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Olympians Inspire Donations for Right to Play

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International nonprofit Right to Play was thrust into the spotlight during February's Winter Olympic Games in Torino, Italy, when medal-winning athletes donated their prize money to the organization, prompting an influx of Web traffic and donations and the question of how to retain new donors' support.

Right to Play works to bring sport and play to disadvantaged children in 23 countries including Azerbaijan, Chad, Ethiopia, Ghana, Pakistan, Rwanda, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Uganda and Zambia. The 5-year-old organization was founded by four-time Olympic gold medalist speed skater Johann Olav Koss of Norway and is supported by an international team of Olympic, Paralympic and professional athletes.

The nonprofit got its first big Olympic exposure this year when U.S. speed skater Joey Cheek pledged his \$40,000 gold and silver medal winnings to Right to Play and called on the public to give as well.

Thanks to Right to Play's partnership with application service provider Convio, Cheek had a donation page within the group's Web site, allowing people to give to his online campaign. Convio's TeamRaiser function lets supporters of an organization create their own Web page to raise funds as well as e-mail the link to family and friends.

"Joey's online campaign collected donations from the general public inspired by his great humanitarian effort," said Samantha McDonald, communications officer of Right to Play International, Toronto.

Cheek's campaign raised \$16,000 in U.S. donations as of March 20 but overall U.S. donations to Right to Play skyrocketed, too.

Canadian speed skater Clara Hughes also has a TeamRaiser page at www.righttoplay.com and followed suit by donating \$10,000 of her winnings and challenging all Canadians to give to the group. As of March 20, Hughes' page generated 875 donations totaling nearly \$192,000.

Obviously, the exposure drove donors to the Web, whether to the athletes' individual TeamRaiser pages or to the general donation page. Unique visitors to the Right to Play site rose to 44,700 in February versus 15,600 in January, McDonald said. Page views

rose from 148,500 to 457,300, and the number of hits soared from 385,500 to 1,098,100.

Donations after the start of the Olympics were \$230,000 in Canada and \$34,500 in the United States, with 95 percent and 97 percent, respectively, being first-time donors. Prior to the Games, the group had raised \$80,000 in Canada and \$26,500 in the United States online since implementing Convio's online donation system in December 2004.

In addition, 1,200 people signed up for the Right to Play e-mail newsletter since the Olympics, raising the subscriber file to 3,500.

The next step is for Right to Play to make the best use of its new donors. To start, a personal letter from Cheek and Hughes will thank all the people who donated to their Right to Play campaigns, McDonald said.

"In 2005, 49 percent of Right to Play funding came from various government partners and UN agencies while 51 percent was received from the public, corporations and foundations," McDonald said. "The attention we received at the Olympics has helped our organizational strategy to increase the amount of funds from the public, and we hope to turn the one-time donors into monthly donors, or simply engage them at a higher level."

Right to Play plans a contact strategy to inform new donors about the specific examples of the work the organization is doing around the globe and how they can get more involved, she said.

"Many donors are already wanting to throw a fundraising event for Right to Play in their school or sport club," she said. "We have many ideas and online tools to help the public with their fundraising needs, and we hope to continue sharing these ideas and showcasing our success stories on our Web site and in our newsletters."

A Convio executive lauded Right to Play's use of its TeamRaiser tool and offered a suggestion.

"I think it's exciting how effectively Right to Play has used our constituent-led fundraising product," said Gene Austin, CEO of Convio, Austin, TX. "They should really make time to better understand the new donors by perhaps sending them a survey via e-mail."

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