

Is Social Media the Fund Development Professional's Magic Bullet?



by Tammy Moloy

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In light of the ALS Association's recent epic success, the nonprofit industry is abuzz with talk of how to recreate the next Ice Bucket Challenge. Increasingly, board members are looking to development staff to devise a plan using social media to increase gift income. Development staffers are spending countless hours brainstorming the next big social media campaign. And consultants are hotly debating the role of social media in a fund development plan.

But here at nonprofit consulting firm Ashley|Rountree we are encouraging our clients to stay the course. While the power of social media exponentially sped up the fundraising results from the Ice Bucket Challenge, the campaign succeeded because of the time-tested, fund development best practices taught in "Fund Development 101" around the globe:

- If you don't ask, you don't get
- People give to people
- Peer pressure affects a person's willingness to give¹

I realize that I may have just lost my credibility after that first bullet point, but trust me, after double-digit years in the nonprofit consulting business, the main reason our struggling clients are not raising the funds they want to raise is because they are simply not asking. Consider these comments that I have heard in the last few weeks alone:

"Our constituents know that we need money."

"We don't want to offend our participant families – we don't want them to feel guilty about using our services if they can't give."

"I don't have time to get out of the office... I have spent lots of time posting our request for funds on our Facebook page and I have created a new, cool Donate section of our website."

"Our Development Assistant just sent out our Gala Sponsorship Form to our past sponsors."

In the words of Nora Roberts, "If you don't go after what you want, you'll never have it. If you don't ask, the answer is always no." The Ice Bucket Challenge worked because someone asked someone to do something, i.e. Joe asked Sue to donate \$100 or dump a bucket of ice water on her head (specific!). Assuming constituents know nonprofits need money, being afraid to ask, crutching to social media alone or emailing out generic forms don't cut it. There were tens of thousands of people who never gave to ALS until they were specifically asked for a gift.

And **who** is doing the asking is just as important because statistics prove that "people give to people." Bill Gates only dumped a bucket of ice water on his head because Mark Zuckerberg asked him; that same ask coming from an ALS staffer would've fallen on deaf ears. Quite frankly, ALS is not a very wide spread disease like cancer or heart disease. Most people don't know someone with ALS—most have never even heard of it. So it was the power of the person—the peer pressure—that made the ask work.

Therefore, development professionals must not lose sight of these basic principles. Staffers must not stray the course to focus on “fundraising” versus “development.” Fundraising by definition is “an activity done to collect money by a charity, political party or school,” i.e. the Ice Bucket Challenge. On the other hand, development by definition is “the act or process of growing or causing something to grow or become larger or more advanced: the act or process of creating something over a period of time,” with synonyms for development being evolution, growth, maturation, expansion, enlargement, spread and progress. The focus needs to stay on development with social media as a key strategy—one vehicle of many—for developing donors. Nothing I’ve written here is new knowledge, so just don’t forget those things that work and are truisms.

Social media allows nonprofits to do the following for their donors and donor prospects:

- Make them feel a part of your family
- Publicly show them recognition and praise
- Allow them to voice opinions and be heard
- Show them your mission in action via videos, photographs, stories
- Get them critical information with the speed of a click

And social media allows the nonprofit staffer to reap the following benefits:

- Enhance the cultivation process
- Speed up the time it takes to receive a gift
- Significantly increase the amount of information in donor profiles
- Get a look at the Rolodexes of donors and prospects

Social media plays a huge role in how donors and donor prospects feel about nonprofits, and using the points listed above, social media can make these people feel like they are a part of the nonprofit’s family. Studies prove that donors and potential donors who feel like they are a part of something donate and donate more often.

Note this excerpt from “Could the Future of Fundraising Be Social” by Katie Bascuas:

The results of a recent Blackbaud study on generational giving that found social media channels are not primary transaction channels (methods of donation), but they are influential in developing engagement among donors, especially younger ones.

“There is growing evidence that social media plays an important stewardship role,” the study noted. “Studies of Facebook and Twitter users suggest a large percentage of these individuals are already highly committed to their causes and seeking more contact with the associated organizations. In an era where direct mail is simply too expensive to use as a cultivation vehicle, online engagement is growing in importance.”

Hence, the following recommendations will help enhance fund development efforts:

- Make followers a part of the nonprofit’s family by bragging about them, engaging them in conversation about your mission, sharing their photos, thanking them and even messaging them via Facebook
- Publicly recognize them in a special thank-you section of the Facebook page, in thank-you Tweets mentioning their monetary gifts and donations of time, in video thank-you messages from Board members, and in ads
- Hear from followers by conducting surveys, asking questions, allowing followers to post to your Facebook timeline, etc. (posts with a question mark get more response than ones without)
- Allow followers to see the nonprofit’s mission in action by posting videos with testimonials and mission-related stories (stats show that 92% of mobile video viewers share video with others!)
- Stay current! Update all internet medias as much as possible! Use phrases like “this just in...” or “latest breaking news...” to keep followers returning for new information
- Tag, tag, tag! Individuals who are tagged in photos like to share those photos, and it further exposes your nonprofit’s name

- Know who is following your organization. Staffers need to visit followers' personal pages to gain information about who they are, who they know, where they work, and more. Transfer this information into your nonprofit's database, updating donor profiles with a wealth of information
- Use Facebook and LinkedIn to see donors' Rolodexes. Use this information to proactively help your donors reach out to others

Development professionals should RARELY make a direct ask for money in social media. Like the Ice Bucket Challenge, all asking via social media should be peer-to-peer, i.e. friends asking friends. Even crowd funding campaigns do better via social media when starting with volunteer promotion. Promoting events is fine, but just promote the big ones and in creative, non-obvious ways, i.e. thanking a committee member for getting an auction item vs. asking Facebook friends to go get auction items.

In summary, development professionals need to "stay the course" by focusing on basic fund development principles:

- If you don't ask, you don't receive
- People give to people
- Peer pressure affects a person's willingness to give

Staffers should use social media for donor cultivation and information gathering. Social media gives nonprofit supporters something: friendship, belonging, information, and entertainment; and social media give staffers a wealth of information about their donors. And remember, at the end of the day, it is all about relationships.

¹Reynolds, Diane and Bhalla, Richa. (2013) *Reluctant Altruism and Peer Pressure in Charitable Giving*. *Judgment and Decision Making*, Vol. 8, No. 1, pp. 7-15.

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