Closing the Online Donation

An Agitator Interview with:

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Agitator: *With all the buzz about hooking in to social networking sites like MySpace and Facebook, do you worry that nonprofits will overlook or be bored by the nuts & bolts stuff, like designing effective Donate pages?*

BL: Yes, clients can get "wooed" by the excitement in social media marketing, but it still comes down to having good, effective donation pages and other conversion mechanisms that ensure the actual conversion process. A jarring donation form or one that is poorly presented is a sure way to stop the momentum of the conversion process.

Agitator: *Are there any "must have" or "must do" rules for an effective Donate page?*

BL: Yes, there are a few good principles that can guide an approach:

- Make sure the "ask" is clear. Let the donor know why he or she is donating, how much is needed, and what the result will be due to their gift.
- Don't give them options from the donation form; don't link to other parts of your site from your donation form as this will definitely cause distraction.
- Give donors multiple giving options so link one-time gifts to sustaining gifts because you never know who would be interested in giving long term.
- Follow-up. This is key for long term relationships. For example, let the donor know "your $XX donation helped Spot the dog get the treatment he needed and Spot has now been adopted."
- Use dynamic content to leverage previous contributions. Check their previous highest donation level and make the form dynamic; increase the ask amount if they are a high spender.

Overall, the guiding usability principle is "less is more" – the less clicks to complete an action the better; and the less information you are collecting in the donation process the better. Long forms and too many clicks scare people away. And also speak in terms your users understand – don't reflect your organizational "speak". There is nothing worse than Web site language that clearly reflects an organization's org chart.

Agitator: *What are the 2-3 changes or improvements that most nonprofits need to make to their home page in the interest of capturing names and e-addresses?*

BL: I have two words – user testing. In the direct mail and traditional media world, organizations/companies always do test runs of a new mail piece or television ad before launching the whole thing; unfortunately, this methodology has not translated into the online advocacy or fundraising space quite yet. Groups tend to invest a ton of effort and resources into crafting a Web site and online strategy in a void with their own internal stakeholders and make huge assumptions that it resonates with their target audiences.

We are pushing our clients to move towards a more iterative approach to collect user feedback in a constant way to then direct site layout and changes. We usability test Web sites via eye tracking tools and also other techniques that allow you to observe how users would try to make a donation or if they can even understand where to go from a home page when asked to "make a gift". We don't assume that a targeted Web site about environmental issues should be presented in the same way as a faith-based organization's site just because they are both trying to raise money.

Unfortunately, there is no silver bullet here, such as using the color red or a type of font generates results.

Agitator: *Tell me the average age of your web designers ...the folks doing the day-to-day work. Can a 30 year old design a satisfactory web experience for a 60 year old donor?*

BL: The average age of our Interactive Services team members is about 28 years old. Again, that is why user testing is so important; we shouldn't assume that we can design or speak to every audience in the same way.

However, thanks to Microsoft, we have been conditioned to surf the Web or read email in the same ways. We typically look for navigation at the top and right side, look for main content in the middle of a page and we typically don't really look in the upper right-hand corner or at the bottom of a page for content. So if you have your donation button in either of those two places, you are in trouble.

I must say though, today there are real disciplines in universities and colleges that teach methodologies around interactive design and user experience (there certainly weren't those programs when we had the first dot.com explosion…all of us were just learning on-the-job). Now, new staff come into interactive positions knowing how, for example, to make sites accessible for users with visual impairments. This is helpful because now that baby-boomers are in their sixties, we need to use accessibility approaches to communicate with them. For example, we can add a text re-sizer on the sites, and also make sure that when users blow up text to be really huge on a page, it doesn't break or ruin the whole experience. We are also very sensitive to browser testing and screen resolutions and don't assume people all view things in the same way – that is key. We have clients whose target market is still using Eudora, WebTV – you get the picture. So I think we do a pretty good job of thinking all those factors through and we really educate nonprofits about the dynamic audience landscape out there…one size does not fit all.

Agitator: *Commentators in the commercial online marketing space make a huge point about synching up the look, focus and message of a Donate page with the online content -- be it a banner ad, a lead on the home page, an email appeal -- that's driven the prospect to that page in the first place. How important is that in fundraising? Why do so few groups seem to do it?*

BL: It is extremely important. We just had a client launch an annual campaign – they did an integrated campaign with a television program that pushed people to register via the Web site to receive a pertinent piece of information that was referenced in the TV program. They immediately saw thousands of unique visitors within the first day and now have new prospects for their house-file.

This example is definitely still the minority. I think the nonprofit and public advocacy space is about 3 – 4 years behind the commercial guys – and unfortunately, is much less funded from a staffing perspective. Our clients have to wear multiple hats – fundraiser, marketer, business operations, etc. – and usually don't have time to run sophisticated, multi-channel campaigns. I definitely think that will be changing though.

Lastly, we still have a way to go to get Web sites out of the hands of the IT departments in many nonprofits – most of the time the lack of coordination is because the fundraising efforts (direct mail, etc.) are in the development side and the Web site is held hostage by IT. The more sophisticated groups get that the Web needs to be an integrated marketing vehicle and should be a constantly evolving face/hub of the organization.

Agitator: *The AHA example points to the importance of having a user-friendly flow to the online donating process. What typically drives or scares prospects off after they've already started the process of giving?*

BL: Well, unfortunately, the biggest challenge is one we can't control and that is someone's own browser or its settings. With Vista, it has extra sensitive security controls so you get a lot of security popups, when the risk is really minimal. With older donors who are already skeptical of putting their credit card into a Web form – this is really a detractor. Also, nonprofits definitely need to make sure their secure certificate is valid – that can really scare people off if they see a message about its expiration and that the donation process is not secure.

Again, less is more. A lot of steps can scare off a potential donor – having 4 - 5 page, click, process can be cumbersome and cause people to give up. A slow site is another way to cause frustration, where people are not sure if the transaction is going through, which causes abandonment. Lastly, making sure a clear demarcation of what fields are required and what is not, is key – if people try to advance and don't understand why they are being kicked back to the original form – that is a definite way to lose folks.

Agitator: *Are there a couple of examples you can give where the client has really gotten the Donate page and process right?*

BL: Medical Team International has a good, simple approach - http://www.medicalteams.org/site/PageServer?JServSessionIdr011=i3bzknf983.app14a&pagename=don_main

www.myaspca.org – a good example of a campaign site where there is more of an overall microsite experience, but still a donation page front and center.

Clients are also using people's comfort with e-commerce to facilitate donation opportunities within the familiar purchase process - https://secure2.convio.net/oan/site/EcommerceCheckout?store_id=1181&PAGENUM=1&JServSessionIdr011=yz798kfc31.app2a

Agitator: *Have you tested any other bells & whistles on the Donate page, such as reinforcing the ask with video, or offering a link to a live operator?*

BL: We just did a campaign with a client where we made a dynamic refrigerator so when clients put in a donation, it spits out how many meals that gift feeds a family. Many organizations are taking this approach of "productizing" donations so people can really see what their gift does at an individual impact level.

We have also experimented with splash pages as a bridge between an appeal and a donation form. Preliminarily this is turning out to be a good technique to convert new donors, but maybe not needed for existing donors.

Interestingly, small bells and whistles are still most favorable – maybe that is because we are more often than not communicating with an older donor base. We have one faith-based client who is using a countdown clock to raise funds for June – due to overall efforts (email appeals, etc.) they will raise $240,000 in June alone. Thermometers are also still very popular.

We have had two or three large clients use video in an annual appeal and it is still unknown as to whether the investment in the video production is worth the results. The technology is not there to put the video in the body of the email yet and have it be consistently viewed in all email platforms, but viewers who click though and view the video on a site seem to be more inclined to make a donation.

Agitator: *Are you willing to place a marker on what kind of closure rate a nonprofit should expect from its online donating process? That is, once the prospect goes to the Donate page, what percentage should actually complete the process and make a gift? What's the highest closure rate you've seen? What would you consider a failure?*

BL: There is still a huge variation here and it's so dependent on many factors. Organizations that are doing "news-cycle fundraising" are seeing the highest results – this is the appeal during a weather disaster or other kind of tragedy. Nonprofits who treat their fundraising program as a constant campaign cycle can see good, constant results. Those who have the online tools, but don't do the campaigning are not going to see the fruits of their technology investment. Just because you build it, doesn't mean people automatically come…

We see email click rates all over the map – .05% to 2%...donate rates are lower – the key is a consistent program, targeted at the individual level with a messaging roadmap and strategy.

Agitator: *Would you say the same or different rates if the "call to action" was something softer than donate, like add your name to a petition?*

BL: Definitely, I have seen click-throughs for a petition sign up at 30% - 50% with conversions at 10 – 20% (this is high, but I have seen it); asking for a donation is much more difficult. But, once you have them on the petition, a good, thoughtful program, can turn activists into donors.