

Why You Need an App for Fundraising

That little device in the palm of your hand holds immense promise for raising funds.

By Steven A. Reed

The smartphone is revolutionary. Look around. Everywhere you go, at any time, you'll see people on their phones. That's assuming that you look up from *your* phone long enough to observe.

But has the fundraising profession caught on to the revolutionary benefits of mobile communications? Are you using mobile apps to your greatest advantage?

When a tool comes along that revolutionizes communication, we owe it to ourselves to check it out. But first, a word of comfort amid the whirl of technological change. Despite the revolution in technology, the basic – and eternal – needs of human communication aren't changing. So you needn't dispense with what has worked for a long time. The face-to-face style is still the best, and the rest of your communications will of necessity be adapted to the needs of the recipient and of the moment. It's a matter of getting the right blend.

Into that blend we must now stir the mobile app.

Until the mobile app revolution of recent years, nonprofits have largely depended on one-way communication, such as an e-mail blast or a printed newsletter. Even websites tend to be mostly one-way avenues.

The problem with newsletters and other periodic communications – as important as they are – is how they're distributed. By its very nature a newsletter is a publication, whether it goes out in print or is made available online. And a publication has lots of potentially time-consuming content – if readers are to do it justice.

That means readers must set aside a block of time – and uninterrupted time is hard to find. Thus, a major gifts officer or donor prospect with a full schedule, for example, is unlikely to do more than glance at a newsletter or lengthy e-mail. The intention is always to read it later. Rarely, however, does it ever get read. The print piece gets shuffled away. The e-mail gets pushed down the inbox in a flood of traffic. The online newsletter is out of sight and out of mind.

But an app lets you give “sips.” While the typical communication is a full glass of water, designed to be drunk all at once, a fundraising app provides a series of sips from an always-available source.

A mobile app moves you from “batched” forms of communication, which tend to be all-or-nothing affairs, toward more easily consumed bits of communication. If your app has two-way capability, you have even more power, because two-way communication is the best (and truest) kind. It draws people closer than the one-way variety ever can.

A two-way app lets users make comments, respond to polls and surveys, and the like. The human interplay strengthens your relationships. A mobile app helps you start a conversation and keep it going.

In addition to two-way communication, let's add one more major muscle group to our mobile app: segmentation. Now you have the power to communicate with one person, a few people, one distinct audience (such as your board), many audiences in various combinations, or all subscribers at once. You choose what combination works best for the audience and subject matter.

Each download of your app creates another potential member of whatever audience you're targeting. Your app users become members of this community. You “meet them” digitally in the way they've become accustomed to communicating – in the palms of their hands.

Here are some examples of how you might use your mobile app:

Harness the power of video. A video interview of a longtime donor, for instance, can inspire staff and campaign volunteers. Video is movement. It engages the senses of sight and sound. And it connects to people emotionally in a way that print or other electronic methods, such as e-mail, can't.

Teach your volunteers how to raise funds. Two-way communication is an effective way to train board members and campaign volunteers in the art of fundraising. You can present training materials and then ask questions to get a sense of your audience members' knowledge and needs.

Disseminate your case for giving to a general audience. You can communicate your case dramatically with videos, pictures, diagrams – even animation.

Tailor your case for an audience of one. Put instantaneous, targeted case information in the hands of



a prospect. Rather than handing prospects folders stuffed with print, ask them to download the app, which you can preload with information specific to each prospect's interests and level of giving. Then use the app to keep your prospect close over time with a variety of content – some tailored to the prospect and some of a general nature such as plans for new or expanded programs.

Keep it lively. Keep it fun. Use engagement tools, including fun knowledge testing and reward programs, as well as gamification techniques. A sense of humor engages people and leavens the serious side of fundraising.

Carry on dialogues with staff, board members, and other volunteers. The mobile app lets you keep in touch in the on-the-go style that people like.

Report to donors on the good work they're supporting, and send them articles and videos on subjects dear to their hearts (and perhaps tied in with their reasons for giving in the first place).

Communicate with prospects by levels of giving or kinds of gifts. You can, for example, target a donor group, planned giving prospects, or any discrete constituency with whom you have a need for continuing, two-way dialogue.

Connect with volunteers in the field during a campaign. Gather progress reports continually in the thick of a fundraising campaign – and benefit from what can amount to an “early-warning system.” Send tips-and-tactics-style suggestions or an inspirational video. Do it all within the virtual private network created by a two-way, targetable app.

Send consolidated campaign reports across the whole volunteer campaign, or use segmentation to communicate only with team captains.

Invite major donors and prospects to an event.

Analyze data. Use your mobile app's analytic capabilities to measure responses and other information.

Track potential donors identified and connections scheduled and made.


Keep connected with “connectors.” Communicate one-on-one with individual connectors and the frontline

fundraisers working with them. Your staff can communicate with their connectors individually or as a group.

Save money by letting all types of communication – newsletters, memos, video, audio, still photos, web portals, surveys, and polls – flow through your app.

Mobile apps are revolutionary because, until now, there hasn't been any communication channel that reaches so far and so precisely. This means you can talk with any segment in terms of their own interests. You can segment horizontally or vertically and customize communications for target audiences or send out the same message to everyone. Of course the medium will be strengthened if the message is strengthened – if the communication is real and purposeful and candid.

You can also use a mobile app internally to build a common platform for your staff to understand both the external environment and internal situation. Smaller doses of information – especially when customized for your staff – are far more likely than one-size-fits-all communications to be read and acted on in a culture-changing way.

That smartphone or tablet represents democracy of information in action. The implications are clear and dramatic. 

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Break Down Invisible Walls

Today's digital tools are opening up amazing ways to communicate with a variety of new audiences. Take a look at these articles at NonprofitWorld.org:

[How Mobile Marketing Can Work for You](#) (Vol. 32, No. 4)

[Accelerating Fundraising through Social Media](#) (Vol. 28, No. 3)

[How to Foster a Positive Funding Relationship](#) (Vol. 32, No. 4)

[Here Come the Millennials – and their Money](#) (Vol. 34, No. 3)

[Can You Create an App \(Or Something Better\) for That?](#) (Vol. 33, No. 4)

[The Peer-to-Peer Fundraising Evolution](#) (Vol. 30, No. 6)

[Diving into the Hispanic Donor Pool](#) (Vol. 34, No. 2)

[The Top Five Digital Tools You Should Be Using Right Now](#) (Vol. 34, No. 2)

[Deeper Donor Relationships = Increased Contributions](#) (Vol. 26, No. 4)

[How to Engage the Next Generation of Donors Now](#) (Vol. 29, No. 1)