Strategic Communications for Year-Round Donor Engagement

By Joleen Ong

ONLINE FUNDRAISING HAS COME A LONG WAY from just having a “donate now” button on an organization’s website; it is now an integral channel for fundraising. In the past year alone, revenue raised through online fundraising increased 14 percent with more than 5.5 million total gifts and nearly $325 million raised, according to the 2014 Nonprofit Benchmarks Study.¹

Social networking, in particular, has amplified the peer-to-peer fundraising approach. But while online fundraising continues to grow, best practices for donor stewardship remain the same: nonprofits need to cultivate and maintain relationships, demonstrate effectiveness and impact, and acknowledge donors for their support.

Nonprofits often make the mistake of waiting until the end of the year to contact their donors for donations. There is so much we can be doing year-round to ensure “the ask” is not a cold one. Think about the donor experience with your organization: aside from the year-end ask for donations, what other messages are they receiving from you? Are those messages conveying why they should donate? Or are they just messages asking for their donation?

Consistent online communication from nonprofits year-round through channels such as social media, blogs, and email newsletters can help cultivate and maintain good relationships with donors, as well as attract new ones. There is no shortage of ways to harness the power of the social web to support fundraising goals, but before you try to utilize all these channels, consider the key ingredient: content.

Online fundraising is powered by good content. Let’s step back to the fundamentals of creating effective and powerful content. In what follows, we will explore: trust-building and fundraising; the importance of thinking “content first” instead of “channel first;” getting all staff members involved in creating content; and a case study of one small nonprofit that boosted its annual fundraising efforts.

Build Trust

Try this exercise: Ask some of your colleagues, “What nonprofits or causes have you donated to, and why?”

Chances are, they will respond by telling you that they have donated to a cause either because someone they knew asked them or because they feel passionately about the cause. Then take it a step further and ask your colleagues, “Out of all the nonprofits in the world that work on this cause, why did you pick this nonprofit to support?” In a recent poll that I informally conducted with colleagues on the latter question, the responses were similar: they donated because they 1) agree with the organization’s approach; and 2) ultimately trust the organization to effectively put their donations to work.

Trust in nonprofits highlights the main link between communications and fundraising: if people trust your organization—to be impactful, fiscally responsible, and reliable—they will be more likely to donate to your organization. Communicating regularly will help to establish the needed relationship to build trust. Think about it—would you ask a stranger for a favor and expect to receive it? Probably not. Neither would you, as a representative of a nonprofit, cold call someone and ask them for money without providing a reason.

Think of the social web as a hub of communications. Looking at the figure on the next page, the social web is a platform through which you can meet and engage potential donors. Engaging donors shouldn’t always involve asking for money but rather offer an invitation: “subscribe to our newsletter,” “link to us,” “attend an event.” These are year-round actions that lay the foundation of engagement and trust for a successful “ask.”

When you consistently communicate your message—whether it’s about impact, effectiveness, or milestones—it plays into the principle of effective repetition. According to the Edelman Trust Barometer², the majority of respondents reported that they need to hear information three to five times to believe messages.

¹ http://mrbenchmark.com

“Content First” not “Channel First”

Create content that informs your community, and then bring your story to them. Social media, email newsletters, blogs, and text messages are just channels to communicate. Creating a consistent stream of content is the challenging part. That is precisely why it is important to ensure that all of your staff members are involved in creating content to ensure their activities are accurately represented. Think “content first” over “channel first.” Nonprofit staff members have incredible stories to tell about the work they are doing to change the world, so don’t wait until the end of the year to tell donors about it!

Having staff and/or board members regularly contribute ideas and content for communications and fundraising is a goal that every nonprofit should strive for in order to ensure the integrity of their work. Inspire staff members to create content by letting them know what you are going to do with it, how it will help align with their strategic goals, and what its potential impact will be. It is also interesting for staff members to receive analytics on their work and feedback from the community. This imbues staff with a sense of ownership and satisfaction, making them a part of the internal process and understanding the impact of their efforts.

Communicating across various channels is also a great opportunity for nonprofits to showcase their personalities and let audiences get a behind-the-scenes look into the organization. Nonprofits are interesting and funny places to work; allow your supporters to fully experience your nonprofit’s culture. (For inspiration, check out workingatnonprofit.tumblr.com). The information you post does not always have to be serious; the most effective communication ensures a balance between content that reports on relevant activities and content that captures the culture of the organization. Showing this personality can help raise funds because, ultimately, fundraising is about connecting with people.

Just as every person in a nonprofit should be involved in fundraising, they should also be involved in communications. But putting this all into practice can be daunting. The following case example demonstrates how to build a culture of reporting within an organization, even if you have limited funds and staff capacity.

Case Example: Social Accountability International

The first nonprofit position that I landed was in a communications and fundraising role at a small human rights organization based in New York called Social Accountability International (SAI). SAI had layers of incredible, award-winning activities, but as in the case of many small nonprofits, they didn’t have the capacity to communicate it out strategically to a non-technical audience.

The biggest challenge was creating an culture of reporting within the organization—a culture where we would consistently generate interesting and accessible content about the organization’s activities, which could then align with our fundraising strategy. We had staff members traveling to workplaces around the world conducting auditing trainings to detect human rights abuses in factories. The staff’s expertise was so technical and complex that it was hard for them to communicate what SAI actually did to potential donors.

I worked with our development director and executive director to distill the technical language into easier to understand text that focused on demonstrating the organization’s impact and effectiveness. To do this, we had to listen deeply to our audiences. A common question we got asked was, “Why do sweatshops still persist?” After years of trying to answer this, we sprang at the opportunity to publish the article, “Seven Reasons Why Sweatshops Still Persist,” later published by McGraw-Hill. This pushed us to educate our audience with easy to understand content that was not too technical in nature. Understanding our audience’s needs was crucial to building relationships and positioning our organization as an educator and thought leader.

Before setting up any accounts on Facebook and Twitter, the monthly email newsletter became the top priority of our communications strategy. Internally, it was a way for all staff members to participate in creating content; a rolling monthly deadline systematized this. Sharing metrics—open rates and community feedback—with staff members helped them understand the im-

3 http://www.triplepundit.com/2013/04/7-reasons-sweatshops-persist/
Bringing It All together

The bottom line: don't want until the end of the year to start fundraising. Your organization exists 365 days of the year. To get started today, here are four ideas and resources:

1. Conduct a communications audit. What are you currently communicating to your audiences? Are you constantly asking them for support, or are you offering balanced content? Chances are, it’s time to refresh. During a slower period of the year (typically the summer), I like to conduct a communications audit to self-reflect, with metrics, in order to understand what content works and doesn’t work as well as to understand the audience’s experience with my organization. Nonprofit fundraising and marketing expert, Kivi Leroux Miller, offers a great free resource for a “DIY Communications Audit.” It is also helpful to ask peers outside of your organization for their opinions. Community forums such as NTEN’s Communities of Practice are great opportunities to connect with others to get feedback and share best practices.

2. Set up a content calendar. The instinct that most have when using the social web for communications is to use it solely to promote your work. As per point one, remember that you need to balance the content that you put out so you’re not just asking your audiences for something, you are demonstrating why they should donate to you. Of course, writer’s block or just being plain busy might make it difficult to get creative. For inspiration, check out Weblink International’s blog post, “6 Ways to Create Content Your Donors & Members Will Value,” and sign up for free monthly writing prompts from Kivi Leroux Miller.

3. Establish an internal process for communications and fundraising. Remember that your colleagues are important stakeholders—they are implementing the work in the field that your donors are supporting. Getting internal buy-in and participation is critical for success. Show colleagues in other departments how effective, consistent communication benefits them and the entire organization, and ask for their help. Setting up an internal process to easily enable this ongoing collaboration, such as weekly check-in meetings, monthly communications workshops, or one-on-one support that aligns with their strategic goals, is also helpful. I keep Big Duck’s Brandraising Pyramid handy as a way to constantly remind myself of what a proper internal process is for fundraising, from the inside out.

4. Stay connected. Stay on top of the latest trends in nonprofit fundraising and communications: Sign up for popular blogs such as Nonprofit Tech for Good, Big Duck, Getting Attention, Nonprofit Marketing Guide, and NTEN: The Nonprofit Technology Network. They offer helpful resources and articles to help you keep up with the ever-changing nonprofit landscape. Annual reports such as the Nonprofit Benchmarks Study also offer important context to see where your nonprofit stacks up. The Nonprofit Tech for Good blog also compiled a helpful roundup of nonprofit reports.

The level of trust that the public has in nonprofits should be realized through fundraising efforts that engage donors through compelling content all year round. This all starts with consistent communication that showcases your nonprofit’s activities, impact and personality.

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