2020 Stakeholder Research
Nonprofits First
November 16, 2020

Executive Summary
Introduction

Between July and September 2020 Nonprofits First engaged in stakeholder research to support its strategic plan, and to glean information specific to:

- Prioritizing investments in programs and services
- Communicating needs and impact for potential sponsors
- Increasing member participation in classes and workshops
- Engaging more affiliate members in training and workshops
- Strengthening its reputation as a thought leader
- Becoming the go-to resources for nonprofits needing assistance

The first phase of research was an online survey of 448 respondents, including nonprofit members, affiliate members, accredited organizations, and others. The survey was followed by virtual focus groups with nonprofit members (11), accredited members (7), and affiliate members (7) held through Zoom.

Executive Summary of Findings

- Networking opportunity is a primary driver of membership for both nonprofits and affiliates. While the research showed that value is high for most training and service programs, the chance to meet, connect, and share with peers and colleagues is what distinguishes Nonprofits First from other training and service providers. Attention to this finding is especially important now with COVID since virtual workshops and training are ubiquitous, often free, and available 24/7 from anywhere. Nonprofits First should consider ways to wrap networking activities into all virtual programs and events and prioritize social and professional networking events among its memberships. Nonprofits First should also audit its brand messaging to ensure that networking is prominent in its value proposition.

- Members with the strongest value of Nonprofits First see it as a community or family to which they belong with pride. They are very familiar with colleagues and some of the consultants and staff. But new members or new staff at member organizations could benefit by having an intentional orientation or onboarding process to make the best use of the membership, meet some peers and consultants, and be welcomed to the family. An orientation process might be combined with retention strategies for members brought on in the last two years to ensure they feel well served and intend to renew.

- Feedback on program content suggested that Nonprofits First could benefit from adding more professional training tracks designed for specific audiences and better segment communications to these audiences (e.g., C.E.O.s, human resources, development, and
marketing). These specific audiences want to know that program content and peer-to-peer networking are designed with their particular needs in mind. Nonprofits First might consider creating a programming advisory committee to fine its offerings and more fully engage the Marketing Advisory Committee in refining messaging.

- Nonprofits First could improve training workshops and webinars’ value by ensuring these activities provide more interactive learning and take away materials that leave participants with actionable plans, tools, and solutions.

- Members and non-members would likely increase their participation in training and workshops if there were more acknowledgement opportunities (e.g., certificates) or rewards (e.g., points) that help them in their careers and distinguish their organizations outside of the current leadership and accreditation program.

- The accreditation program is not well known outside of Palm Beach County. It could benefit from strategic marketing through regional partners and funders to reach new organizations, especially now as activities that have migrated to the digital realm have made it easier and more efficient to participate.

- Nonprofits First could increase the value of accreditation by working with funders to reduce some duplication in reporting requirements for organizations accredited by Nonprofits First. If this could be accomplished, it would strengthen the brand and offer an opportunity to turn accredited organizations into evangelists for the program.

- Nonprofits First might benefit from further developing and marketing the 501cPro toolkit and programming around it. It’s highly valued by those who use it, but many are unwilling to pay the additional cost on top of membership. Consider ways to monetize the tool differently and make it more accessible.

- While everyone appreciates free and discounted programs, many are willing to pay professional development fees if they have a better understanding of the return on investment and can communicate that within their organizations. The discounts for membership are not seen as substantial enough to be perceived as a vital membership benefit.

- Research participants contributed their input enthusiastically and expect to hear from Nonprofits First about what the organization learned and how it will respond. Consider ways to weave top research findings and messaging about the research in upcoming newsletters.

- The Affiliate Membership program shows an opportunity for growth. Affiliate membership is valuable to business consultants if it delivers income, either from the nonprofit membership or relationships that can form between affiliates who deliver complementary nonprofit services. Affiliates perceive Nonprofits First as a marketing portal rather than a partner. Consider ways to tier membership levels and provide different and more
substantial partnership opportunities and value for affiliates who are philanthropic members versus those driven to join for their own business development. Consider affiliate specific networking opportunities (e.g., matchmaking), remodeling the “office hours,” and bringing back mixers.

- Awareness and value of the job postings service are strong for those who use it. Nonprofits First could benefit from more promotion and messaging the importance of this service.

- There is evidence of need within the research results that point to opportunities for Nonprofits First to position sponsorships and funding requests for program modifications, improved branding, and new strategic initiatives.

- Continue plans for the Nonprofit Conference, the subject was broached with the focus groups and many participants, particularly Affiliate members, were interested in being involved and assisting with the planning and execution.

**Survey Results**

**Key Takeaways**

- Just over half (54%) strongly agree that Nonprofits First programs are worth the investment, and this percentage is higher by 12% for nonprofit members versus non-members.

- Close to 60% of nonprofit members report that Nonprofits First has increased their organization’s capacity to serve clients. This number drops to 34% for non-member organizations.

- More than 30% of nonprofit organization members rate the membership program as excellent or good than do non-members. The most significant barriers to nonprofit membership and the use of programs are cost and lack of understanding of investment return. Nonprofits that have used the following programs rate them as either excellent or good: education/professional development (87%), accreditation (83%), job posting site (79%), financial services (86%), 501cPro Toolkit (83%), Rising Leaders (89%).

- The top suggestions for improving the value of programs include:
  - Membership: more free/low-cost programs, more and advanced training, more networking, and reduced duplicative reporting (to funders)
  - Education: more timely/specific/advanced training, more free programs, incentives, and 24/7 access online after live training.
o Accreditation: reduce reporting and monitoring duplication, streamline/update the program, open pathways to more funders outside of P.B.D., promote the program to funders. Nonprofits First could convene a group of Accredited organizations to serve on a temporary task force to provide accuracy of

o Job posting site: broaden reach, make it easier, draw attention to new jobs, publish outcomes, screen for matching.

o Financial services: offer training for new board members, keep good partners, expand services.

o 501cPro Toolkit: update it, match course offerings to it.

o Rising Leaders: improve flexibility, more inclusivity

• Organizational needs are highest for attracting and maintaining funders and donors, branding or marketing, demonstrating impact, empowering leaders, and strengthening leadership/management practices, particularly among organizations newer to the Nonprofits First community.

• For organizations that have participated in Nonprofits First capacity building programs, leadership and management are the areas where programs have seen the most impact with 30% to 33% reporting improvements, followed by attracting and maintaining donors (27%). While branding/marketing and demonstrating impact are high needs expressed by nonprofits, less than 20% of respondents report that Nonprofits First programs have strengthened their capacity in these areas.

• While more than half quarters of respondents rated the various programs offered by Nonprofits First as important, the programs considered to be the most essential to constituents are free and discounted training and workshops, research assistance on grants and funding, and accreditation. Members rate the various programs as important or essential and much higher rates than do non-members.

• Close to 43% of respondents have not used or were unable to rate the affiliate membership program, but 88% of affiliate members rate the program as excellent or good.

• Most important to affiliate members is access to clients (37%), followed by knowledge sharing (26%). A quarter of affiliate members indicated that networking/matchmaking events and business development assistance would improve the program.