



Potent New Fundraising Tools Shouldn't Be Abandoned When the Covid Crisis Ends

The Covid-19 pandemic has irrevocably changed how nonprofits operate. Out of necessity, we were forced to come up with new approaches for doing our work and accomplishing our goals, with unexpected benefits. Today, as we think about what lies ahead in 2021, we need to recognize that changes we once viewed as temporary responses to the pandemic may ultimately transform how we do our work — specifically how we use technology to cultivate donors.

In the past year, the nonprofit world endured sharp shifts in how it operates. In-person fundraising events — a lifeline for many organizations — were canceled. Face-to-face donor meetings that helped foster important relationships disappeared overnight. Potential donors could no longer volunteer or visit charities to meet beneficiaries and strengthen their ties to the organization. Losing these foundational practices required a quick pivot to new technological platforms for donor engagement and a re-evaluation of measurements for success.

But after the initial panic, we discovered something remarkable: These changes didn't necessarily hurt our work. In many cases they actually helped us improve our fundraising efforts. As we look ahead to some degree of normalcy in the coming year, fundraisers should think twice before stepping back into the old ways. Instead, we should embrace and improve upon what we've learned during the pandemic.

Here are three fundraising trends that helped many nonprofits survive and, in some cases, thrive during in the past year. Now we should figure out how to make them stick.

Technology expanded our reach.

The pandemic forced nonprofits to break through technological barriers that limited their ability to reach more donors. As people became accustomed to using technology to connect with family, friends, and colleagues, new possibilities opened up for expanding the pool of potential donors through virtual events and online giving pledges — all while reducing costs.

We experienced this firsthand at our organization — Valleywise Health Foundation in Phoenix, which raises funds and community awareness for Valleywise Health, the area's only public teaching health-care system that serves uninsured and underinsured people. After converting many of our in-person events to virtual gatherings, we saw a 24 percent increase in new donors over the same fiscal period in 2019 and raised more money than in any other year in our history.

While this is partly due to support from the community for our health-care workers during the pandemic, we couldn't have managed the surge in donors without new technological tools to facilitate those relationships. For example, we partnered with an online fundraising platform that allowed donors to set up their own web page with photos to encourage friends to donate. This type of peer-to-peer fundraising strategy proved highly effective and allowed us to reach previously untapped audiences.

Greater use of technology also lowered our cost-per-dollar raised, enabling us to put more funds where they were needed most. Like many other organizations, we scrapped events and galas, which typically net 50 cents on the dollar, making them among the costliest endeavors for nonprofits. Switching from ballroom and audiovisual rentals to far less expensive online events meant more money could go to key services. On a smaller scale, hosting Zoom meetings drastically reduced travel expenses and precipitated other innovations. For instance, rather than scheduling individual in-

person tours of the hospital, we created video tours that were shared with many more people and saved valuable time for our gift officers.

Tapping into technological tools to host virtual and even hybrid events should continue long after the pandemic subsides. While many people will crave in-person events, we can't deny the benefits technology provides in reaching people who were typically unreachable.

Success measures changed.

Previously tried-and-true performance measures may need to be revisited, and slightly modified. Our team found over the second half of 2020 that what we originally considered a meaningful donor visit and effective fundraising tactics were no longer the only — or even the best — measures of successful donor engagement. In the past, it would never have occurred to us to use text messages, cellphone videos, or Zoom meetings when cultivating a major gift, relying instead on in-home and dinner meetings as best practices.

But we found donors actually appreciated these easy and time-efficient methods. In fact, meeting with a fundraiser over Zoom in a less than perfect setting — with children and pets interrupting — gives donors a glimpse into the fundraiser's life, making the interaction feel more authentic and relatable. We shouldn't abandon those tactics in the future. They are far less costly than donor lunches and dinner meetings and still allow nonprofits to reach their revenue goals.

Involving leaders got easier.

Board members and organization leaders, like almost everyone else, became much more comfortable using technology tools to connect with people during the pandemic. That opened up new opportunities for engaging them in fundraising efforts. For instance, we created a "Why I Give" campaign in which board members

recorded cellphone videos explaining their motivations for giving to charity. They also hosted virtual town halls with their organizations that included presentations and question-and-answer sessions with our health-system leaders. Through one such virtual event, a board member introduced us to his church association, which donated 50,000 badly needed masks to Valleywise Health early in the pandemic.

Board members and leadership in general are the best advocates for fundraising, and the pandemic has shown us more innovative ways to keep them connected. There is no reason to return to the old, less effective, ways.

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Going through a crisis together created more meaningful and trusting relationships with many donors. As vaccines allow us see a time when the pandemic will ease, we need to nurture those bonds by embracing and improving upon tools we once saw as temporary. The landscape of philanthropy will look different, but it could also look better.

https://www.philanthropy.com/article/potent-new-fundraising-tools-shouldnt-be-abandoned-when-the-covid-crisis-ends?cid=gen_sign_in