

Ten Tips for Successful Online Fundraising

by Brian Walsh, associate director, Fundraising Division, Changing Our World, Inc.

While organizations' approaches to online fundraising can vary based on mission, staff resources and constituent base, every online fundraising program should have four basic goals:

- Make people aware of your organization
- Get people to care about your organization
- Encourage people to support your organization
- Keep people connected to your organization

Here are ten quick tips that will help you reach these goals and get the results you want from your online fundraising efforts:

1. Drive traffic. Never pass up an opportunity to gather email addresses at your functions and encourage people to register at your Web site — even if they don't donate — so you can continue to cultivate them. Network with other relevant organizations so you can place links and ads on their sites to drive potential donors to your site. In your offline publications, highlight your Web site and the benefits of donating online.

2. Know your audience. Who do you hope will donate to your organization? Keep in mind their age, technological comfort level, and Internet connection when creating an online fundraising presence. A Web site heavy on graphics and presentations, for example, may turn off a potential donor connecting via a slower connection.

3. Maintain your brand. Your online identity and message should reflect your offline identity and message, since that's the brand with which your constituents identify. It is important to maintain consistency among all communication channels.

4. Stay fresh. View your Web site as a high-impact marketing and communications tool. Keep it updated. This demonstrates that your organization continues to have relevance and an impact. Potential donors aren't likely to have confidence in an organization that last updated its site in 1999. A vibrant, useful, user-friendly site will not only engage first-time visitors, but also encourage them to return.

5. Make it easy. While a Web site should tell about the nonprofit's mission through vivid graphics and inspiring stories, it also must allow both casual browsers and frequent visitors to donate to the organization. People don't want to wade through Web pages to discover how they can donate online. Make the donation process easy by posting the "donate now" button clearly and prominently on every Web page.

6. Be clear, be brief. Articulate your organization's mission on your home page. Individuals' attention spans are much shorter on the Internet than they are reading through a brochure or an annual report — especially if it is on a site they have stumbled onto. You have a short window of time to "sell" your organization to these types of visitors, and don't want to lose their attention.

7. Get personal. If you don't personalize email, you should. Each online interaction with a constituent is an opportunity to learn more about his or her interests, which you can use to personalize communications. Personalized communications are more relevant and help organizations break through the increasing barrage of generic emails cluttering people's in-boxes. Also, work on achieving the right tone. You wouldn't just take a direct mail letter and slap it into an e-mail message any more than you would put a phone-a-thon script in an envelope and mail it. E-mail should be a bit more casual, as if you were dropping a note to a friend.

8. Make it interactive. Think of online fundraising as building an online community. Provide people the opportunity to sign up to volunteer on your Web site. Allow donors to post messages and publicly share their reasons for giving. Encourage donors to spread your organization's message to people they know. Allow people to choose what information about your organization they want to hear more about from you.

9. Keep track. Measure email response to find out what to do more of — and what to stop doing. Here's one approach: Split your email list into two groups and mail the same content to both groups using different subject lines. Then, see which version is opened more frequently. Another idea: Experiment with story order in your e-newsletter, and track click-throughs to see which story gets more response. Look for software that will allow you to track click-throughs on emails and Web pages and test the effectiveness of email messages so you can learn what's most effective.

10. Stay flexible and adapt. Some people want to mail a check. Others want to charge their donation by phone. Still others want to give online. Provide an array of easy-to-use options so that your donors can choose the means they like best. All methods should work together for the benefit of your donor, and your organization. Be ready to adjust your online fundraising program to reflect what works best with your constituents.

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