

Fundraising in a Time of Crisis

Here are a few tips and hints on how to fundraise during a crisis. They include: stewardship, solicitation, cultivation and preparation.

For most of the year, a fundraising professional might spend 40% of work on Cultivation (finding new donors), 20% on Solicitation (asking for money) and 40% on Stewardship (thanking donors and deepening relationships). During November and December, when 40% of a year's gifts may come in, most efforts are spent on solicitation. During a crisis, most of your time will be spent on both stewardship (taking care of donors, volunteers, staff and the people you serve), and careful solicitation.

Stewardship

Beginning with stewardship, you'll want to spend a few minutes creating a plan on reaching out to donors and the people around you. Think about the people you come in contact with, including donors, volunteers, vendors, your fellow staff, board and committee members, and the people served by your organization, including members, subscribers and/or beneficiaries. Consult with other staff and split up the list of people, prioritizing them as needed.

You'll want to reach out to different groups in different ways. For your entire list, you might send an email. If you have a holiday event, you may have already sent an email out to cancel it or to update people on where and when it will be held. If not, you may wish to let your list know that you care and are thinking of them.

For those in affected areas, you might reach out to them by email, phone or text. Consider that the kindest thing you can do right now is just to listen to people's stories.

Be careful to get agreement among staff on what you can offer those you contact. Perhaps you might just offer a pot of hot coffee and a willingness to listen. Or perhaps you can offer a desk, phone and computer to those displaced by the fire (that can be a blessing to someone who lost everything and needs a base of operations). Don't offer more than you can deliver.

However, if your organization is in a position to do more, this is where you can step up. For example, the Ventura YMCA is offering free child care to those displaced by the fire, free workouts through December to the community, and free memberships to fire survivors through March. They've made a decision to be a center for the community. The Ventura County Credit Union, which is member-owned, is offering \$5,000 signature loans to anyone who was a member before the fire. If your organization can offer something, this is the time to do it.

Solicitation

There are many aspects to solicitation. You may have a final December mailing going out to donors: if there's a way to pull out households that were impacted by the fire, you'll want to do this. Of course, you can still mail into zip codes near the fire, but you may find that your fundraising is impacted as donors are distracted. Or your fundraising may be positively impacted as your donors and community members become aware of the work you're doing.

If you need to fundraise because of the crisis, you'll want to perform fundraising that conforms to best practices. Don't have a fundraising event at a restaurant where you make 15 cents on the dollar: you

might find that you have 60 people show up and you raise only \$106! (Actual result.) Instead, if you want to do a group event, consider a short meeting at someone's home. Email invites, hold it for only an hour or 90 minutes at the most, make a short presentation on why you need donations at this time, and give them some ideas of what amounts would help. This can be endlessly repeated. Hosts can invite their friends and you can invite donors.

Another best practice would be to meet individually with your top donors. You can do coffee three times a day, three days a week for the next three weeks. Normally, you would probably cut off fundraising by December 20 or so, but in an emergency you can continue meetings through New Year's. Not every donor will say yes, but those who do are open to an emergency gift. If 10-20% of your donors are providing 80-90% of your donations, now is the time to reach out to them.

In soliciting gifts around an emergency, be clear on how the gift will be used. Red Cross used to teach fundraising staff to say "For this and future emergencies" because not all of the gifts may be spent on a particular crisis. So be sure to say why you need a gift now. Examples might include:

- We need to move our office for 3-6 months due to smoke damage
- We had to cancel a week of performances but our union contract still requires us to pay performers
- We have 40 new clients because of the fires

You may also need to be clear on why you need money rather than goods. You can say "Studies show that giving people gift cards instead of donated clothes helps them recover a full year faster" or "Giving gift cards instead of donated items helps us focus our volunteers on helping more people rather than sorting through goods" or "Giving gift cards helps local businesses recover faster."

Cultivation:

A word on cultivation... you may find new donors coming to you at this time, given that they're aware of the needs of the community. If this happens, you want to be sure that you are doing best practices. Try and get thank-you notes out within three days. If you can't, this is the time to hire a temporary staff member. If that's impractical, consider taking photos of checks and sending a hand-written note now, with a formal note to follow when their gift is processed. Or you can have a volunteer call people to thank them and let them know that a formal thank-you will follow. (Of course for online gifts, your system should be set up to send an immediate email acknowledgment.) Even a quick pre-printed postcard is better than a letter that goes out a month later.

Preparation:

If you haven't been impacted yet by the fires but want to prepare, here are four things to do:

First, make sure your computer files are backed up to the Cloud. Actually test this. This is not the time to find out that no one paid the Carbonite bill or that you don't know the password.

Second, make sure that all staff members have other staff members' cell phone numbers in their cell phone. Create a phone tree of who to call if needed.

Third, designate one person as the contact for any media and make sure that all staff have their cell number and that the person is reachable. If you're contacted by media, you want to make sure you know who is authorized to speak for the organization.

Fourth, if you have time and don't already have one, create an emergency plan of what to do. Who decides when you'll close and reopen? Do you have phone trees or a way of reaching out to the people you serve? (Whether it's seniors, or musicians who play for you.) How can you use volunteers to help? Who decides what goes on social media or when to email your list of donors?

Two final items:

First, support local businesses as much as possible. Buy your holiday gifts at a local business, and have your holiday staff party at a local business. Consider for your personal gifts this holiday season a locally-made piece of art or tickets to a local restaurant or performance. It is our local businesses that support us far more than those based in Seattle or Arkansas, and they return money to the local economy.

Finally, as fundraisers we tend to be practical people. This advice is not meant to sound heartless. We are all decent people and are trying to do our best during a difficult time. Reaching out to the people around you now will build and maintain relationships that will help your organization for years to come.

Kathy Wertheim, CFRE, was trained in crisis fundraising while working at The American Red Cross National Headquarters. She also did crisis fundraising while working in Washington, DC during and after September 11th. Her family in Ventura is impacted by the Thomas Fire but everyone's safe.

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