

Fundraisers Find Success With Simple Appeals, Wild Ideas, and Offbeat Campaigns

By Raymund Flandez

Use simple messages and rigorously test them

Autism Speaks raised \$750,000 online, up 50 percent from the previous December, largely by borrowing techniques that helped the Obama presidential campaign raise a big haul last year.

The group e-mailed simple and unabashedly direct text-only fundraising appeals (with messages like “We’re writing to ask you for money”) and tested different subject lines with small batches of supporters to see which ones prompted people to give the most. It then sent the top ones to a broader pool of donors and found that the winning appeals were always the most clear and direct.

Not only did the dollar value of December donations rise sharply but the appeals produced double the number of gifts. The average gift size dropped to \$151 from the previous year’s \$175, which means that more donors donated in smaller amounts.

“It was pretty spectacular, to be honest,” says Kai MacMahon, director of online fundraising. “We tested furiously with every single e-mail. We didn’t send anything without testing.”

Autism Speaks was taking a risk because it sent all the appeals during a short period in December, rather than spreading them out more, as it had done in 2011. Even so, donors didn’t get upset. The number of people who asked to be taken off the e-mail list was “well below 1 percent,” he says.

The organization decided that its supporters already knew the kind of work it had done throughout the year from previous, more elaborate e-mails, freeing it to focus on the main purpose of its December push: raising money.

The success with the minimalist e-mail campaign came after a creative effort that relied on popular celebrities lending their voices and hard-core fans willing to shell out \$299 to get a custom-tailored voice recording from actors like Morgan Freeman, William Shatner, and Betty White. The campaign sold 346 of those messages and raised \$100,000 for Autism Speaks.

The early December campaign was an additional boon to its year-end e-mail blasts, which also got a boost. A \$750,000 matching gift from the Autism Speaks board of directors drove its year-end haul to \$1.5-million.

Find creative ways to say thank you

Save the Children broke its own fundraising record for December 27 when it hired a record-breaking talker to thank anybody who gave at least \$10 that day.

The charity hired Fran Capo, the fastest-talking woman in the world (according to Guinness World Records) to speed-read the names of the charity’s donors. Ms. Capo, who won the fast-speech title by saying 603 words in 54 seconds, was captured in a video appeal on the charity’s site.

The appeal lured 384 donors to give at least \$10 online that day, a 44-percent rise over the number who gave in 2011. The timing of the speed-talker promotion was carefully calculated to fall at a down time. Save the Children usually encourages people to donate before Christmas through the charity’s gift catalog or to donate

before December 31 for tax purposes, spurring a flurry of gifts on the last day or two of the year. The organization wanted to place a one-day fundraising campaign in between.

“We wanted to select a day towards the end of the year that was perhaps a bit arbitrary, that didn’t have a natural sense of urgency but would catch people who were back in the office,” says Ettore Rossetti, the nonprofit’s director of Internet marketing and social media.

Give “crazy” ideas a shot

Project Access Now, a health charity in Portland, Ore., surpassed its \$10,000 goal for December by thrusting a 28-year-old part-time worker from its fundraising office into the spotlight as a “last-ditch effort,” says Linda Nilsen-Solares, the group’s executive director.

It was December 31, and the health-services organization had raised just \$8,500 up to that point.

So Mike Conway, who had been on the job only five months, had a brainstorm: If people donated \$500 or more, they could spend an entire day with him. An e-mail pitch suggested he would clean a donor’s house, move the donor’s heavy furniture, or spend the day with that person bowling and biking around Portland.

Donors took the bait. Three people gave more than \$500, for a total of \$2,000. With many of the charity’s senior leaders gone for the holidays, the fundraising staff didn’t have to navigate much bureaucracy to get their idea approved, Mr. Conway says—although he and his boss were worried that the last-minute move would make the charity look ridiculous.

After some internal debate about the ethics of offering a staff member’s time to a donor, Ms. Nilsen-Solares says, she gave the green light to try the idea.

Mr. Conway found out that the donors who paid for his time had interesting activities in mind. One donor wants to get someone to build shelves in his office, play dominoes, and fetch drinks. Another wants her husband to make time for fun outside of work because he’s a busy doctor.

“I was a little nervous about it,” Mr. Conway says. “It just goes to show you that sometimes it’s good to take risks. It looks like I’m going to be building some shelves and playing dominoes.”

With the idea’s success, Ms. Nilsen-Solares may ask her board members if she can auction her time to donors next December.

Put a new twist on what’s worked elsewhere

Stand Up to Cancer, a program of the Entertainment Industry Foundation, turned the tacky tradition of unsightly holiday-theme sweaters into an online drive to raise money for cancer research.

The organization was inspired by another popular charity, Movember, which urges men to grow their mustaches in November to raise money to fight prostate cancer. The charity asked its supporters to see how many days—or weeks—they could bear to wear an ugly sweater and asked them to set up fundraising pages with pictures of themselves in the apparel.

Donors pledged more than \$250,000 through the charity’s Web site in December, one-third more than the same month in 2011. The number of visitors rose by that much, too. And its Facebook page exceeded 1 million “likes,” adding 15,000 during the month.

Besides the ugly-sweater campaign, the charity also persuaded Major League Baseball and its 30 sports clubs to conduct a four-day auction of baseball items and experiences. That raised more than \$150,000.

“Given that we don’t do a conventional year-end push, these are numbers that we’re really pleased with,” says Kathleen Lobb, senior vice president at the Entertainment Industry Foundation.

While the group hasn’t made a decision to continue its inaugural ugly-sweater campaign in 2013, Ms. Lobb says, “this certainly appears to be an effective tool in terms of generating awareness about Stand Up to Cancer. I think there’s a likelihood that we would do it again.”