

Development Director's Letter

Practical Advice for the Nonprofit Manager



November, 2001

How To Handle Fundraising Appeals After Sept. 11

Many charities with missions unrelated to the relief efforts after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks have witnessed a drop in donations. Fall is traditionally the season when many groups rev up their direct-mail and annual-fund campaigns, but many are unsure how to proceed.

For some expert advice on ways to handle fundraising efforts during this crisis, DDL talks to fundraising consultant and nonprofit marketing expert Vinay Bhagat, founder and CEO of Convio, an Austin, Texas-based developer of Internet software designed to help nonprofits fundraise and manage constituent relationships.

Summing up his advice: Show awareness of the Sept. 11 events without appearing to take advantage of them; remind your constituencies you're still around, doing your job; and be flexible in finding new sources of funding to replace those you lose.

Convio serves the full spectrum of nonprofit organizations including national and regional advocacy groups, museums, public television and radio stations, educational institutions, health-care entities and performing-arts organizations.

Bhagat holds degrees from the Harvard Business School, Stanford U. and Cambridge U. in England.

DDL: What advice would you give to nonprofits who need to begin or sustain a campaign to raise funds but have concerns about being insensitive taking advantage of the Sept. 11 attacks?

Bhagat: First, acknowledge what has happened and show your compassion and concern. For example, CARE sent out 400,000 mail pieces to their

constituency to acknowledge what had happened but intentionally did not include a reply envelope. In addition, they called major donors in the New York region to see if they had been affected. Harvard U. set-up a Website to facilitate information about the whereabouts and safety of alumni.

Second, reinforce the importance of the work your organization does and how you continue to need donors' support to function.

The president of Planned Parenthood sent out an E-mail which started by acknowledging the tragedy but then stressed the importance of the work they do and the need for the ongoing support of donors. It was not a direct solicitation per se, but a reinforcement, stewardship-type of message.

Third, if there is a relevant service you can provide in the context of what has happened or continues to happen with terrorist activity, warfare and scares in the United States and abroad, then do so.

For example, the Austin Children's Museum sent out information to donors (i.e., parents) to help them counsel their children on the Sept. 11 events. Again, they did not solicit any contribution as part of this outreach, but they reinforced the value of their institution in doing so, which they strongly believe will strengthen loyalty and boost future fundraising efforts.

There are a few themes to the strategies I've outlined above: proactively communicate with constituents to reinforce your organization's ongoing work, relevance and need for support; hold off on direct solicitation from the first communication. And electronic communication over the Internet can be more timely and far more cost effective than mail.

DDL: What advice would you give to nonprofits who have recently lost a corporate donor who decided to redirect funding to the relief effort?

Bhagat: This has been a relatively common occurrence. The only tenable strategy is to diversify funding sources, either by turning to new corporate donors and/or taking a more extensive approach with individuals. Some organizations are turning to the most loyal major donors to ask for increased support in these difficult times.

DDL: What steps should nonprofits take to get back on track?

Bhagat: First, start communicating. Going completely silent allows important donor relationships to wane and wither .

Second, find creative and cost-effective ways to communicate and fundraise. Build your capabilities to run electronic campaigns and donor communications.

The Austin Children's Museum ran an E-mail campaign to 1,300 people and a direct-mail campaign to 5,000. The

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