



Making the Connection:

10 Smart Ideas for Effective Fundraising on the Web

Is Fundraising on the Web Really Different?

If you give users the ability to donate online, does this qualify as online fundraising? How many users visit your site per day? Per week? Of these users, how many came to your Web site with the purpose of making a donation? If you are like most organizations that solicit charitable donations, your answers probably range from a hearty “no” to an “I wish that were the case” to an “I don’t know what my users are doing”. To top it all, it may not even be clear to you what is meant by “Fundraising on the Web” and how it differs from traditional fundraising methods. Is it different?

Yes, it is different. Like all other successful fundraising efforts, it doesn’t happen by magic. So it isn’t different in the sense that it takes the same amount of dedicated work and craftsmanship as needed to plan and execute traditional campaigns. It takes just as much ingenuity and creativity in how you decide to make your ask, and you still need the same analytical mindset that pushes you to test, hone, and target your efforts.

When planning direct mail campaigns or media spots, you know that you have a certain window of opportunity to connect with the recipient or viewer. Within this window, you want to take the individual through a four-step process that takes this individual from an unaware state to completing the task of making a donation. With your carefully crafted notifier (whether mail, email, media spot, web page), you want to grab the attention of the recipient, have the recipient open their mind to receive your message, make the individual adopt your message and inculcate it as their own --which then prompts them to take the appropriate intended action.

What then is different? How is fundraising on the Web any different from traditional practices?

Perhaps it is not so much that the intended process is different, it is just that the Web is a newer communication vehicle that has arrived on the scene and with which many organizations still do not possess great familiarity. There is nothing magic to fundraising on the Web—the only magic is in understanding how to harness the power of the Web for your campaign purposes.

Web as a Communication Vehicle for Fundraisers

To this end, let us look at what is different about the Web as a communication vehicle.

First, we all know its ubiquitous nature that allows for organizations to transcend space and time. Its no down-time nature allows organizations to expand scope and reach of its efforts with minimal additional investment, if any. This bodes extremely well for charitable organizations that are often short-staffed and always trying to find economical ways to spread the message to as many people as possible.

Next, the Web has the potential for increasing the amount of touch. Since users have voluntarily come to your Web site and are looking at your information, you have a much greater chance of putting information in front of them that you choose and that they may react to in the manner that you intend. Basically, your window of opportunity is greater on the Web than it is when sending direct mail. If you are using your Web site's elements strategically to support a particular campaign effort, the likelihood of the user seeing, understanding, and acting upon your message is greater than other traditional means.

Why is this? For the most part, there are just more opportunities to insert your message throughout a Web site—you do not have to worry about having too much verbiage that increases print jobs and postage, and you do not have to worry about the number of seconds it will take to get your message across because you are not paying by the minute. Unlike other means, it costs next to nothing to increase the number of times you embed various solicitation messages on your site; therefore, you have greater opportunity to really put the word out to people in a way that makes sense to them. Since purchased time and space are not really considerations, you have the freedom to create as many messages as you want and target them to different Web user groups and then identify which message works the best. This type of low-cost testing and the flexibility to change the message, the intended message recipient, and frequency/duration of the message, puts the Web as a fundraising communication vehicle in a highly coveted spot.

Unlike TV, radio, and mail which only have the ability to touch upon one sense at a time, the Web has the ability to use multiple senses to emotionally connect with the user. Like TV, the Web can use imagery, color, spatial relations, and movement in order to grab the user's attention and create a connection. Like radio, the Web can provide sound that accompanies images or that reinforces a mood and provides context to the message. Like mail, the Web can put text in front of a user and use font styles to signify meaning and words to convey your message in hopes of persuading the user to adopt your viewpoint and take action. The Web, however, has the ability to leverage multiple senses at once-- this heightens the emotional impact of the message and thereby, increases the probability of the recipient's uptake of the message.



Emotionally-Connected Web sites

The real question of online fundraising boils down to this: "How do we emotionally connect with the end user?". Somehow, we need to make an emotional connection between the flesh-and-blood user that is tapping a keyboard and looking at a monitor and this abstract idea of your organization's campaign. We need to hook the human into believing in an idea to the point that s/he is willing to overcome inertia and participate. And we want to make that connection as quickly as possible and make it sustainable so that we can build donor loyalty.

The end goal of Fundraising Web sites is to foster and grow relationships between the end user and the organization using the Web as the connector. A well-designed site should allow a user to displace the feelings that s/he feel towards the organization to the Web site itself and vice-versa. In this respect, the position of your Web site in your communications mix becomes *the* most critical element because of its ability to supplant emotional connectivity from an organization to the Web site and back again.

Emotional connection comes through many avenues on the Web. The following ten methods aim to make a rapid connection with the Web user and then expand this connection into a relationship that is built on trust, loyalty, and mutual benefit.

1. **Imagery.** Images are one of the first things that people notice when viewing a Web site. The eye naturally seeks out images and will process these first when viewing any sort of visual material. The subjects of images allow users to make assumptions and guesses as to the meaning of the material. The larger the image, the faster the eye responds and the more data is absorbed by the Web user. Large images that show emotive subjects are the fastest way to set tone, convey an emotional message, and represent the organization's message. Despite this, however, most organizations continue to use collages, faded/fuzzy images, use very small imagery in order to save space, and choose images based on what they think is 'safe' for the organization. While none of these motives are necessarily wrong, they often result in a Web site that is functional, but not powerful. To really connect and form a long-lasting relationship, the Web site needs to be powerful and make users *feel* something.
2. **Typography.** Like images, good typography (font size, selection, weight, placement) can convey information to the viewer on level of importance, hierarchical relationships, give clues as to how the information should be attacked, and provide a sense of tone and style. While typography has long been a prized element of well-designed print materials, it has yet to come to maturity on the Web. This is unfortunate, as typography can really help to make a Web page more appealing, easy-to-read, and work with the typical scanning method used by Web page viewers to look at, absorb, and process information presented in a Web format.
3. **Content Craftsmanship.** Nothing reinforces the visual style of a Web page more than the way that content is crafted. Content craftsmanship includes the physical placement of text within a Web page, the amount of text within a page, how text is broken up or 'chunked' to make it easier for the Web viewer to scan, the selection of words to make hyperlinks, as well as the tone and

style in which the content is actually written. Content craftsmanship occurs when these elements exist and content is written specifically for intake by the intended Web site viewer. If content craftsmanship exists, it should not be noticeable to the Web viewer. Instead, the viewer should flow through the Web page or Web site with little to no interruption in focus, tone, style, or understanding.

4. **Transparency of Fund Allocation.** Fundraisers can emotionally connect with Web viewers and gain credibility and accountability by making their allocation of funds and operational allocations easy to find and understand. Some of the best fundraising sites go one step farther and combine information on where the money goes with graphics and typography to make easy-to-understand charts and graphs. Not only are these charts and graphs easier for the user to understand, but it makes the organization look easy to understand and gives an air of openness that aids the Web viewer in perceiving the organization in a positive light. These feelings of positivism and openness are the building blocks of trust. Viewers are more likely to give online when these feelings exist. However, this is just the first step. Trust is truly established only over time; therefore, fundraising Web sites need to go beyond just offering pie charts and seek ways to continually build on these feelings.
5. **Success Stories.** All fundraising organizations seem to be brimming over with stories of how their organization is meeting its mission. Unfortunately, many of these stories are verbally passed throughout the organization and not written down. The Web is a great way to institutionalize your organization's success stories and get people other than your staff to document these stories and put up on your Web site. Success stories, or "How We Help" types of stories, testimonials, and recommendations all help to make and keep the Web visitor emotionally connected. The breadth and extent of your success stories may also help change a viewer from a non-giver to a giver.
6. **Security.** Make sure that you are making your Web users feel secure in their movement around your Web site and when making transactions. It is important that your site gives a sense of security—that you are respectful of their private information and that information that warrants encryption is handled as such. You can help users to feel more confident on your Web site through adding in appropriate logos and certifications of vendors that handle encryption of transactions (e.g. VeriSign) and through links that go to organizational policies on use of customer information, privacy standards, security measures, and contact methods.
7. **Volunteer Spotlights.** Another great way to emotionally connect with your audience is to provide "spotlight" areas that give insight into the people behind the Web site, programs, initiatives, articles, gifts, and the like. Taking the time to interview a volunteer and transfer their story, along with picture, to your site does two things. First, it tells your volunteer that you really do care and are appreciative of their efforts. Secondly, it sends the message to other Web users that the organization really does take steps to invest in its volunteers and wants to publicly show approval and praise for those that participate in the organization's mission. Most people love to receive praise—especially in a public format—and have a deep desire to be the recipient of such praise. This base psychological need can be leveraged by your organization for the dual purpose of appreciating your volunteers and recruiting new ones.

8. **Personal Care Options.** Your Web site can also help in connecting with users through giving users control over how they wish to be treated. Personal care options such as contact preferences, frequency of contact, areas of interest, and preferences for how their gift should be handled all add to a user's understanding that they are unique and special to the organization. Personal care options should be centered around a deep respect for the individual and always should provide a rationale for why questions are being asked and for what purpose. You would be amazed at how much information individuals are willing to provide if they feel that it is for a good cause. Since a good database-driven Web site does not usually have a limit on how much data can be collected, feel free to try and glean as much about your users as possible, but make sure that the majority of the data can be voluntarily contributed. The greatest personal care option that exists is the organization's willingness to let the Web user be in control and drive the relationship forward.
9. **Treatment Statements.** Individuals interested in fundraising organizations often want to know how the organization intends to treat their assets—no matter what the asset is (money, time, furniture, cars, documents, etc). Your organization can make users feel good about their donations and gifts *before* they give them by disclosing how the assets will be received, handled, processed, and treated. Many donors want to understand the whole process because it gives them a greater connection and insight into how the check that they mail relates to a child receiving rice in a developing area. By including treatment standards,—whether those manifest as statements on ethics, philosophy, respect, or operational standards—you can pre-empt a user's questions by providing the answers. These types of statements should allow a sense of calmness to descend on the Web user who realizes that their possible objections and questions have already been answered. Treatment statements help reinforce credibility-- allowing users to relax and begin to trust the organization and its purpose.
10. **Displays of Gratitude.** It is very hard to read words of gratitude and have no emotional reaction. Web sites are a great vehicle for providing personalized words of gratitude and gracious thoughts about giving in general. The key to displaying gratitude on the Web is to not make it 'one size fits all' and to not 'super size' it. You don't want to say thank you a million times in the same way and you don't want to say it to everyone in the same way. What you want to do is find out which ways of showing gratitude work for which types of donors and then use that method to best convey your organization's thanks. If you can find out what the primary mover is for donating in the first place, you can match this up with the way in which you show your appreciation. Once this information is known, you can provide thank you messages that are appropriate, sensitive, and respectful to the individual donors. However, this doesn't mean that you only say 'thank you' following submission of the online donation form. Make sure your organization takes *every* opportunity to show its appreciation—from help emails from the webmaster to deal with login problems to e-newsletters—all your communication pieces should include messages of appreciation.

Respecting the Gift

The money transaction is the final, and arguably, most inconsequential step of the process. While the intent from the organization's viewpoint may be to receive the money, the user should not be left with this feeling. The user wants to leave with a feeling of fulfillment and abundance—that they leave something good in their wake. To this end, the actual transaction must be very easy to use, operate without hiccups, and simple in its design. The greatest danger once a visitor has decided to undertake a financial transaction is to interrupt him/her from this process. The experience must be understated, subtle, and respectful. The emotional feeling following an online donation should be one of warmth and pride in the user. Make sure that your Web site conveys this and all communications immediately following the donation (confirmation emails, etc) continue this feeling.

This final feeling is the distinguishing characteristic of performing fundraising on the Web. The emotional connectedness that a user feels upon entry to a site needs to grow during his/her time spent on the site and build to a crescendo of actually making a gift. Following this crescendo, the tone should be one of calm, respect, and peace—a time for self-reflection over the gift and the personal meaning of it to the donor. Designing a Web site that honors this natural rhythm and online donor gift-giving cycle is critical in making for an experience that conveys the messages intended by the organization and in establishing a long-term relationship with the donor.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Suzanne Carawan is the Product Marketing Manager for Web solutions Advanced Solutions International. She has more than five years of experience in Web design and consulting as well as an MBA in Marketing from the American University. You can contact her directly at scarawan@advsol.com.



