



Many Nonprofits Advance in Time of Adversity

By Avrum Lapin

“Great is tzedakah, for since the day that the world was created until this day the world stands upon tzedakah” – Midrash Tanna d’Vei Eliyahu Zutta

When we look back to the months of March and April 2020, we will remember so many unknowns. What did we know about COVID-19? When will there be a vaccine? How long will we be at home? Will we be able to bounce back from the financial crisis? How will nonprofits survive?

As we approach the summer, although instability and unknowns remain, so many nonprofits have invested time, and the wisdom and experience of volunteer and professional leadership, in figuring out how to continue to meet their goals and to make a meaningful and ongoing impact on the lives of their constituents and community.

Through our work over recent months with Israel-based and domestic nonprofits, we have certainly seen and confronted the difficulty and the challenges head on but have also basked in the beauty of generosity during this uniquely difficult period. So many donors and leaders have stepped up to the plate. They understand the importance of ensuring a viable and robust future for meaningful charitable organizations and understand that their support will help accomplish that.

In an interview that recently appeared in the LA Times, Una Osili, Philanthropic Scholar at Indiana University’s Lilly’s Family School of Philanthropy, shared a similar observation about giving during the current crisis, “It’s not just the large gifts – there is a generosity taking place at the community level by everyday people and sometimes really heroic acts where people are stepping up to help their neighbors.” Osili is right, and it has been inspiring. Donors want to help and are doing so when they are engaged, convinced, and asked.

We have seen success reflected in a variety of ways. Read below to see some of the ways nonprofits have worked to achieve it.

Localized Webinars. Organizations based overseas, and others, have been subject to restrictions and all the accompanying changes, limiting their ability to engage face-to-face with leaders and donors across the US. Those organizations that continue to achieve a measure of success conceded little ground to the challenges and are doing everything possible to avoid skipping a beat. In partnership with our international nonprofit clients, we re-calibrated our spring and summer fundraising strategies. Instead of an intended visit to a specific community or geographical region and meeting with donors on an individual basis, many have held localized webinars, engaging with leaders and major donors in each community to help moderate, share, and participate. That, together with continuous investment in online personalized connection and involvement, have yielded positive and encouraging results.

Combining Passion with a Forthright Presentation of Facts. In this environment, as in most circumstances in the pre-COVID world, prospective and existing lead/major donors typically decide to give through the confluence of factors:

- A dedicated and generous donor will predicate his or her decision to invest in a cause because they are motivated by a devoted passion for the vision and goals of the organization, a deep belief in its contribution to the lives of people, and the positive impact their contribution will make on their geographic or functional community.
- They will also seek out a clear and unvarnished understanding of the facts, the organization's business plan, and the "business case."
- Who asks – people most certainly still give to people – in person or individually online.

If you are truly dedicated to the notion of the nonprofit and donor as partners, pursue that partnership with transparency and a commitment to working hand in hand on crafting solutions and a productive path forward.

Avoiding "Cookie Cutter" Solutions. Every organization is different, even those that are similar in mission, purpose, and scope. Each has an internal culture and personality that is unique to them, to their history, to their governance, and to their individualized vision for the future. While any nonprofit activity must be predicated on an understanding of and strict adherence to best practices and a firm commitment to the highest ethical standards, every fundraising strategy and approach must be carefully tailored and specific to an organization's persona, needs, and expectations. And the generational differences in approaches to philanthropy that existed (and made it more complicated) before the COVID crisis certainly remain and are punctuated in today's more competitive marketplace.

Asserting Your Mission and Sharing Your Story. Be direct and share why a donor's support is critical right now. We have been encouraging continued communication throughout the past few weeks and months and have stood firmly behind the importance of not shying away from asking, as long as the ask is genuine and transparent, and predicated on solid preparation and homework. The ongoing communication will tell you who is encountering difficulty and who is ready and eager to help. The donor will make the decision themselves.

Jennifer Dow Rowell, the Director of Development at Community Overcoming Relationship Abuse, shared a similar sentiment recently, in an interview with the *Chronicle of Philanthropy*, “They're supporters for a reason, and it's our job to let them know what's happening and to give them the opportunity to offer support if they can ... If it's a reduced amount, that's fine, and if they can give more than expected, then celebrate and honor that. But the last thing any of us should be doing is going silent.” We too have seen similar buy-in from leaders on all levels, and they want to help ensure that these organizations are able to fulfill their mission, beyond COVID, and beyond the financial crisis.

Asking for renewed support earlier. One of the strategies we recommend is starting earlier than in a “usual” year in asking donors to renew their giving. Why wait until the end of the year, if the process can begin now, when the support is probably needed the most? This has helped to bolster confidence and financial stability during this historically unstable time. Educating donors on why their support is needed more than ever on the short term will help lead to long term success, likely enduring well beyond this crisis. Be prepared, do your homework, be appropriate to the time, and understanding of the reality of the day, and do not fear the ask.

Expressing deep appreciation and thanks. Recognition and appreciation are and [always have been](#) a crucial element in stewarding meaningful long-term donor relationships. Knowing that this is an unprecedented time for everyone, it is important now more than in the past to show appreciation for a donor's continued support. In supporting your nonprofit, donors are expressing their trust in you and belief in your mission, giving out of dedication and leadership, despite any financial hurdles they may be facing. Your appreciation for their support during this difficult time will not go unnoticed and could make a significant impact on your future.

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