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The power of architectural renderings for nonprofits: A marketer's perspective - by Anna Smith

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The adage “seeing is believing” holds extraordinary weight in the nonprofit world. For these organizations, architectural renderings — realistic visualizations of future projects — can mean the difference between securing critical funding and an organization’s vision fizzling into obscurity.

From a marketer’s perspective, architectural renderings are indispensable.

When your project hinges on external funding sources, communicating the story of a project’s mission that captures the project’s purpose and impact becomes vital to everything from staffing and operational expenses to the successful implementation of design and construction.

1. Showcasing Potential: Making the Future Tangible

Architectural renderings bridge the space between the left side of the brain and the right side, doing the work of translating abstract ideas into vivid imagery to convey a project’s full potential.

Asking donors, board members, and community stakeholders to envision a conceptual future from a set of technical plans or a long-form narrative is a tall order. We’re all strapped for time and attention, and good marketers understand the importance of meeting an audience where they are and filling in the gaps, ensuring that the work of communicating a value proposition isn’t left up to the viewer.

Without well-designed visuals, assumptions replace understanding with uncertainty.

Whether it’s a new community center, a reimagined public park, or an expanded health clinic, renderings empower nonprofits to show how their projects will come to life.

2. A Powerful Fundraising Tool

Fundraising is at the heart of nonprofit operations, and architectural renderings can play a key role in securing donations.

Understanding that the human brain processes graphics 60,000 times faster than text, it makes sense that proposals that contain interactive visuals increase approval rates by as much as 30-40%. The donors and grant managers judging submittals and assigning resources have finite attention, and it’s a battlefield. For example, the U.S. government receives hundreds of thousands of grant requests each year for special projects across various sectors. While all proposals are required to have a descriptive narrative, high-quality renderings are a differentiator with the power to cut through the noise and move potential donors toward urgency and emotional connection in seconds.

Donors want to know that their investment will have an impact. Elevated graphics and architectural renderings are marketing tools as much as they are communications vehicles. They make visualizing a project’s outcome immediate; a huge benefit to effectively reaching decision-makers.

3. Elevating Awareness and Engagement

It can't go viral if it doesn't connect, and it can't connect if it isn't clear. Mark Twain is often credited with recognizing the exponentially harder feat of creating concise messaging to long-winded writing, in the quote, "I didn't have time to write a short letter, so I wrote a long one instead."

The same philosophy applies here. High-quality visuals are steeped in data. They do the deep work of distilling huge amounts of information — getting to the heart of a mission, design intent, site and plan details, and material selection — to capture attention and imagination. By offering the audience a visual vocabulary, communities, boards, and donors, know what questions to ask and how to engage in a meaningful conversation.

The art of distilling complexity (long letters) into concise, beautifully packaged images and videos elevates awareness and creates engagement across every piece of marketing material, from social media posts to donor newsletters.

4. Strengthening Stakeholder Confidence

Donors and partners want assurance that their contributions are going toward well-planned, impactful projects. Renderings help nonprofits provide a clear, cohesive visual roadmap that reduces ambiguity and builds trust. When stakeholders can see the end result, they feel more confident about supporting the journey.

Three examples of SMRT's renderings in action

Bangor Region YMCA

1. Community Impact through Design – Bangor Region YMCA: SMRT created high-quality renderings and fly-through animations, in partnership with the client, specifically for a fund-raising event. The video takes the user on a tour across the site and through the building, giving potential donors a sense of how the building will be used, as well as how the building will feel, nestled within the community setting. The resulting footage was displayed in a theater setting, overlaid with video and testimony to the impact the facility will have on community programming and engagement. New donors sprung up, and existing donors substantially increased their financial support after being able to visualize the project's impact. Beyond fundraising, these renderings provided the media with powerful tools for sharing the story more broadly, helping to generate excitement, expand public awareness, and attract further support for the project. Here's how MaineBiz used the images.

2. Empowering Transformation – Urban Youth Program: Renderings helped communicate the scope

of transformation, generating excitement and fostering community partnerships.

3. Sanctuary and Healing – New York State Sheriff’s Institute (NYSSI) – Summer Camp and Wellness Center: NYSSI engaged SMRT to help them develop a program and a vision that will benefit children from all across New York state. Realizing the potential of the site and the building, SMRT worked with NYSSI to expand the program and develop a vision to include ‘wellness and support’ for all of New York state’s first responders. To help secure an additional \$12.5 million in funding, SMRT created detailed visuals demonstrating how campers and facility end-users would experience and interact with a new Summer Camp and Wellness Center with a special focus on how the new campus would positively impact the lives of children and families, reinforcing the project’s mission.

Best Practices for Using Architectural Renderings in Nonprofit Marketing

- **Tell a Story:** Pair renderings with narratives that highlight the project’s mission and the lives it will change.
- **Tailor for Your Audience:** Customize visuals to resonate with specific stakeholders—donors, community members, and public officials. Incorporating various major donors’ names into renderings, if they are naming a room or a building, can have a hugely positive impact.
- **Maximize Visibility:** Feature renderings across multiple platforms, including social media, websites, grant applications, and donor events.
- **Invest in Quality:** Professional, high-quality renderings create a stronger emotional connection and leave a lasting impression.

In the nonprofit sector, where every dollar and every action matters, architectural renderings are an investment in both the future and the story you want to tell today. If a picture is worth a thousand words, a rendering is priceless.

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