

Charities Borrow Ideas from Political Campaigns to Increase Donations

By Jennifer Berkshire

CeaseFire PA, a Philadelphia group that seeks to curb gun violence, expanded the number of its online supporters by 30 percent late last year after a spate of high-profile shootings raised the public's interest in gun control.

But rather than following conventional nonprofit wisdom and hitting those new potential donors with an aggressive year-end pitch, CeaseFire PA decided not to send a single appeal.

That idea came from a pair of political strategists who had been hired by the Joyce Foundation, one of CeaseFire's supporters.

Patrick Ruffini, a former Republican party strategist, and Michael Slaby, who was chief technology officer at Obama for America, urge charities not to let the calendar dictate when to send appeals but to think instead of when people were most likely to want to give. For Ceasefire PA, that meant in the days leading up to a pivotal Congressional vote on gun legislation.

"We're finding that when we really break down what is energizing folks and use that information to craft specific fundraising messages, it translates into donations," says Shira Goodman, CeaseFire's executive director.

CeaseFire PA's improved digital fundraising operation has proved so successful that the charity now has enough money to hire a development chief.

Help From Joyce Foundation

The Joyce Foundation hired Mr. Ruffini and Mr. Slaby to translate lessons from the digital success stories of the 2012 election cycle to benefit its grantees. "We wanted to understand how the lessons from a watershed presidential campaign cycle could apply to the urgent public-policy focus of our grantees," says Ellen Alberding, president of the Joyce Foundation, which gives \$40-million annually to a range of nonprofits.

The result is a digital playbook that seeks to guide charities' digital outreach, while recognizing the distinct differences between a buzz-generating political race that may spend \$1-million or more a day and charities that often get by on meager budgets.

Several of the Joyce Foundation's grantees are already putting the ideas into practice. Following are some of Mr. Ruffini and Mr. Slaby's tips, along with insights from charities that are working with the Joyce Foundation to improve their digital fundraising and advocacy.

Put technology and communications specialists together. President Obama's 2008 campaign succeeded in part because the campaign raised \$690-million online and attracted 35 million Facebook fans and 26 million Twitter followers. But Mr. Slaby says what cemented the 2012 win was putting campaign strategists in the same room with the technology whizzes. When they were separated, as they were in 2008, the best ideas didn't always get translated into successful strategy or technology tools, he says.

“In a world where media and technology are shifting and converging so quickly we can barely keep up, integrating digital and technology with communications, program operations, and fundraising in particular was essential,” says Mr. Slaby.

Clean Wisconsin, an environmental group that advocates for clean air and water, recently reorganized its digital operations using such an approach.

Instead of giving the membership and development departments control over sending messages to people who provided their e-mail addresses, the communications team oversees the lists and decides when mailings are sent, says Amanda Wegner, creative director at Clean Wisconsin.

“Our messaging is much more consistent now, and as a result we come across as a bigger, stronger voice, and that’s meant a more powerful impact,” says Ms. Wegner.

Communicate from the top. For organizations to succeed in using new technologies, everyone on the staff must embrace the challenge, including the charity’s leader. That’s because the most important “digital director” is the charity’s chief executive, say Mr. Ruffini and Mr. Slaby.

Ra Joy, executive director of Arts Alliance Illinois, has taken that advice to heart. Mr. Joy says that he used to leave the use of social media up to his staff and even confesses to having had a fear of tweeting.

But after lots of practice distilling the charity’s arts-advocacy message into 140 characters or fewer, Mr. Joy now views the digital tool as essential to helping the organization promote a stronger role for the arts in Illinois public life.

“I’m not tech savvy so this was a big challenge for me,” says Mr. Joy, who regularly uses Twitter to discuss his organization’s work, share news and information about the arts in Illinois, and get the word out to supporters. “I feel like I’ve found my voice, and our organization now has a voice in the conversation that’s taking place on Twitter.”

Most important for the small arts charity: Twitter is helping to amplify the organization’s voice far beyond its Chicago headquarters.

“Illinois is a huge state and there’s a lot of sensitivity about geography,” says Mr. Roy. “I’m able to connect in person with leaders throughout the state, and that’s been helpful from an organizing perspective.”

Encourage two-way conversations. While plenty of charities have embraced Facebook and Twitter as a way to talk about their work with supporters, too many groups use these networks as one-way communication tools, says Mr. Slaby. “Social-media platforms were designed as relationship platforms, not just content-delivery mechanisms. The most effective organizations recognize them as engagement opportunities for the activation of communities.”

Clean Wisconsin has been posting information on Facebook for years, but attracting “likes” proved easier than getting fans to talk back. To expand the conversation, the charity introduced an online contest.

Every Friday, staff members post a picture of a Clean Wisconsin water bottle and ask people to guess where the photo was taken. The contest has been a hit, says Ms. Wegner. “Friday afternoon, people know to come to our Facebook page and look for the photo. Now we’re turning it back to them and asking them to submit their own ‘Where in Wisconsin’ pictures,” says Ms. Wegner.

Make clear requests for action. Mr. Ruffini notes that most of the presidential-campaign e-mails sent last year were brief, containing just a few paragraphs along with a clear description of what the campaign wanted supporters to do.

E-mails with too much text or multiple requests don't tend to spur action, says Mr. Ruffini. That doesn't mean charities need to dumb down appeals.

For Clean Wisconsin, making complex policy issues understandable is a regular challenge.

Ms. Wegner says that to avoid message overload, she relies on what she calls the "drip method." Instead of one big e-mail full of information about dropping water levels in the Great Lakes, for instance, Ms. Wegner sends one brief e-mail a week over four or five weeks.

"It's a way of engaging supporters without overwhelming them with information or coming off as too wonky," says Ms. Wegner.

Test everything. Digital tools allow charities to measure which appeals are generating the online equivalent of a belly flop and which ones are prompting supporters to click the "donate now" button.

While large charities have long been able to afford sophisticated tests of their online communications, small groups now can increasingly tap low-cost tools that let them figure out what is working.

CeaseFire PA heavily tested the message it used in a recent online advertisement before the ad went public last fall. The group sent e-mails with different versions of the text to 10 percent of its entire e-mail list.

The winning version, which received the most clicks, instructed Pennsylvanians to "Demand a change," and "Make your voice heard" and was connected to an online petition. "Testing enables us to see whether something is going to be effective before we roll it out," says Ms. Goodman.

8 Lessons for Nonprofits From the 2012 Election

Following are tips for improving online fundraising from the political consultants and digital strategists Patrick Ruffini and Michael Slaby:

- Integrate digital media and technology into every aspect of your organization.
- Your leaders must embrace digital.
- Design online programs based on offline behaviors.
- Empower supporters to get more involved, including raising money.
- Listen and respond to supporters.
- Encourage online activism by asking for it.
- Test everything.
- Let technology people solve technology challenges.