

What Nonprofits Should Stop Doing in 2014: Advice From the Experts

By Nicole Wallace

Ignoring people who make medium-size gifts

People who give \$500 to \$10,000 annually fall through the cracks at far too many charities, says Alia McKee, a principal at Sea Change Strategies, a fundraising-consulting company. These donors often aren't big enough to attract the attention of major-gift fundraisers. But because they give generously, nonprofits often take them off direct-mail and email lists out of fear of offending them with too many solicitations.

To do a better job, organizations need to give at least one person in the fundraising department responsibility for concentrating on those donors, says Ms. McKee. The key is to pair substantive mail and electronic appeals with personal interaction.

Says Ms. McKee: "Investing in this group with a mix of strategies that blend major-giving stewardship with direct-marketing tactics can yield big results."

Using social media indiscriminately

Nonprofits that jump onto every new online platform that comes along are spreading themselves too thin, says Farra Trompeter, vice president of Big Duck, a communications-consulting company that works with charities.

Figuring out where your donors, volunteers, and other supporters are and where they want to hear from you is a much smarter plan, she says: "I'd rather see organizations think about how they can go deeply in two or three channels than try to have a smattering [of posts] on 10 of them and never keep them updated."

Hoarding information

A year is too long to wait to tell donors how their gifts made a difference, says Derrick Feldmann, chief executive of Achieve, a consulting company that helps nonprofits reach out to millennials. Instead of saving up information about the group's activities for the annual report, he says, charities should communicate to donors one important point about the impact of their contributions each month.

Using generic language

Too many nonprofits use fuzzy language, says Mr. Feldman. As an example, he points to the generic phrases many groups use to explain their work: We help the community, we help educate, and we empower.

“They should stop using those big, broad words and just be specific,” he says. “If you help fifth graders with financial literacy, just say it.”

Fearing mobile technology

Organizations need to do a better job of adapting their content for mobile technology, says Amy Sample Ward, chief executive of the Nonprofit Technology Network. The best place for groups to get started, she says, is to make sure that website forms—pages people use to make donations, subscribe to advocacy alerts, or sign up to volunteer—are easy to navigate on a mobile phone’s small screen.

The same goes for email messages. Everyone has opened an email that is three times bigger than a smartphone screen, says Ms. Ward. “It makes the whole email unreadable. You’re scrolling back and forth, up and down, trying to read what it is, so you just delete it. Well, it could have been an amazing call to action, but none of us are taking it.”

Shying away from risks

Charity leaders need to stop paying lip service to the mantra of “fail fast and move on,” says Ms. McKee.

“Most nonprofits want their staff to take big risks and innovate,” she says. “But then they balk whenever a project or a campaign fails.”

Organizations, she says, need to be more thoughtful in the way they experiment with new ideas, defining how they will measure success and planning how they will pivot if the project doesn’t work.