support-type organizations are highly stakeholder relationship-focussed. It is likely that such organizations want to communicate to stakeholders how valuable they are to the organization.

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Displaying this kind of information—reciprocity—on the about us page may be a way for an organization to communicate that an important part of its identity is its relationships and partnerships with stakeholders. So, like NEDA, other support-type ED nonprofits may benefit from exhibiting reciprocity on their about us page.

### **Responsibility**

Because of NEDA's success in its field, the presence of responsibility on all of NEDA's main webpages may indicate that demonstrating responsibility in multiple ways on its website has been particularly effective for NEDA in building beneficial relationships with its key stakeholders.

Particularly, the repetition of general information about the organization and its value-driven work, as well as information concerning programs and programmatic successes, may suggest that displaying this kind of information has also been effective for NEDA. Additionally, displaying links to trustee and staff listings, text related to the mission, and statements conveying how resources are used to support the organization's mission may also be indicators of responsibility that NEDA has benefitted from displaying on its website.

The prominence of responsibility on NEDA's about us page follows a pattern seen by others scholars. Responsibility was the dominant stewardship strategy seen on the about us pages across all types of nationally ranked nonprofits' websites (Pressgrove et al., 2015, p. 13). This suggests that the about us page is a good place for all nonprofits to display responsibility.

The prominence of responsibility on NEDA's get involved page may also indicate that the get involved page is a good page to emphasize the organization's responsibility. Stakeholders

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who are considering investing time in NEDA may be more likely to if they see evidence that it is a responsible organization.

A pattern was seen in much of the messaging related to responsibility. Many of the statements related to the organization's value-driven work and mission fulfillment emphasized that NEDA collaborates with other people and groups. Examples of words and phrases are: "NEDA welcomes partnership and collaboration," "creative collaborations with organizations, corporations and philanthropies," and "partnership between NEDA and other mission-aligned organizations." Another theme in these messages is the general involvement of any supportive people or group including "advocates," "other eating disorders organizations," "the Board of Directors," "other mission-aligned organizations," "individuals and loved ones," and the site visitor ("you"). The wording of these statements reflect NEDA's high focus on stakeholders and their involvement. To meet the standard of the leader in their field, other support-type ED nonprofits may benefit from using NEDA's display of responsibility as a model for their own websites.

### **Relationship nurturing**

Though relationship nurturing and responsibility were seen on an equal number of webpages, relationship nurturing was more prominent, with generally more indicators displayed per page. As Patel and McKeever say, "Elements appearing on multiple pages provide insight into what organizations deem most important in terms of stewardship and communication with stakeholders" (2014, p. 229). The findings suggest, then, that NEDA deems relationship nurturing to be the most important stewardship strategy to display. The fact that relationship

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nurturing was the dominant strategy on the home page, which tends to be the first page a user sees, further supports this idea.

As defined in this study, relationship nurturing aims to maintain regular, open communication between an organization and its publics, provide stakeholders opportunities to engage with the organization and engage in mission fulfillment, and/or expand current involvement of individuals or publics into long-term relationships. For NEDA's own organizational goals, communicating in a way that demonstrates relationship nurturing may be the most effective stewardship strategy. This may be explained by NEDA's highly stakeholder relationship-focussed mission. For other ED support-type organizations, then, displaying relationship nurturing in a variety of ways across webpages may contribute to their organizational success by improving relationships with stakeholders. The frequently seen indicators NEDA displayed were: invitations to participate in events; a variety of different calls to additional action; initiating two-way dialogue; contact info; upcoming events listings; and join mailing list. Calls to actions were the most prominent.

The way NEDA's website is designed also contributes to the way stewardship strategies are presented. Relationship nurturing was present on every page because of the several buttons that were in the static menus at the top of the screen or at the bottom of the page. Other support-type ED nonprofits who want to emphasize relationship nurturing on their own sites can potentially design their sites in a similar way, making these elements visible on every webpage.

Links to social media platforms at both the top and bottom of the page may be relationship nurturing elements contributing to NEDA's success. Patel and McKeever support the

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idea that using social media is an important factor for nonprofits, saying that organizations that use YouTube or other social media were “more likely to have higher revenues,” and that the use of social media may be “a best practice for health nonprofits” (2014, p. 234).

The fact that relationship nurturing was most prominent on the the ways to give page may indicate that NEDA believes this is the best place to display relationship nurturing.

### **Dominant Stewardship Strategies**

All four stewardship strategies have proven to be favored by stakeholders of nonprofits (Waters, 2009) and to positively impact fundraising efforts and a nonprofit's ability to develop successful donor relationships (Pressgrove, 2017). But depending on a particular organization's mission and goals, it may find it effective to make certain stewardship strategies more prominent than others in its communication. After all, public relations considers its key publics' wants and needs and communicates accordingly.

As noted, responsibility and relationship nurturing are the most prominent strategies of stewardship displayed on NEDA's main webpages. While it is important for NEDA to display information concerning finances (reporting) and expressing gratitude and friendship to supportive publics (reciprocity), what may be needed more is showing evidence of mission fulfillment and developing open dialogue and cultivating relationships with website visitors.

A dominant presence of responsibility and relationship nurturing was actually a pattern seen in the study that analyzed the 70 nationally ranked nonprofits' websites. These two strategies, which Pressgrove et al. (2015) say are "both key to informing and engaging publics," were displayed across all organization types and pages (p. 13). The authors of that study further

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add: "This provides initial evidence for the notion that public relations processes (models) become cyclical when there is a general focus on relationship nurturing, building and cultivation, combined with evidence of mission fulfillment" (p.13). So, findings from the present study and past studies may suggest that responsibility and relationship nurturing are more important to nonprofit success in general and to NEDA in particular.

A particular emphasis on relationship nurturing is logical for NEDA, because a key part of its mission is to create supportive relationships with certain key publics. NEDA's key publics, who are struggling with eating disorders, may be engaged more effectively by content that promotes a relationship with the organization rather than other types of content. Perhaps the lack of reporting is made up for by the several calls to action and invitations to dialogue (relationship nurturing) on the ways to give page.

As the leading exemplar in its field, NEDA's success could be due, in part, to the way it manifests stewardship through its website. Thus, there is a possibility that other support-type ED nonprofits may find success in also emphasizing responsibility and relationship nurturing

### **Limitations and Future Research**

This study focussed primarily on measuring the presence and frequency of each of the four stewardship strategies throughout NEDA's six main webpages, with a minimal analysis of the actual variables that were found to represent each stewardship strategy. A future study could do a deeper analysis of NEDA's unique displays of stewardship. For example, it was found that NEDA displays reciprocity is through blog posts. Future research could ask whether or not

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acknowledging and thanking supportive public members through narratives or blog formats is an especially effective way for support-type ED nonprofits to manifest reciprocity. Future research could also more closely analyze the actual wording of the text that NEDA uses to display stewardship. A study could compare NEDA's website with other support-type ED nonprofits' sites to see if any unique themes emerge. For instance, does NEDA use the word "you" in its text more than other support-type ED nonprofits; or is it unique how much NEDA's responsibility messaging emphasize supportive stakeholders?

This study analyzed six pre-determined webpages but was not able to explore the significance, if any, of distinct webpages as landscape for communicating different kinds of messages. For instance, this study could not definitively conclude whether a home page or about us page is more important than others for displaying key information. The author decided to code the ways to give page because of its similarity to a donate page, but this study could not explore any possible significance or implications related to the inclusion of a ways to give page.

### **Conclusion**

In light of the existence of many ED nonprofits whose missions are highly centered on maintaining ongoing relationships with individuals, stewardship should be a much higher concern to scholars concerned with ED organizations and improving the treatment of EDs. This study inaugurates the body of such research, analyzing how an exemplar in the field of ED nonprofits manifests stewardship on its website—a venue proven to be good place to display stewardship. Some major themes emerged from the study. First, responsibility and relationship nurturing are the stewardship strategies most prominent on NEDA's website, demonstrated in a

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variety of ways and on every main page. Relationship nurturing was slightly more prominent than responsibility, suggesting that this is the strategy NEDA believes is most needed to engage with its publics effectively. Reciprocity was less prominent but was demonstrated on the home, about us, and donate pages. A great lack of reporting on NEDA's website indicates that reporting may not be vital to NEDA's success, but this discovery points out an area for improvement in displaying reporting on main webpages.

NEDA's display of stewardship may serve as an effective model for other nonprofits of this type, and findings suggest additional best practices. This study is especially valuable for PR practitioners and digital communication experts employed by ED nonprofits who want to improve relationships with stakeholders. While the study focussed narrowly on a specific subtype of ED nonprofits, future research should advance the discussion by expanding upon these findings and translating them to other ED nonprofit subtypes or even for-profit ED organizations' website communication.

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