

Can You Create an App (or Something Better) for That?

Think outside (and inside) the smart-phone box with these relationship-building experiences.

By Karen Eber Davis

It's opening night. You step into the hall and onto the podium and the audience erupts with applause. After your third bow, their thunderous cacophony quiets. Silent expectation fills the space. You pick up your conductor's baton and begin. . . .

Well . . . not actually. The crowd, the hall, and the applause are all in your imagination. In your hand is your smart phone. You have downloaded Bravo Gustavo, one of the Los Angeles Philharmonic's apps. The app turns your phone into a conductor's baton; you set the tempo by tapping your screen. Even though the experience is all in your hand, it draws you into a closer relationship with the Philharmonic.

The Bravo Gustavo App, named after the Philharmonic's conductor, was launched in 2009. It is one of a handful of successful nonprofit apps. From their shortage, we know that creating successful nonprofit sponsored apps is challenging. However, the strategy behind them, or at least the one behind Bravo Gustavo, is not. This column will help you to develop "experience apps" at your nonprofit.

What Is an "Experience App" & How Does It Work?


An experience app is an opportunity for individuals or groups to be involved in a piece of your mission. In turn, the experience provides your nonprofit opportunities to grow relationships. Experience apps work because they are rich in three ways:

- 1. They're interactive.** People are hungry for interesting experiences, learning, and immersion opportunities.
- 2. Experience apps draw people closer to your mission by engaging their emotions.** In the case of Bravo Gustavo, what audience member hasn't imagined the power, joy, and fun of being the conductor?
- 3. They grow relationships.** Over 50,000 people have downloaded the Bravo Gustavo App. That translates into many new relationships and enhanced branding for the LA Philharmonic. Increasingly, research is proving that social media involvement predicts other involvement.



Can You Create an App Experience at Your Nonprofit?

In all likelihood, yes. Here are three steps to get you started:

- 1. Identify experiences around your mission** to offer potential customers, donors, or community members. To create a list of ideas, think back. When you were new at your organization, what intrigued you? Think about now. What intrigues current customers, volunteers, and newcomers? Think about the future. What would be fun to share? For example, a modern art museum decides to offer patrons the opportunity to create modern art. Patrons learn that it is fun to make art, but not easy to create masterpieces.
- 2. Plan in advance how you'll leverage the experience.** Make sure your app includes invitations for people to get more involved with your organization. What will you offer those charmed by the experience app who want more? Gustavo Bravo is helping to grow the Los Angeles Philharmonic's brand and engage younger audiences. How will you link your app to your strategy to grow and improve your nonprofit?
- 3. Use technology – or not.** Your experience app may or may not involve social media. Besides the Bravo Gustavo App, the Audubon Bird App, which provides a field guide with 820 species of birds, uses technology. In contrast, Heifer International's travel packages involve attending emotionally satisfying Passing on the Gift® Ceremonies. During these ceremonies, recipients of Heifer animals give baby animals to other families. Likewise, Centre College in Danville, Kentucky, creates experience apps without technology. They enhance their major gifts program by inviting potential donors to interact with visiting guest lecturers. What can you offer to help people experience your mission, using social media or not? 



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