

Getting Started With Online Fundraising

STEP 1: GOALS

You've got to have goals, and a plan that will help you realize those goals.

“If you don't know where you're going, any road will get you there”

The goals and the plan be different for every organization, depending on where you already are in the process. Some of you may already be raising money online, but it's coming in passively, and some of you might not even have a website. So start with where YOU are.

STEP 2: REFLECTION

Step back and Reflect:

Evaluate your current fundraising process. Where are you at now? What does your current fundraising program look like? What does your donor file look like? Where do you want to be?

Don't be afraid to dream big. If your dream is to have a 100,000 people on your email list but you've only got 50 people right now, well, that's okay. Those kinds of dreams/ideas will help you identify what you're going to need to do to get where you want to be and they'll help you estimate how long it may take you to get there.

Also look at your organizational profile and current direction. You want to make sure that your plan is aligned with your organizational work.

Bring in your stakeholders ... anyone who's working on fundraising and communications, and anyone who will be involved in getting the work done. What do your events look like, what does your existing communications effort look like, what does your existing fundraising strategy look like? The idea here is to assess where

you're at and create your battle plan, so to speak.

Look for opportunities to incorporate online activities into your offline activities/campaigns. i.e. how can we create an online component to our fall fundraising letter appeal?

STEP 3: WEBSITE

Evaluate your website. Drawing on your reflections, make sure you're clear about who your audience is and who you are trying to reach. If you're trying to reach supporters/donors who care about issue "x" and the only information you have on your site is general info about your organization, then roll up your sleeves and start tailoring your content to your desired audience. Clean it up if it needs to be cleaned up. Make sure your website has the same overarching message and look as your direct mail, your e-newsletters, etc.

If you don't already have it, you need to establish secure online donation processing. It's almost impossible to fundraise online if you can't accept donations through your web site. Also, make sure the vendor you choose to partner with is does donation processing. Use

Make sure your donate button is prominent and on every page.

Chances are good that you'll need to invest time and possibly money in redesigning or significantly improving your web site to make it interactive and engaging and therefore more effective for fundraising.

Promote your website in all of your existing communications. Don't just print your Web address. Give people a reason to go. "Visit www.ourgroup.org for a free newsletter or to find out 10 ways to save energy."

For the more advanced or adventurous:

Look at your site statistics and set some benchmarking and conversion goals from

those stats.

4: LISTS, LISTS, LISTS!

Make sure your email lists are current, clean, and GROWING. Look at both online and offline opportunities to build your lists. Ask for emails at every event, make sure every sign-in sheet includes space for an email address.

One reason to pay particular attention to your list growth is that online fundraising returns are generally a little bit lower than direct mail, coming in at about 1.2% of your list. So, looking at your numbers: if you have a list of 200 people and 3 people donate, you're not doing too shabby.

Segment your newsletter and your lists. The more you can personalize your e-newsletter, the more effective it will be. By creating a special version for your donors, you can not only tell them how their donations make a difference and you can also send them targeted renewal messages or special appeals. Include in your non-donor special appeals, involvement opportunities, or incentives for joining or making a donation. As your list grows you may want to segment it even more by collecting member preferences and sending targeted information based on their interests.

Step 5: COMMUNICATE

Regular e-communication. Contrary to what a lot of folks may think and in spite of all the buzz about fundraising via the “next big online app,” email communication is where most of the fundraising happens.

First, foremost, and very critical: it is important to use an email service provider to send emails and e-newsletters.

The primary reason for that is that you want to be able to **track the activity of your emails**. How many people opened the email? How many people clicked on the

different links? That information is one of the most important aspects of online engagement and online fundraising.

Keep e-newsletters **short** if you want to keep them out of the email trash bucket. Each story should have an enticing teaser and a related image. And both should be designed to entice the reader to click through and read the rest of the story on your website, thereby driving traffic to your website.

Your emails could be purely informational, or they could be focused on a campaign, whether it's fundraising, education or advocacy. So consider mixing up those type of emails so that you're not always asking for something every time you contact your stakeholders.

STEP 6: FUNDRAISING CAMPAIGNS

Develop specific online fundraising campaigns. An online fundraising campaign is more than an appeal on your site. It's a special appeal that you aggressively promote - perhaps it's built around a certain event (such as Earth Day) or around a particular issue (how a tax cut will affect your constituents). Be creative!

Promoting your work and establishing an online identity:

This is where I would start thinking about social media and reviewing which of the abundant tools are going to be useful for you.

Promote your site online and offline - wherever possible - in publications, at events, etc.

STEP 7: STAFFING, BUDGETING, TRACKING, REPORTING

This is an important part of the plan. Who's going to do the work? Do we have the staff time and the budget to focus on achieving our dream goal of 100,000 people on our list in one year, or based on our current resources, should we reduce this year's goal to a more modest number? Make sure your plan and your staffing are aligned.

You CAN be successful with building an online program, but it takes time, continued effort, and resources.

Track what you're doing. Be cognizant of your goals, and match your numbers monthly. Evaluate your numbers against industry benchmarking standards.

Celebrate your successes! Share your results with peers, board members.

LESSONS LEARNED

Don't be afraid to start small: our very first attempt at raising any money online brought in \$100 and ONE donor. But we kept working at it, planning, strategizing, building our list, and \$100 grew to thousands annually.

Don't oversell expectations while underselling the work.

Don't be afraid to fail. Every list is different, and what works for one organization won't always work for another. Test and tweak, test and tweak ...

Planning is EVERYTHING

HELPFUL RESOURCES

http://www.madelinestanionis.com/writing_rules_article.html

http://www.madelinestanionis.com/writing_sixways_article.html

<http://www.fundraising123.org/article/10-things-avoid-email-campaigns>

<http://www.frogloop.com/care2blog/2009/6/3/why-nonprofits-need-to-grow-their-online-lists.html>

<http://magnoliawebstrategy.com>