

FOCUS ON: E-MAIL ♦ NEW DONORS

# FundRaising

## Success

NOVEMBER 2006

Laurie Conkerton, vice  
president for development,  
Audubon Nature Institute

### A MAMMOTH MESS

With many of its facilities in ruins, and its staff, customers, volunteers and donors scattered by Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans' Audubon Nature Institute turned to the Web to raise the money needed to get back to its mission.

[fundraisingsuccessmag.com](http://fundraisingsuccessmag.com)



## COVER STORY

# A MAMMOTH MESS

In August 2005, New Orleans' Audubon Nature Institute was on the verge of beginning a \$100 million capital campaign. Philadelphia-based development, marketing and management consultants Schultz & Williams had just finished a feasibility study for the organization, and all signs were "go."

"I don't think I ever saw so many positive signs for the success of a capital campaign," Schultz & Williams President Scott Schultz says. "They were — they are — a beloved institution in that city. People really cared about it, people were really engaged. We felt very good about moving forward with this capital campaign."

Then, on the morning of Aug. 26, "There was this thing in the Gulf," recounts Laurie Conkerton, vice president for development for ANI. That "thing in the Gulf" turned out to be Hurricane Katrina, one of the costliest and most deadly hurricanes in the history of the United States, which devastated New Orleans and much of the Gulf Coast.

### Caught in the storm

ANI is a nonprofit organization that operates 10 nature-based facilities in New Orleans that collectively attract 2.2 million visitors annually. When voluntary evacuations were announced, ANI quickly made the decision to close its facilities to the public. Staff prepared for the storm, securing offices and animal enclosures, putting computers in plastic bags, and moving files.

ANI had a disaster plan in place, which it reviewed annually. Every



BY ABNY SANTICOLA

## COVER STORY

year, as hurricane season began, the organization would make sure it had things such as alternative sources of fuel and extra animal feed; it double-checked supply lines and sent copies of important animal records to a safe haven. It also had business-interruption insurance. But the plan was only meant to sustain the organization for a two-week period at most.

“We were set up for a normal evacuation, which is where you leave town for a couple of days, you come

back, clean up and open up because the storm hasn’t come anywhere near you,” Conkerton says. “Our facilities had resources to function for two weeks without contact with the outside world. But I don’t think anybody imagined that we would be closed for two and a half months after a storm went through.”

And there were other things that ANI had *not* been prepared to implement, such as a structured strategy for extended communications with employees in the event of a massive shut down.

The storm’s intense winds knocked out power at ANI’s aquarium. Backup generators struggled to maintain the facility’s life-support system, but in the end, most of the 10,000 aquatic animals in the collection died. Established tree canopies — outdoor ceil-

ings, so to speak, formed when the leaves from different trees meet — at the research center, Audubon Park and Woldenberg Riverfront Park were severely damaged, as well. The zoo was in a bit better shape, as only a few animals in its collection were lost.

After the storm hit, ANI’s parks became satellite operational centers for first responders. And though the zoo, aquarium and research center all are located on or adjacent to the Mississippi River on some of the city’s higher ground, the nature center was under water, as were many areas in New Orleans.

Within a week, ANI scrambled to find remote office space in Baton Rouge, La., setting up temporary offices where it could get operations back on track. Staff had been evacuated and were spread out across states, with some people in Baton Rouge and others in Texas, such as Web master Denny Juge, who was in Austin, and Conkerton, who was in Dallas.

ANI receives very little city or state funding for operations. Historically, most of its funds have been self-generated from front-gate admissions, food and beverage sales, catering and the gift shop, and membership. Hence, most of its fundraising had been aimed at raising money for new exhibits or other capital projects.

But with its facilities in need of repair, its staff off site, its membership base scattered across the country and dealing with life-and-death issues of their own, and its admission gate closed, ANI realized that its fundraising focus needed to change. The capital campaign was temporarily shelved, and the organization looked at its options. Though ANI had a Web site in place and sent monthly update e-mails to constituents, its site was fairly passive and had not been a major fundraising channel. But with phone lines, including most cell phones, down, and the postal system disabled, the Internet was the only viable way to rally support.



### In Case of Emergency ...

#### Gene Austin, CEO of Convio, on putting an immediate-response online fundraising program together:

“Get online immediately and take advantage of your e-communication capabilities by reaching out to your constituents and letting them know what’s happened to your organization. I would also recommend moving quickly to put in place a micro-campaign, meaning re-orient your organization’s Web site around the help you need and make it extremely visible on the site. You should consume the homepage with, ‘These are ways you can help our organization.’ It doesn’t all have to be monetary, but your message should be very clear to Web site visitors.

“Then, as things move forward, it’s extremely important to let everyone know what progress is being made with your recovery efforts. Let supporters know of any changes involving your organization’s needs. For example, perhaps you no longer need financial assistance, but instead need clothing or food or other items. You need to keep people engaged online as much as possible, which helps encourage additional giving and support. This also helps motivate your supporters to recruit other individuals to get involved, so that you’re actually growing your organization’s constituent base and creating a larger following.”

## COVER STORY

"Keep in mind, over a million people from the New Orleans area out of 1.3 million people were out of here. Those are our members, those are our customers, those are our donors, and our volunteers. They were all over the country," Conkerton says.

The Internet was the only way ANI could reach out to these constituents, and it offered the added opportunity to touch concerned citizens across

of local and national media, and it needed to leverage that media coverage by having a relevant Web site to drive people to. The organization's server was down, but with Juge in Austin and Conkerton in Dallas, the two were able to meet with Convio and get a site — that would normally take three months to launch — up within 36 hours.

The first priority was to arm ANI

disasters.

Initial components of the site were a request for donations, a letter from ANI CEO Ron Foreman, a press release about the animal relocation and a Web-based Gmail address to contact the organization. Until ANI's mail server was up and running again in October, Conkerton says she was a regular at the public library in Seven Points, Texas, where every day she'd take over a computer station to check and respond to constituent e-mails. Some of the e-mails included pictures from people who had visited the aquarium days before the storm as a sort of tribute, others were from extended family members of employees who hadn't been heard from since Katrina, and others offered things such as helicopters to airlift food to the animals.

As soon as the site was up and running, the organization sent out an emergency e-mail to its existing e-mail list of 30,000 and urged those constituents to ask their friends and family members to donate. The organization also urged supporters to add its Web address to their e-mail signature line to drum up additional awareness and support.

ANI set out to raise \$60 million from private and public sources over the course of the next 36 months, and it broke the campaign into three phases. The first goal was to raise \$10 million within six months so that it could open its doors, feed and care for the animals, and sustain a base number of employees. Its second goal was to raise another \$25 million in 18 months for operations plus damage repairs and building an infrastructure that safeguards against similar situations. By the 36-month mark, ANI planned to raise another \$25 million for projects that were in the works when Katrina hit, including final production of its IMAX film "Hurricane on the Bayou," a documentary on Louisiana's wetlands that was in the midst of being filmed when

### Audubon Nature Institute

6500 Magazine St. New Orleans, LA 70118

**Web site:** [www.auduboninstitute.org](http://www.auduboninstitute.org)

**Phone:** 800.774.7394

**Operating Budget (Pre-Katrina):** Roughly \$40 million

**Operating Budget (2006):** \$26 million

**Mission:** Audubon Nature Institute celebrates the wonders of nature by fulfilling its mission to exhibit the diversity of wildlife; preserve native Louisiana habitats; provide opportunities for recreation in natural settings; educate visitors about the natural world; and enhance the care and survival of wildlife through research and conservation.



the nation. Indeed, as a major visitor attraction in New Orleans, about 80 percent of ANI's visitation comes from out-of-towners, giving it some level of familiarity beyond the city.

Conkerton turned to Schultz for advice, and he recommended the organization enlist the help of Austin-based online constituent relationship management solutions provider Convio, which already was working with the American Red Cross in its online efforts to raise funds for Katrina recovery.

### Regroup and respond

ANI had no time to waste. By the time it got a fundraising strategy in place, almost two weeks had passed since the storm, and it desperately was in need of funds to move its remaining aquarium collection to facilities with power. Its efforts got the attention

with a way to communicate with constituents and let them know what was going on for the organization, and then move into a fundraising strategy where they could communicate proactively with supporters.

Getting a recovery message on the site was crucial. The primary focus of the Web site previously had been ANI's facilities and all it had to offer visitors.

"It was, 'Come to our facilities, we have all these great things to see and do; this is why you want to come here,' versus, 'We're a nonprofit organization and we desperately need your support to fulfill our mission.' So we had to kind of shift the focus," Conkerton says.

But the positioning of its message had to be handled with tact as well, given the fact that ANI's need was competing with serious human



*'Keep in mind, over a million people from the New Orleans area out of 1.3 million people were out of here. Those are our members, those are our customers, those are our donors, and our volunteers. They were all over the country.'*

— LAURIE CONKERTON, VICE PRESIDENT FOR DEVELOPMENT,  
AUDUBON NATURE INSTITUTE

---

the storm hit.

One of the first online fundraising campaigns ANI ran was a virtual adoption where people could adopt an animal for a set donation amount. A second campaign in early 2006 called Bring Back Our Fish centered around raising funds to restock the aquarium. It included a contest for supporters to send in stories of their favorite aquarium memories, with the winner earning a free trip to the aquarium. And ANI recently launched another campaign in conjunction with the release of "Hurricane on the Bayou," in which it asked constituents to send e-cards to friends and family to build awareness of the movie and ANI's continuing need.

### Worldwide wonder

Despite the devastation it wrought, Hurricane Katrina snapped into focus the benefits of using the Internet and took ANI's online strategy to another level.

"One of the things that ANI found out is the Web is an absolute lifeblood because chances are your Web capabilities are not going to go down in the event of a disaster," Convio CEO Gene Austin says. "They can now appreciate the CRM potential of the Internet and the ability to really build relationships with their membership."

Schultz adds that he's worked with many organizations recovering from natural disasters in his 30-year career, and the biggest difference in the case

of Katrina was the online giving capabilities that were available.

"Crisis [management] means a lot when there's a disaster like this. If you can communicate with your donors right away, they're going to respond to you. The Internet's made it so much more instant, and it's never going to go back in the other direction, that's for sure," Schultz says.

One of the biggest shifts in terms of ANI's online program is its new focus on measurement of things such as clickthrough rates, funds raised online, etc. The management structure for the Web site has changed, as well. In the past, all ANI departments wanting content added to the Web site would contact Juge, who was the sole manager of the site. The Web site now is managed by a committee, which meets once a month to select Web content and hierarchy.

The organization's increased focus on the Web has required an internal shift, too.

"More people are aware that the site is not only a communication tool, it's also a relationship-building tool, and this is a way of actually bringing revenue into the organization," Conkerton says.

"New Orleanians, in general, have become a lot more comfortable using the Web for transactions," she says, citing a rise in online banking and bill paying in the area post-Katrina. "Blogging became the way evacuees

knew what was going on back home. So we've all become a lot more Web-savvy than we used to be."

The number of people purchasing and renewing memberships online is up. As of July, ANI already had raised roughly \$200,000 online for the year, more than it's brought in through the Web in any prior year.

Conkerton says at the same time the organization reached out for gifts of all sizes via the Web, it touched base with its major donors — those who had given ANI \$10,000 or more in a given year — by phone or e-mail as soon as it was able. Several of those contacts yielded additional donations, many from corporate donors whose companies had emergency funding available to organizations affected by the storm. Fundraising events were held in Aspen, Colo., New York and Cincinnati; and the entire zoo and aquarium industry embraced Audubon's recovery during "Audubon October," an awareness and fund drive held on site at facilities nationwide. A number of donors also joined ANI's board as "huggers" to greet and — literally — hug the 66,000 guests admitted to the zoo for free when it first reopened Thanksgiving weekend.

In the months following the hurricane, giving to the Katrina recovery effort became less of a knee-jerk reaction and more of a thought process, as people began asking deeper questions about the future of New Orleans: Is it coming back? Will it survive?

"People are going to put those giving priorities up there now and take a look at where [ANI is] versus everything else. It's not only about rebuilding those institutions, it's a part of rebuilding New Orleans," Schultz says.

"They contribute a lot to the economy as well as the education and quality of life in New Orleans," he continues. "They're really an important part of the fabric of the city."

Schultz says the key now, more than a year after Katrina, is to work



## COVER STORY

at cultivating major gifts from past major donors and one-time recovery supporters, which tend to take more time than the spontaneous gifts given via the Web immediately following the disaster.

### Lessons learned

Conkerton stresses the need for organizations and departments within organizations to have a disaster plan and to review it on an ongoing basis, as it's easy to overlook even the most basic things.

"It seems so obvious, but electronic versions of every document that you would need to produce a grant request need to be at the top of a fundraiser's evacuation list," she says. "It's the kind of thing you don't think of because when you're in your office, you always have easy access to that information. When you don't have it, you miss it."

The question of what to do with staff was something else not readily addressed in ANI's disaster plan. Communicating with displaced staff with phone lines down and cell phones non-functional was difficult, to say the least. What's more, with its facilities closed and no visitors to serve — and the fact that it needed every spare penny for recovery efforts — ANI had to let staff go.

"There are decisions that you have to make with limited information that you don't really think about ahead of time — like how long we'll be able to pay people, how long we'll be able to cover them from an insurance standpoint, when do we make the decision to cut positions, what positions need to be cut, all of those types of things," Conkerton says, adding that ANI went from 700 employees to fewer than 200 after Katrina.

In addition to fundraising changes, the organization has improved its disaster plan. It now has developed the capability to switch the employee emergency hotline to an out-of-area-code number and an intranet registration function that

### ANI's family of museums and parks include:

- ◆ Audubon Park
- ◆ Audubon Zoo
- ◆ Woldenberg Riverfront Park
- ◆ Audubon Aquarium of the Americas
- ◆ Entergy IMAX® Theatre
- ◆ Freeport-McMoRan Audubon Species Survival Center
- ◆ Audubon Louisiana Nature Center
- ◆ Audubon Center for Research of Endangered Species
- ◆ Audubon Wilderness Park
- ◆ Audubon Insectarium

collects evacuation contact information. Employees must now check in within 72 hours after a storm, and Blackberries and WiFi cards have been distributed to key staff members. It also has a set satellite location in place.

Down but not out, ANI and New Orleans are getting back on their feet, slowly but surely. ANI achieved its six-month goal, and while Conkerton says the 18-month goal is challenging, she's confident that the \$25 million figure is well within reach. Ever the fundraiser, she adds, "If your readers want to make sure our recovery takes root, their support would help immensely!"

Until it has more resources, ANI is still running in recovery mode. It typically produces a different membership decal every year, for example, but has continued to use leftover decals from 2005. It also typically produced four, four-color member publications annually, but given mail and other resource challenges, it produced just one in 2006 and probably will produce no more than two in 2007.

All of the organization's facilities now are open five days a week for winter, but with shortened hours of operation. For example, pre-Katrina,

the zoo was open from 9:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. and now is open from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Attendance for the year is expected to be 30 percent of its normal yearly average. Conkerton says that attendance currently is running slightly ahead of budgeted numbers, but adds hesitantly that survival for the organization — much like the rest of New Orleans — is still a tenuous balance.

"Everyone, no matter how little or how major their personal losses have been, is impacted by the region's recovery, and things will fall through the cracks," she says. "We're all learning to be more patient and to realize what's essential rather than what's done because it's always been that way."

Just a little more than a year ago, ANI operated the top three most-visited attractions in Louisiana, with an economic impact of more than \$330 million a year for New Orleans, and it served as a tremendous science resource for the public schools and the surrounding community.

"To have us gone from the community would leave a huge, gaping hole that nobody else could fill at this point," she says. "I think we need to be here for families in New Orleans. We need to give people in New Orleans a reason to come back."

While DRM post-Katrina is harder than it was before, even for things such as one-on-one meetings with local major donors, with a greater, now more widespread constituency, Conkerton is cognizant of the need to keep everyone involved and engaged.

"The ball is very much in our court now," she says. "We have the support from outside of the city. We need to make sure people stay connected." ◆



To learn more about Convio products and services, please contact us at 1-888-528-9501, email [info@convio.com](mailto:info@convio.com) or visit [www.convio.com](http://www.convio.com)