



REALITY check

How Environmental Grassroots Organizations Are (Or Are Not) Raising Money Online

by Andy Robinson

Flery Gizzard was protected by The Land Trust for Tennessee with the help of an e-mail campaign.

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This excerpt (except where noted) comes from a report of the same name commissioned by the Institute for Conservation Leadership. See the full PDF at www.icl.org/resources/publications.

I have the good fortune of serving on the editorial board of the Grassroots Fundraising Journal. At the age of 53, I am perhaps the oldest member of the group—I'm surrounded by fundraisers and consultants in their 20s and 30s, all of whom are sharp, articulate and wise.

At our November meeting, one person mentioned that he had just written personal notes on 300 year-end appeal letters. Everyone groaned in empathy.

In this tech-savvy group of emerging leaders, I wondered, why is everyone so devoted to a fundraising technique that's even older than I am? "Given all the online fundraising and social networking opportunities available to us," I asked, "is anyone spending *less* time and money on their mailings or events or outreach to major donors?"

Nobody said a thing.

We learn about millions of dollars raised for Haiti via text messages. We study how Obama for America electronically engaged a new generation of voters and activists and convinced them to give. We hear rumors of viral fundraising campaigns that spread across Facebook. We ask, "How do I get some of that?"

Of the 15 grassroots organizations featured in this report, most are raising only 1-2% of their annual budgets from online giving, so this is unlikely to be a replacement strategy any time

soon. However, this percentage is likely to grow as nonprofits and donors become more comfortable with online fundraising, so we need to pay attention and begin adapting now.

E-mail Campaigns

The classic e-mail fundraising strategy follows a few basic rules:

- It's time-limited: the campaign has a deadline.
- It's usually built around a specific theme or program goal.
- A challenge gift is often used, and the challenge must be met by the campaign deadline.
- During the campaign, prospects receive lots of e-mail, as many as one message per day.

In June 2010, The Land Trust for Tennessee* launched an e-mail campaign to protect 6,182 acres in and around Fiery Gizzard, a nationally recognized trail system on the South Cumberland Plateau. The total amount needed to purchase the land was \$8.1 million, of which they had to raise about \$2.1 million in private funds in five months.

An anonymous donor offered a challenge gift to match the last \$333,000 raised, matching each donation at 50%.

Aside from their quarterly e-newsletter, in which Fiery Gizzard was mentioned in the June and September issues, the land trust sent out 10 e-blasts to their approximately 3,500 addresses. During the final week of fundraising, they sent out daily e-mail appeals that were very clear and direct. "We outlined how much was still needed, what was raised the day before, and how much time was left," says Beth Thomas, development manager. The 'ticking clock' appeals worked well. "In that week we raised over \$100,000."

In total, The Land Trust for Tennessee was able to raise approximately \$1.8 million, including \$120,000 through the e-mail campaign. They are still raising money to cover a bridge loan provided through The Conservation Fund, but they closed on the Fiery Gizzard transaction and the beautiful area has been protected.

*THIS CASE STUDY WAS NOT PART OF ICL'S REPORT.

Integrated Campaigns

Using e-mail and social networking tools to increase offline (and online) giving, the Sky Island Alliance works to protect the unique habitats and species of the U.S. Southwest and northern Mexico. With guidance from Training Resources for the Environmental Community, they rolled out a "Bring Back the Cats" campaign over the last 10 weeks of 2009. Components included:

- Two challenge gifts of \$5,000 committed in advance.
- A campaign kick-off event attended by 120 people.
- One e-mail per day for five days sent to their list of 3,500 addresses. "We used different photos and content for each one," says Executive Director Melanie Emerson, "but the subject line was the same. People were calling us to say, 'Stop sending the same e-mail!' Next time we'll add a unique subject line to let people know it's a series."
- Facebook postings for the organization's 500 fans.
- A personalized mailing to 150 to 200 major donors and prospects, seeking gifts of at least \$250. Several of these donors had attended the kick-off event.
- Regular "Cat of the Week" updates on the website.
- Personalized thank you notes to all campaign donors from program staff, and phone calls to all donors giving \$200 or more.

By the time the campaign ended, Sky Island Alliance met its goal of \$30,000, including \$5,000 contributed online. When the challenge gifts are subtracted from the total, the average campaign contribution was \$135—a number that would make any grassroots organization proud.

"The big donors continue to give in traditional ways," Emerson says. "Hand-written notes [on fundraising letters] from staff and board made the biggest difference. Donors told us that's why they kept us on their list."

Online Advertising

Five Valleys Land Trust in Montana purchased online advertising to support its \$250,000 challenge campaign, which was successfully completed in December 2009.

These banner ads, prepared for free by a local agency, were designed to drive traffic to the land trust's website.

They generated more than 800,000 impressions (the number of times people viewed the ads) and a click-through rate of .08%, a bit better than the industry average of .06%. "When the ads were running, we saw a big increase in traffic to our website," says Development Director Glenn Marangelo, "so they helped build awareness of our campaign. Unfortunately, we didn't see a corresponding increase in online donations."

Tried and True

The activists and fundraisers interviewed for the report are intrigued by the suite of emerging tools, but are also wary of unrealistic expectations and concerned about the time and discipline required to master these tools. Here is our distillation of what we learned from the case studies:

1. Despite the proliferation of communications tools, personal contact and relationship-building trump everything.
2. Collect all the e-mail addresses you can, then use them.
3. Websites are still essential for effective fundraising.
4. Social networks like Facebook remain a lower-tier fundraising strategy—at least for now.
5. Use online appeals to build a monthly giving program.
6. Perfect conditions never exist, so do what you can with what you've got—and do it now.
7. Many online strategies won't pay off for awhile, but try them anyway as time and money allow.

The best news is that emerging technologies create great opportunities to engage donors, which can result in deeper commitment, a new pool of volunteers, greater board involvement and more generous offline giving. The sweet spot is the place where old techniques and new technologies come together. 🍀

FOR 30 YEARS **ANDY ROBINSON** HAS WORKED WITH NONPROFITS AS A FUNDRAISER, PUBLICIST, GRANTWRITER AND COMMUNITY ORGANIZER. HIS BOOKS INCLUDE *GRASSROOTS GRANTS*, *SECOND EDITION*, *SELLING SOCIAL CHANGE (WITHOUT SELLING OUT)*; *EARNED INCOME STRATEGIES FOR NONPROFITS*, *BIG GIFTS FOR SMALL GROUPS* AND *GREAT BOARDS FOR SMALL GROUPS*. LEARN MORE AT WWW.ANDYROBINSONONLINE.COM.