



I Think I.T. Can, I Think I.T. Can: E-Philanthropy Helps Small Nonprofits Reach Donors

The e-philanthropy revolution helps even small nonprofits increase support by embracing technology.

By Chrissy Kayhko

Small nonprofits may lack the financial and technical resources of larger organizations, but e-philanthropy is leveling the playing field. E-philanthropy gives small organizations the ability to use technology and the Internet to cultivate donor relationships. Increasingly, such cultivation is vital to organizational survival.

The Key to Surviving Hard Times

In her *Nonprofit Hard Times Survival Guide*, Joanne Fritz offers the following suggestion for surviving a recessive economy:

Don't pull back on fundraising. Just as companies need to keep advertising during a downturn to keep their names before the public, nonprofits will gain nothing by retreating. Not only should you not retreat, you should become even more focused in your efforts. Look at your lists again, sharpen your case, get more personal, and cultivate within an inch of your life.¹

How do you reach out to donors cost-effectively? Through e-philanthropy (defined as using the Internet for philanthropic purposes). Fundraising success comes from integrating new online methods with traditional fundraising tools.

The Value of a Web Site View

It's been said that a picture is worth a thousand words; for an environmental organization, a

picture can be worth a thousand dollars—or more. Piedmont Land Conservancy (PLC), a small North Carolina nonprofit, is a case in point.² Visitors to its Web site enjoy beautiful photography of land the conservancy has protected with the support of generous donations. The site also describes the organization's projects, and each project summary specifies the sources of funding.

By documenting an organization's accomplishments, a Web site allays people's uncertainty about an unknown group. Visiting an organization online develops familiarity and trust.

Gain Quick Results with E-Mail Marketing

E-mail marketing—sending mass e-mails that target a specific audience—lets you create HTML formatted e-mail messages that contain graphics, working links, and virtu-

ally unlimited colors and fonts, in addition to text. Companies that offer the service provide easy-to-use templates and wizards to simplify creation of these highly-evolved e-mail messages.

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Perhaps the most convenient feature available with e-mail marketing is list management. An organization using this third-party service isn't burdened by the work required to manage subscriber requests, and recipients can opt out at any time.

Affordability is also a compelling feature of e-mail marketing. Service providers charge for the number of e-mails sent, so a small nonprofit



Photos such as this one of Mitchell River draw in visitors to Piedmont Land Conservancy's Web site (www.piedmontland.org).

pays a very small and reasonable fee to send electronic communications to its constituents.

The recent experience of Piedmont Land Conservancy shows how effective e-mail marketing can be. The Conservancy learned of a contest in which the environmental project with the most online votes would receive \$3,000 from Patagonia, an environmentally-

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focused clothing and equipment manufacturer for outdoor pursuits. Votes were cast through Great Outdoor Provision's Web site.

By the time the Conservancy heard about the contest, only two weeks remained. The Conservancy used its e-mail marketing list to send supporters details about its project, the Piedmont Regional Greenway, and urge them to vote.

During the final week of voting, the Conservancy sent a follow-up e-mail, imploring recipients to forward the message to family and friends to get more votes. This practice, known as viral marketing, gave the Conservancy the advantage it needed to win the competition. The \$3,000 grant was a big return on the small effort of creating a message, sending it to constituents, and following up with viral marketing.

Seek Donations Online

Another growing trend is making donations online. While online fundraising certainly existed before 9/11, the events of that day in September brought it to everyone's consciousness as the American Red Cross raised more than \$67 million through online donations. Their database of supporters grew from 30,000 to over 700,000 names in just four months.³

During the devastation of 9/11, the desire of a few companies (including AOL, Cisco Systems, the Time Warner Foundation, and Yahoo) to make a difference prompt-

ed the founding of Network for Good (www.groundspring.org), an umbrella organization that collects online donations for over a million charities. Network for Good offers a secure server and reduced processing fees for credit card transactions; although a 3% service fee comes out of each donation, that's lower than what many banks and similar service providers charge.

Use Technology Wisely

The technology itself isn't what makes e-philanthropy beneficial but, rather, the way you apply that technology to build strong relationships. Supporters want to know that their money is spent wisely, their information will remain confidential, and they won't be bombarded with unwanted solicitations.

In an article about chief information officers (CIOs) in the nonprofit sector, John Soat comments that donors don't want charities to spend their money on technology. They see information technology (I.T.) as overhead, and that's not where they want their contributions to go.⁴ Instead, they like to

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fund programs, the more specific the better. The same is true of foundations. Although some enlightened funders are starting to give grants for technology, most prefer to fund individual projects.

Of course that doesn't mean you don't need to spend money on technology. It just means you have to find creative, low-cost solutions. For example, many software developers offer free, open-source software that's as good as—if not better than—commercial versions.⁵ You can also find no-cost technology information, resources, and support at TechSoup.org (www.techsoup.org). By taking advantage

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*Strand, Mike, "Is it Time to Consider New Ways to Communicate?" *Nonprofit World*, 25(4).

*Starred references are available at www.snpo.org/members.

of nonprofit technical resources offered free or at reduced rates, you can maximize your budget and realize greater donations, reach a wider audience, and support your mission for future success. ■

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Footnotes

¹See About.com: Nonprofit Organizations (www.nonprofit.about.com).

²Piedmont Land Conservancy is a land trust organization that preserves natural and scenic lands, farms, and open spaces in North Carolina's Piedmont area. Since 1999 the Conservancy has completed 138 land protection projects, protecting nearly 16,000 acres of property within its nine-county service area.

³Golden, Kate, "The Red Cross Challenged: Success on the Web," www.techsoup.org/learningcenter.

⁴Soat, John, "CIOs Uncensored: Charities Need Your Skills and Your Vision," *Information Week*, www.informationweek.com.

⁵Anderson, Ian, "How to Run your Organization with Free Software," *Nonprofit World*, 26 (6), www.snpo.org.