FOCUS ON: E-PHILANTHROPY

BY GENE AUSTIN

Gather Ye Screen Names While Ye May

Technology is still applying; and these donors that you
reach today, tomorrow might be a-flying.
(With deepest apologies to Robert Herrick)

The first step in any effective e-mail marketing strategy is to build an e-mail file — the fuel for your e-mail marketing efforts. Many nonprofit groups discover that, despite their large and detailed constituent databases, they have few supporter e-mail addresses on record. Although the prospect of building a usable e-mail file can seem daunting, you easily can grow your e-mail file using several proven tactics.

Gather e-mail addresses offline

Even if you're just starting out with an online pres-

ence, you easily can begin developing your e-mail file by integrating e-mail address collection into your existing marketing or fundraising initiatives. Every time you communicate with supporters or prospects, take advantage of the opportunity to collect their e-mail addresses.

■ **Gather addresses through every interaction.**

Planned interactions such as renewal appeals, membership drives and event invitations are perfect times to ask for e-mail addresses. Simply add a field for e-mail collection to all response forms. At events where you will interact with a large number of constituents,

consider setting out a newsletter sign-up sheet, or conduct a giveaway for attendees who drop in cards with their names and e-mail addresses.

■ **Promote the benefits of e-mail communication.**

When asking for e-mail addresses offline, emphasize to constituents the benefits of providing this information. Remind them that communicating online saves your organization money and administrative manpower, allowing more funds and human resources to go directly to fulfilling the organization's mission.

Also, underscore the advantages of timely communication — with e-mail, the organization can respond in real time to compelling events and update constituents quickly about important news, developments, events and programs.

Gather e-mail addresses online

Your Web site is the best source for reaching new prospects and existing constituents, and collecting their e-mail addresses. Web site visitors are interested in your organization (or they would not be coming to your site) and most likely will be more willing to provide their e-mail addresses.

■ **Drive traffic to your site with each communication.**

Maximize Web site traffic by including your URL wherever you list phone numbers, mailing addresses or other contact information. This includes brochures, advertisements, staff e-mail signatures, voice messages, phone "hold" or introductory messages, and business cards. Tell prospects and supporters about the resources available to them on the Web site, and keep the online content current, informative and engaging so visitors will return.

■ **Promote the benefits of online registration.**

Make registration compelling for site visitors so they will provide the information you want. Create special benefits for registered members and link to a separate page explaining the perks, such as free e-mail newsletters, advance notification of upcoming events, members-only pricing for ticket sales or special premiums.

Then, invite site visitors to register by using an action phrase such as, "Register to receive updates" or "Sign up for our educational newsletter."

■ **Provide an online registration mechanism.**

Use a Web-based form that allows site visitors to register — preferably one that automatically captures their information in an online database. The registration form should be easy to complete, a fast read. Minimize the number of required fields that registrants have to complete — the more fields, the less incentive to register. Provide examples if the system requires data to be entered in a particular way (e.g., "Please enter dates in mm/dd/yyyy format") to avoid frustrating registrants.

Theories in Practice

Jo Sullivan, senior vice president of development at the ASPCA, talks about e-mail.

FundRaising Success: How does ASPCA gather e-mail addresses?

Jo Sullivan: We provide an option on every direct mail piece in our program (about 28 million total). The offer is for our free weekly e-news alert, as well as [an opportunity to become] a member of our advocacy brigade for legislative issues regarding animals.

FS: Once you have the addresses, what does ASPCA do with them?

JS: [It depends on whether] we gathered them at the time a gift was made or if someone logged on and registered for our e-news alert. If a donation was made, [the e-mail address] goes into an integrated fundraising tract receiving communications both on- and offline, as well as telemarketing. [E-mails collected through registration only], we consider "warm prospects" and work to convert them to donors through online membership offers.

FS: Where does ASPCA stand as far as its e-mail marketing/solicitation strategy is concerned?

JS: We are pretty sophisticated, I think. For the past three years, the ASPCA has cultivated and tracked online donor behavior. Preliminary [Lifetime Value statistics] show us that donors with e-mail addresses give up to twice as much as those without during their time on file. The program has grown over 150 percent in the past three years as our methods become more sophisticated and integrated with the offline efforts.

FS: Any general thoughts on e-fundraising?

JS: Any organization that is not already aggressively gathering e-mail addresses from donors, offering donors the opportunity to give on- as well as offline or developing acquisition/conversion strategies for visitors of their site who are not already donors will have a tough time catching up in the fundraising arena. Donors are more and more demanding and sophisticated in their giving, and nonprofits need to be ready to meet those needs on- and offline.

■ **Use "quick registration."**

Instead of requiring site visitors to complete a lengthy registration form, consider requesting only basic information (such as name and e-mail address) in order for a supporter to sign up to receive updates, e-mail newsletters and other communications.

Once you have captured this basic information, use follow-up communications such as online surveys to gather more information about each constituent, e.g., interests and motivation for getting involved with your organization.

■ **Give site registration prominent placement.**

Dedicate a consistent area of your home page to promoting online registration. Place it in an eye-catching spot "above the fold" to reflect its importance.

Consider using an image or graphic to draw attention to this message. Promote registration throughout the rest of your Web site by, for example, including a registration link on every page.

Viral marketing

"Forward to a friend" e-mail campaigns, also known as viral marketing, can help you reach new supporters and grow your e-mail file efficiently. In a viral campaign, the organization sends an e-mail with a call to action (such as a solicitation for donations, event invitation or public policy action alert) to the existing e-mail file or to selected groups of constituents in the file.

The e-mail also asks recipients to forward the message to friends, relatives and co-workers so they, too, can get involved. When a new supporter from this previously untapped network of friends clicks through to your Web site to register and take action, you can request permission to communicate with him in the future.

Imagine the effect of one person sending 10 e-mails and then each friend forwarding another 10 ... and so on. If this happens five times, a single e-mail would reach 100,000 people.

E-mail greeting cards, or "e-cards," are another way to build an e-mail address list through viral marketing. With e-cards, constituents can create their own e-mails — using your e-mail greeting card template, with your organization's branding — to send to their friends and family.

E-mail appending services

If you have an extensive donor or supporter database but only a small number of current e-mail addresses, consider using an e-mail appending service to quickly begin connecting with supporters via e-mail. These services add a constituent's e-mail address to the constituent's existing record in your database. The e-mail address is obtained by matching records from your database against a third-party database to produce a corresponding e-mail address.

However, match-rates vary, and while appending solves the problem of matching e-mail addresses to current supporters, it is not a substitute for a long-term strategy to build and maintain your e-mail file.

Although building an organization's e-mail file can seem like a huge undertaking, using some basic techniques makes it simple to get started or accelerate the growth of an existing list. And in today's increasingly wired world, developing and maintaining a good e-mail file is one of the most important things you can do to support your organization's direct marketing and constituent communications.

With these simple and effective steps, your organization can begin building an e-mail file of interested constituents, and you'll be on your way to a more effective e-mail marketing program. ◆

Gene Austin is CEO of Convio Inc. and has more than two decades of experience in product management, marketing and sales. You can read more about this topic by downloading "The Basics of E-mail Marketing for Nonprofits: Using E-mail Communications to Build and Strengthen Constituent Relationships Online" at www.convio.com/ e-mailguidedownload.

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