



10 BEST Practices for ONLINE Fundraisers

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Preface

With the rapid advances in online communications over the past few years (YouTube is 5, Facebook is 6, and Twitter is 4), we have seen monumental changes in what it means to be an online fundraiser. In the past three years alone, email fundraising went from the new fundraising tool to today where pundits are claiming email's early demise¹. While I would probably stop short (well, way short) of cancelling your upcoming email campaigns, I would agree with the idea that the times, they are a changing, and *fast*.

And with this change comes a lot of fun stuff to do online. Testing new innovative ideas. Finding new ways to grow your organization. Launching interesting campaigns that go “viral” and increase your organization's impact. With that new, fun stuff, comes a lot of uncertainty. I mean, if email is already dead, then I guess Facebook might have died over the weekend – we just don't know it yet. I kid. But you get the point.

The *2010 Best Practices for Online Fundraisers* tries to help with some of that uncertainty. Providing a few tips that will guide you in the right direction and hopefully save you some time. Whether it's benchmarking your peers' email fundraising numbers or trying to keep up with the waves of information flowing through Twitter, this document will leave you with enough online resources to quickly get up to speed with what you need to know, now.

Thanks for reading!

Sean Powell
The Engage Group



1 Setup a listening post

Listening online is an effective way to gather information related to your organization or its mission. You can get a real good idea of what the hot topics are now and get a feel for what is being said around those topics.

The good news is that it is easy to get a great listening post up and running. Start with collecting a few of your favorite blog feeds and slowly add information sources like Google Alerts or Twitter's real time search feeds. Use these alert tools in the same way you use a search engine – enter in keywords and phrases as the criteria.

Soon, your *listening post* will quickly become your best source for fresh, relevant content for your blog, next email, or Facebook post.

RESOURCES:

- Twitter's Real Time Search
- Google Alerts
- RSS Readers like Google Reader or Netvibes
- List of listening tools from Beth Kanter:
<http://socialmedia-listening.wikispaces.com/Tools>

Websites like, Netvibes or iGoogle, allow you to aggregate a number of different feeds (RSS, Twitter, Facebook) into one place. This allows you to create a listening dashboard of important topics to your organization.



2 Repurpose your content

Repurposing content created for another medium is a great way to not only use your resources wisely but also to keep your messaging consistent across mediums (a huge challenge to a number of organizations).

Great copy, art, video, images, etc., that have served your organization well in other channels, like direct mail, can serve your organization well in online channels – inexpensively. Keep in mind, however, that repurposing does not mean copy and paste. Take the time to make the message work online.

A few quick guidelines:

- Take inventory of art, images, copy, videos, etc.
- Identify the best performing campaigns or content that convey your message most clearly
- Use some of this content as a great way to keep your blog/Facebook page/Twitter feed active during slower times

Your organization probably did not start creating compelling content yesterday. But it was just yesterday that YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook came on the scene. Don't hold back on that great content just because it was not created today.



3 Coordinate your offline/online mailings

This is one of those tips where you say, ok – *I know that.*

However, it is a practice that is often overlooked when we get into our siloed “let’s just get it done” routine. Each group has their own deadlines/mail dates to make, causing even more separation internally.

Coordination will allow you to deliver your message consistently while maximizing donor value. Make an *overall* production plan, one that includes all campaigns offline and online, a part of your organization’s practice.

RESOURCES:

- Your production mail plan
- A strong project management tool
e.g. Basecamp

“Your most valuable donors become that way because you reach them in multiple ways. While they have joined online, they may continue to give off, and vice versa. Make sure your message is clear and consistent across all channels.” – Barb Perell, Vice President of Online Fundraising, The Avalon Consulting Group



4 Benchmark, set goals, test, measure (in that order)

The quickest way to figure out if you are going in the right direction is to measure your results against your peers. Fortunately, there are some really great resources out there to help.

Using peer benchmarks as a guide, set goals for each campaign. Then test your ideas and measure against your goals and benchmarks.

RESOURCES:

- Convio Nonprofit Benchmark Study
- M+R eNonprofit Benchmarks
- Blackbaud Online Giving Index



5 Use tried and true offline fundraising techniques online

New online media give us great opportunities to try fresh ideas and approaches when it comes to fundraising. However, don't lose sight of those stalwarts of fundraising that just work – like offering matching gifts, using deadlines, and testing your teaser message (aka your subject line).

- Add a P.S. to your email appeals. Give those who prefer to scan your messages a reason to click through quickly.
- Use personalized ask/gift strings on your donation pages based on either Most Recent Contribution (MRC) or Highest Previous Contribution (HPC). Test different upgrade multiples to see which performs the best.
- A clear big callout (think image) is essential for your campaign. The vast majority of clicks will originate with it. The callout should be large enough so that it is extremely easy for anyone to click on.



6 HTML hacks + (testing)² = picture perfect email

Email clients, like Outlook or Gmail, don't have to adhere to html standards like web browsers do. As a result, you need to understand the quirks of each email client and how to overcome them with a few guides, hacks, and a truckload of patience.

- Be wary of Outlook 03, 07, and 10, which do not support many common html styling standards.
- Inline styling is the best and sometimes only option for html emails. For instance, Gmail strips out header styling.
- Test in as many email clients as possible. Set up test accounts in Gmail, Aol, Hotmail, Yahoo, etc.

RESOURCES:

- Free email accounts like Hotmail, Aol, Gmail, Yahoo, etc
- Campaign Monitor's HTML Email CSS Cheatsheet
- Email testing tools like Emailonacid.com or Litmasapp.com

"Testing [html email] is a pain, plain and simple. There are so many different email clients that render the same email differently. Nonetheless, we have to test thoroughly to make sure our brand and message remains consistent over any medium." - Shana Masterson, Lead Manager, Online Campaigns for the National Brain Tumor Society



7 Seed your email like you seed direct mail

Use your previously setup test email accounts in Gmail, Yahoo, Aol, etc. for seeding purposes. Checking these accounts will give you valuable information on how your emails are being viewed and delivered. They will also give you the best idea of whether or not your message is being treated as spam.

Seeding accomplishes two really big things:

- You know when your email actually hit
- You know if your email actually hit

Seeding can really help to get an early diagnosis on your email campaign. If something goes wrong, you will be able to troubleshoot the issue immediately – perhaps saving donations in the process.



8 Maximize touchpoints for email collection

Collect an email address at every touch point possible. Your website, your publications, your events, etc. Schedule time to promote these collection points.

Email is a rock solid and inexpensive way to reach your audience. Build your list organically whenever and wherever you can.

Add an email signup opportunity/form to the following:

- Your direct mail reply forms
- Your Facebook Fan Page (via FBML)
- As part of your event signup forms

Thinking ahead: You could replace “email address” with “mobile phone” in this tip and be ahead of the curve when it comes to mobile fundraising.



9 Refresh and grow your list with a strong acquisition strategy

A strong acquisition strategy is a key part in every fundraisers repertoire. Knowing exactly what is out there will help you make the right decisions when setting said strategy.

- Use E-append, which come with a low price tag and decent match rate, to quickly grow your online list.
- ECOA is a growing practice among nonprofits. With list average churn rates a little under 20%, Email Change of Address (ECO) can help lower the number of email addresses you lose each year.
- Work with organizations that provide pay per lead services. They can help you grow your list quickly by providing qualified leads based on criteria you set.

“(Nonprofit’s) lifeblood is the constant flow of new donors, advocates, volunteers and members. Having a strategy for doing organic recruitment via your website is imperative, but if you want to really jumpstart your online fundraising program you should also consider lead generation.”
Jocelyn Harmon, Director of Nonprofit Services, Care2



10 Crowdsource your fundraising

If you have either participated in or supported a walk/bike/run event you know the power of having friends, friends of friends, and friends of friends fundraising for your organization.

What you might not know is according to some, peer-to-peer fundraising may account for 50% of online fundraisingⁱⁱ. If that is true, that's fundraising to the tune of \$7 billion dollars.

RESOURCES:

- 24 Tools for Fundraising with Social Media from Socialbrite
<http://www.socialbrite.org/2010/05/28/19-tools-for-fundraising-with-social-media/>



11 Video and fundraising

With the realization that 11 is more than the 10 the title of this document promises, here is one more tip squeezed in.

Video has always been a powerful way to visualize your organization's mission and to describe the what's, when's, how's, and why's. Online fundraising is no exception.

- Mention the word video in your email subject line and it will increase open rates
- Video on Facebook increases engagement (same with images)
- Video is huge for your search engine ranking
- Adhere to fundraising storytelling best practices

RESOURCES:

- YouTube's Nonprofit program
<http://www.YouTube.com/nonprofits>
- Secrets to Nonprofit Video Success
<http://www.citizentube.com/2010/04/secrets-to-nonprofit-video-success.html>

“When using video in fundraising make sure there is a clear call-to-action. Present a need and then describe how fundraising solves the need.” David J. Neff, Senior Digital Strategist, Ridgewood Ingenious Communication Strategies



Resources

A few good websites/blogs

- NTEN <http://www.nten.org/blog>
- The Agitator <http://www.theagitator.net/>
- Idealware <http://www.idealware.org/blog>
- Beth's Blog <http://www.bethkanter.org/>
- Frogloop <http://www.frogloop.com/>
- The Chronicle of Philanthropy <http://philanthropy.com/>
- Future Fundraising Now <http://www.futurefundraisingnow.com/>
- Socialbrite <http://www.socialbrite.org/>

Benchmarks

- M+R Strategic Services eNonprofit Benchmarks Study <http://www.e-benchmarksstudy.com/>
- Convio Online Nonprofit Benchmark Study <http://my.convio.com/forms/2010ConvioOnlineNonprofitBenchmarkStudyGuide>
- The Blackbaud Index of Online Giving <http://www.blackbaud.com/bb/index/bb-online-index.aspx>

Email help

- HTML Email Cheat Sheet from Campaign Monitor <http://www.campaignmonitor.com/css/>
- Email on Acid Testing Service <http://www.emailonacid.com/>
- Litmus Email Testing Service <http://litmusapp.com/>

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Other Resources

- Netvibes Dashboard <http://www.netvibes.com/en>
- iGoogle Dashboard <http://www.google.com/ig>
- YouTube for Nonprofits <http://www.YouTube.com/nonprofits>
- Basecamp project management tool <http://basecamphq.com>
- Facebook for Nonprofits <http://www.facebook.com/nonprofits>

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Attribution/Sources

ⁱ Carlson, Nicholas. "Facebook COO: "Email Is Probably Going Away"". Business Insider. <<http://www.businessinsider.com/facebook-coo-email-is-probably-going-away-2010-6>>.

ⁱⁱ Belford, Tom. "Spectators or Fans". The Agitator. <<http://www.theagitator.net/dont-miss-these-posts/spectators-or-fans-ii/>>.



About PMG and The Engage Group

PMG was founded in 1997 to provide direct mail fundraising services to nonprofit organizations and the agencies that serve them. From the day the doors opened, the caliber of customer service is what has differentiated the firm. Internal processes that create efficiencies, uncompromising quality control standards, a culture of hiring experienced staff and deep supplier relationships put PMG in a unique position to offer its clients a superior experience in project management.

In 2007, PMG launched its online division, The Engage Group, to provide our clients with the same level of quality control and efficiency for their email fundraising programs. Engage has since grown into a full service online services operation, managing all production phases of online campaigns, social media efforts, mobile marketing, web and landing page development, and data management for independent projects as well as integrated fundraising campaigns.

The success of our company can be attributed to its corporate philosophy, which is firmly entrenched in the spirit of “good.” By cultivating trusting and meaningful relationships with good clients, good supplier partners, and good staff we know that extraordinarily good outcomes will follow. So far the formula is working. It can be seen at PMG’s offices and is felt everyday by our clients and suppliers alike.

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Special Thanks

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the National Brain Tumor Society

Barb Perell – Vice President of Online Fundraising, The
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David J. Neff – Senior Digital Strategist, Ridgewood
Ingenious Communication Strategies

Jocelyn Harmon – Director of Nonprofit Services, Care2

Debbie Young – PMG

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The Internet