

Surviving Fundraising on the Internet

Follow these tips to raising money online.

BY STEVE EPNER

Anyone who has to communicate with others had better be able to do it online. Many people have already made the Internet and e-mail their preferred method for connecting with the world. For many in the new generation, if you're not on the Internet, you don't exist.

But what does the Internet have to do with fundraising? AT&T said it best with this comment: "It isn't about technology; it's a new dial tone."

Think about the telephone. You don't need a telephone science degree to use a phone. Watch an 11-year-old on the Internet, and you'll see that young people are as comfortable online as their elders are on the phone.

The kids have been raised in an electronic, connected world. The Internet is how they communicate. If you aren't there, you're not part of their world. They are your future donors, volunteers, and stakeholders.

Writing an article about the Internet carries a high degree of risk. Technology is changing at such a rapid rate that anything written one day may be out-of-date the next.

The ideas in this article represent the best information available at the time of publication. Use the following guidelines as a starting point. Then, as you develop strategies, review them with a 13-year-old to make sure they are current and valid.

Create an Internet Presence.

Every nonprofit must have a domain on the Internet. If you don't, another organization will attract your traditional donor online, and the dollars that might have gone to you may now go elsewhere. Once gone, a donor will be harder to win back.

Getting a domain is neither difficult nor expensive. At www.internic.net, you can research and select an Internet name. The ending .org is preferred for charities. Some nonprofits have also reserved names with the .com extension to be sure they won't lose anyone browsing the Internet.

Look for names that the public will associate with your cause. If multiple names might apply, register them all. Even a half-dozen names can cost as little as \$72 per year. Why let a potential donor miss you when the cost is so low?

Search engines look for domain names, but so do individuals. Many people looking for information will initially skip the search engine and enter a name followed by .org to see what they find. For example, someone trying to find information on lung cancer might try entering www.lungcancer.org to see what might be available.

Select natural names. If you find that the name you want is taken, enter it into your browser and see what pops up. Many names are unused after registration, some are used by "kids", and others were taken by "squatters" hoping to sell them later for a profit. Get in touch with the people who have your name to see whether they will allow you to gain control of it. As a charity, your chances of reclaiming a domain name are much better than for-profit corporations.

Design a Donor-Friendly Site.

Once your identity is established, you need to get people's attention once they find your site. Then you have to take care of their needs. It's really no different than a potential client's finding your organization by phone or in person and asking for information. You gladly provide the information and include a request for funding.

Requests for funding should also be spread throughout the Web site. Make them simple. Wherever you have a page that offers assistance, it's appropriate to request help to continue these services.

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Design your site to make it easy for someone to find help or be encouraged to donate.

What separates a good site from a bad one? Five issues make the difference:

1. Make your site fast. We live in an MTV world. If the first page doesn’t “pop” in 10 seconds or less, some of your viewers will be gone. The best sites have a short, uncomplicated home page that is brought up quickly. It has limited graphics and provides an introduction or overview of the charity. Then, there are “buttons” or links to other parts of the site by key words. Once visitors are interested in a site, they’ll wait longer for information to load. The goal is to quickly capture interest and then provide a map that lets interested parties rapidly find the information they want.

2. Make the site clean. Remember when desktop publishing first came out? Everyone wanted to play. Newsletters were created with 17 different fonts. Each page (sometimes each article) had a different border. Then there was clip art everywhere, with no space unfilled. The document looked like a mess.

Designing a Web site could end up the same. With the latest tools, anyone can design a sophisticated site. But before opting for something fancy, ask: “What good will these flashing lights, moving signs, and animation do toward increasing donations?” Most of the time, the answer is: “I don’t know.”

Hire a good designer to make sure that the site makes the impression you want, that a consistent message is sent, and that the message fits as part of the complete fundraising program. Stay on top of the “techies” to make sure they do what you want, not what they want on their resumes. This is not a technical project but a marketing one.

3. Print out the pages on your site on an inexpensive dot-matrix printer to test for legibility. Current research suggests that some 75 percent of all Internet access is from home, not the office. This means that the majority of your potential donors find your site in the evening. If they see something they like, it will be printed to show around or share.

But that carefully crafted page with interlocking colors that produced a three-dimensional feeling on screen may end up looking like a black blob on a standard black-and-white printer. Then all the time, effort, and money spent setting up the site and attracting a prospect will have been wasted.

4. Update your site regularly. Anyone will visit a site once, maybe even twice. But if nothing has changed, they’re unlikely to return for a third visit. The best sites have new information added no less than twice a month. Some sites are updated many times a day. People want the latest information. Being current with the latest and greatest is an advantage on the Internet.

A nonprofit with a limited budget may need to find volunteers to help keep a site changing. The home page should highlight new information as a service to return visitors.

5. Make sure your site is accurate, both informationally and grammatically. Nothing will turn off the public faster than a sloppy site. Maintenance of the informational part of a site is not a technical job. Get an English major or a person with public relations training. This is how the world will see you. Do not leave that important image to someone more familiar with bits and bytes than with P’s and Q’s.

Encourage Donations.

What should you do on the site to encourage donations? Here are some ideas:

1. The home page should contain a link to a “Getting Involved” information section. In it, all of the options should be explained. Provide a link to an online page where a pledge can be completed, and make it easy to find.

2. It’s wise to accept credit card and debit card donations. These can be validated while a prospect is online. It is the option of choice for more and more donors.

3. Ask your donors to go shopping using your site as a “gateway.” One good example is Amazon.com, the online bookstore. If a donor buys a book as a result of a link from your site, you will receive a small commission. It is easy for your organization to sign up online and to establish the link from your site. Check out all of the sites that may be of interest to your donors, clients, and stakeholders to see if it is possible to earn money by having an active link from your domain.

Reach Out to Solicit Funds.

The next step is to use e-mail to send out information to a target audience. It’s not much different from bulk mail or blast fax, just faster, cheaper, and with a greater reach.

For this type of fundraising, your most important asset is your mailing list. For online fundraising, the list will contain e-mail addresses instead of street addresses. Software is available to track, sort, and manage these lists, also known as databases.

“De-dup” computer programs are used to eliminate duplicate names and addresses, just as with standard mailing systems. The lists must be kept up-to-date to maintain their value.

Anyone who sends e-mail can be accused of “spamming” (the electronic equivalent of junk mail). Be careful. All e-mail solicitations or other documents should carry instructions for having a name taken off the list. Requests for removal from a mailing list should be honored.

Consider doing small group tests to see how each mass e-mail message might work for you. Periodically review message content with your colleagues to learn what is working and what isn't. Here are a few suggestions for your solicitation messages:

1. Make it short. Start all e-mail fundraising letters with a quick grabber (not unlike any fundraising letter). But in this case, limit it to one or two sentences. E-mail users like brief messages that they can deal with quickly. Long messages are filed for later reading. The only problem is that later rarely arrives. When the backlog becomes too large, the unread messages are just deleted.

2. Give the prospect a link to your site for more information. Most of the people you reach with e-mail also have access to the Internet. Having an embedded link makes it easy for them to check you out for more information.

3. For each e-mail fundraising campaign, use a different internal page (thus, a different embedded link) to serve as the introduction to new visitors. Your Webmaster or Internet Service Provider will be able to provide counts of how many responses you have by day to any specific area within your site. This will make it easy to measure the success of each mailing. More sophisticated response-measuring tools will allow you to better understand which audiences react best to which letters.

4. Get personal. Making personal connections is what this technology is all about. You can use surveys, for instance, just as you would in a standard mail campaign, except that the survey can be completed online and the results processed in real time (while you wait—no delay). This makes it easy to establish an immediate dialogue with a prospect. For example, in the case of a disease, a survey question might ask whether any relative has the illness. If the answer is yes, the system can immediately provide information about the latest research or treatment news.

Keep the Connection.

Once you've established an online dialogue and offered assistance, you have probably found a donor and a friend. Help first and then follow up (by e-mail, of course) to see

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whether the material you sent was useful. It is then that a subtle request for funds to continue the organization's activities may be most effective.

Take time to check out other charity sites. Keep an eye on what others are doing for hints of what's working. No one knows the answers. All we can tell you is that future generations will interact on the World Wide Web (or its successor). If you want to be relevant, you must be there.

The Web provides a new way for you to provide many of your traditional services. Support, education, referrals, and even access to care-givers can all be offered online to anyone, anywhere, anytime.

Any charity can afford a basic Web site. Many “hosting sites” (where Web pages are stored) will provide free or reduced costs if you agree to publicize their service at the bottom of your site. Design services often are available from colleges and universities with computer science and design classes. Students need to create portfolios to show what they can do. Charges can be minimal and the results amazing.

Better yet, the Web can reduce your ongoing fundraising costs. There is no incremental cost for sending e-mail as there is for fax or hard-copy mail. Processing electronic donations is a breeze, and the back office workload is greatly reduced. Plus, the value of being available 24 hours a day, seven days a week is hard to measure, but it could be worth a fortune in new donors and volunteers and in terms of helping more people.

The Internet and its connected society are like a train coming right at you. There are only two choices. You can get on the train or you can ignore it, but you cannot stop it. The choice is yours. ■

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These resources are available through the Society's Resource Center, www.snpo.org.

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