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FundRaising SUCCESS

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FOCUS ON: DONOR NEWSLETTERS

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**Building relationships through newsletters
requires stewardship, a wealth of information
and just the right amount of 'ask.'**

Newsletters, especially of the online variety, allow fundraisers to build and maintain relationships with stakeholders long before they even think about anteing up the greenbacks. Donors and prospects alike can now get engaged more often, and with more personal relevance — making it easier and more cost effective for nonprofits to forge links with individuals primed for giving.

Chris G. Cleghorn, executive vice president of direct and interactive marketing for Easter Seals, says the organization's goal for its newsletters is to create fre-

quent touch points with constituents and offer diverse ways for people to get involved, such as learning about services they didn't know about, participating in online votes and petitions, or responding to special fundraising-challenge campaigns.

"Fundraising is one of many objectives we are trying to achieve with our newsletters," Cleghorn attests. "Our primary goal is to increase engagement among our users and help them more readily access information about Easter Seals."

Easter Seals, which aims to help improve the lives of



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— *Chris G. Cleghorn, executive vice president of direct and interactive marketing, Easter Seals*

people with disabilities, offers two e-newsletters for specialized audiences: “Legislative Action Network,” a bimonthly that shares current policy and legislative activity; and “Project Action,” a monthly that provides resources and information about accessible public transportation for transportation providers and people with disabilities.

According to Cleghorn, regional variation is the key element of content for Easter Seals’ e-newsletter. In 2002, the organization designed its online network to allow each of its 90 affiliates to have its own Web site; the core articles for each version of the monthly e-newsletter are pulled from each affiliate home page.

Similarly, there are several articles of broad interest that highlight top stories from the national Web site. In all, roughly 25,000 individuals receive Easter Seals e-newsletters.

As far as the “ask” goes, each newsletter offers the reader — who on average is 50 years old — multiple opportunities to get involved, including making a contribution. The organization launches four nationally focused e-mail campaigns a year, which consist of three to four e-mail messages over a six- to eight-week period. Each local affiliate can choose to send focused e-newsletters and updates up to four times a year.

“We feel it’s important that Easter Seals constituents hear from us frequently enough that they stay aware of us but not so much that they feel hassled by constant e-mails,” Cleghorn says.

Backyard segmentation

For the National Wildlife Federation, a member-supported wildlife and environmental conservation group based in Reston, Va., the task of producing a compelling e-newsletter was a simple one: Bring it to people’s backyards.

Currently, NWF is working toward dramatically increasing the relevancy of its newsletters (a special newsletter just for teachers is slated to drop later this year), so it can better communicate with the 800,000 subscribers who have signed up to receive news updates via e-mail.

Roughly 100,000 subscribers get NWF’s “Backyard

Wildlife Habitat” newsletter, a segmented publication that provides tips and news for people who live in remote, rural areas.

For example, a recent issue provided information on container gardening for wildlife: “... [It] is ideal for the urban naturalist trying to maximize blooms per square inch. Discover how just a few simple guidelines will result in healthy



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plants cascading over pots and enticing pollinators and other wildlife to visit. ... Also, to learn more about pollinators and how beneficial they are to your yard, click here. ... ”

One of the goals of the newsletter, aside from delivering tips on how to enjoy wildlife, is to urge readers to register their backyards in NWF’s Backyard Wildlife Habitat program, for \$15. More than 40,000 yards have been certified around the world.

But Tom McGuire, vice president of membership programs for NWF, says soliciting a donation is not the main objective.

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"The strategy [NWF] has taken is to look at the newsletters as relationship-building devices rather than fundraising devices," he says. "E-mail is a very inexpensive way to get our information out there and get people involved in our work. We now can afford to service [new members] without necessarily asking for donations."

NWF's e-newsletter audience is slightly younger than that of direct mail, and perhaps more technologically savvy, but the organization does not consider it a starkly different pool of donors and prospects.

"These people have the same interests and concerns about wildlife as any other member. What we're trying to do here is use good direct-response techniques to build donor relationships for the long term," McGuire says, "by giving [recipients] news and information on how they could get involved and help us further our mission."

A brand new project

This year marks the debut of Project HOPE's e-newsletter efforts. While the Millwood, Va.-based humanitarian-assistance charity relies heavily on direct mail to deliver a newsletter to active donors and inquirers, there still remains a void in the organization's communications efforts, says Interim Director of Communications Lori Allesee.

"Our [monthly] e-mail newsletter is still in its infancy, as we are entering our fifth month of collecting e-mail addresses," Allesee says. "Today, Project HOPE has approximately 820 active e-mail addresses. We acquire 50 to 70 new addresses each month and an additional 20 through each mailing."

Allesee says the e-newsletter allows Project HOPE to provide donors and prospects with up-to-date information while educating them about its mission. As part of its work, the organization strives to achieve "sustainable advances in health care around the world," so the ability to send emergency updates in real-time is crucial.

"Content for the e-mail newsletter is thematic, that is, focused on a specific effort that we are engaged in," she says.

While demographic data on e-newsletter subscribers

has yet to be formally collected, Project HOPE's quarterly print newsletter reaches a decidedly older, traditional demographic (age 60 and up). When prospective donors inquire about Project HOPE through the mail, they are immediately sent a hard copy of the most recent newsletter.

According to Cary Kimble, interim vice president of development and communications for Project HOPE, the organization treats the ask as a soft one.

"Donors should not expect that every time they hear from us, it is because we want money," Kimble says. "We owe them the courtesy of reporting on some of our key activities so they know how their donations are being spent."

Project HOPE *does* provide a device for readers to make a donation if, after reading, they feel moved to do so. But Kimble says the newsletter is not intended as a revenue-generating tool. It serves chiefly as a "reporting" and "visibility-raising" tool, he says.

"Our newsletter does not try to educate donors and the public on everything that we are doing, but it does try to give them some periodic highlights and assure them that our important work continues," Kimble explains.

Project HOPE also features stories and photographs of staff members in the field and individuals who benefit

from the charity, as Kimble says, to "connect a human face to our work."

Good news for animal lovers

The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals has learned the value of collecting and using information about constituents to develop stronger relationships through online communications. Even by knowing something as simple as whether a prospect is a dog person or cat person can yield success.

Based on user-profile information gleaned from its Web site, the ASPCA segments donors and inquirers into three groups: dog people, cat people and non-specific constituents for whom no profile information was available. (Every donation, action — such as signing up to receive its e-newsletter — or any other touch point that a constituent makes online becomes part of



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his e-profile.)

The organization then deploys special appeals and targeted weekly newsletters according to the information offered voluntarily by constituents, including geographic region. Currently, members who live in New York, Connecticut and New Jersey receive a tri-state version of ASPCA's national newsletter, which lists local events and human-interest stories.

"We try to be as comprehensive as possible with our [newsletter] content. We aim to include items about legislation, pet health care and behavior, and an adoption success story in each issue," says Pune Dracker, managing editor of "ASPCA News Alert."

"At least every couple of weeks we like to feature a humane Web site, a listing for an upcoming animal-welfare conference and something global, such as a report on an animal-welfare issue in another country," she explains.

Dracker says she feels especially good when the ASPCA is able to meet readers' needs by letting them dictate content. If readers want to know about a chemical or product that is potentially dangerous to their pets, for example, the newsletter editorial staff asks the ASPCA Animal Poison Control Center, and then prints a detailed response in a future issue.

"We try to reinforce the idea that the newsletter is *their* newsletter," says Dracker, who has been writing for "ASPCA News Alert" since its inception in 2000.

Typical newsletter subscribers have never made a donation, are predominately female companion-animal owners, usually open the newsletter two to three times each month and live in New York, Illinois, California or Florida — the most densely populated areas of ASPCA newsletter subscribers. Right now, the organization does not have enough information to pinpoint age and income demographics.

"Some readers come to us just as 'companion-animal' people. They love their pets but may not be as familiar with farm-animal welfare or the status of endangered species," Dracker shares. "The 'News Alert' is a great way to introduce readers to these different issues."

And although ASPCA applies a soft ask to the footer of each newsletter, the organization fetches roughly \$200 to \$300 each week from subscribers, says Garth Moore, director of Internet communications.

Overall, the ASPCA's donors with e-mail addresses tend to give more; specifically, they give 112 percent more in average dollars, and the number of gifts they give is



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approximately 85 percent higher than constituents who have not provided an e-mail address, according to statistics provided by ASPCA's online partner, Internet software and services firm Convio.

Since 2000, the organization has grown its subscriber file from 5,000 names to more than 240,000 names.

"This is an extremely important method of communication that we take seriously," Moore affirms. "We are fortunate enough to have the staff to maintain the newsletter's frequency. Other nonprofits aren't so lucky." ♦



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