

RAISING MONEY IN A CHALLENGING TIME

Strategies to adapt, rebuild and
post better numbers



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Nonprofit organizations worried about fundraising would do well to consider the story of Captain Thomas Moore. Captain Tom, as he is known, is a former British Army officer who—at age 99—set out to raise money for U.K. medical charities by doing 100 laps around his backyard.

When he began in April, his goal was to raise £1,000 (about \$1,250) before his birthday at the end of the month. He did some media interviews and his story caught fire, first in Britain and then worldwide. By the time Captain Tom turned 100, more than 1.5 million people had donated to NHS Charities Together, his chosen cause. Collectively, they raised more than \$40 million.

The story of Captain Tom underlines an important point about raising money in a post-pandemic world gripped by protests over racial injustice: common knowledge around what brings in funding no longer applies. The organizations that succeed will be trading on new ideas and novel approaches. As Erik Leaver, an expert on fundraising at Blackbaud, put it, “nobody has a playbook for this.”

The COVID-19 health crisis has forced development directors to tear up plans and start again under entirely new rules. Organizations like food banks and others that are providing pandemic relief are seeing unprecedented giving. [Direct Relief's Team Love Dance-A-Thon](#) raised \$3.7 million in 12 hours. Those dependent on events or whose missions lie far from public health see worrisome declines. Some even face an existential threat.

Many nonprofits—perhaps even most—lie somewhere in the middle, forced to adjust and carry on in an environment marked by increased competition and a need for sensitivity to a national tragedy that has already killed more than 125,000 Americans.

Yet, the need for social good organizations has never been greater—and that requires funding. If your organization is revamping its strategy, we have assembled strategies worthy of consideration as you recast your organization's plan for the rest of the year. The organizations that adjust quickly to the new rules, tailor their appeal to the moment, show some creativity and prepare to take advantage of their “Captain Tom” moments, can see their numbers improve this year.



Stay in the Moment

Fundraising must go on so organizations can meet their mission. While that may seem obvious in many organizations, there are those that paused programs when COVID reached U.S. shores out of respect for the crisis and may be reluctant to restart.

While a pause was certainly appropriate for some organizations, so too is rejoining the fight. If you are communicating properly, your supporters will understand that your organization has an important mission. It is pivotal to tie your efforts to pandemic relief or the national recovery. “We’ve got to be realistic about this,” Leaver said. “This is a foundational crisis for nonprofits.”

The success of your next campaign and beyond may well depend on how well you can make the case that your work is relevant to the pandemic. COVID-19 is one of the few national crises that has impacted every American. Fundraising appeals that stray too far from the problems people are facing right now can strike the wrong tone.

For organizations working on pandemic relief or recovery, explain your efforts and the good they are doing. Make targeted appeals and include personal stories of those who were helped, all with a measured and appropriate sense of urgency. Make the case that your work is vital to America’s recovery and that donations are directly fueling those efforts.

Make a special effort to communicate with your sustaining donors and primary funders. Donors are being bombarded with requests from organizations that are providing frontline care, and many will be moved to help. Funders, such as corporate sponsors, may be rethinking how to direct their resources. Be sure to communicate directly with sustainers and funders to explain how your organization is responding to the pandemic and why their support remains important. Retention will be vital moving forward.

“Being honest and open with donors is really the most important thing you can be doing right now,” Leaver said. “Make sure your asks are really relevant to the current moment.”

UNDERSTAND YOUR AUDIENCE

The more you know about your supporters—their giving history, touch points and how they like to engage—the more relevant you can be in your fundraising communications.

Raiser’s Edge NXT with Blackbaud Marketing can give you more complete insight into your donor community and what moves them to action at every stage of the constituent lifecycle, from acquisition to retention.

Blackbaud tools allow you to engage your audience according to their specific preferences, and then assess every engagement a supporter has experienced to maximize your insight.

You can then maintain momentum with automated, action-triggered follow-up messages that keep the conversation going.

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ERIK LEAVER, *Fundraising Expert, Blackbaud*

Embrace Online, Virtual & Mobile

Like the workplace, fundraising is likely to take a giant step toward the digital realm, furthering a transition that has been taking place for years.

Online giving grew by 6.8 percent in 2019, according to [Blackbaud's annual Charitable Giving Report](#), and increased 9.6 percent over the past three years. The percentage of donations made on a mobile phone reached 26 percent in 2019, more than double the percentage in 2014.

While online giving still accounted for less than 10 percent of overall donations last year, that may very well change in a post-pandemic world in which organizations can no longer gather their donors for events, walks, runs and other in-person activities. The digital space is going to get more active.

Many organizations are already trying virtual events, gathering their donors for a call or video conference using [Phone2Action's Virtual Event Suite](#); transitioning traditional run/walk/ride events to include virtual participation using [Blackbaud TeamRaiser](#); conducting crowdfunding campaigns using [Blackbaud Peer-to-Peer Fundraising](#); broadcasting via Facebook Live; or using fitness trackers to hold virtual athletic fundraising challenges.



Social media is playing a more important role than it has in the past, with people spending far more time online. Many organizations are having success with paid acquisition strategies such as Facebook Lead Ads, which allow organizations to send targeted communications and capture data while giving supporters a smooth and low-friction experience. Facebook is a strong option because it is a network based on family and friends and calls to action may have more impact.

“Digital interaction is more important than ever,” said Ximena Hartsock, co-founder of Phone2Action. “It’s what allows us to fight the problems that come with isolation and continue to gather in our communities, even as we practice social distancing. We need to meet our people where they are. Even as states reopen and people head back to the office, that’s more apt to be on a phone, an app or a social network.”

One good example is the National Eating Disorders Association, which works to help the 30 million Americans who suffer from eating disorders recover. NEDA was forced to move a program that included almost 100 fundraising walks nationwide to an online environment. The walks provided fully a quarter of their annual revenue, as well as a way to unite members in their own communities and provide much-needed support.

So when the COVID pandemic struck in the U.S., eliminating the ability to gather supporters, NEDA had to adjust—fast. The organization scheduled a series of “virtual” walks via videoconference, targeting specific cities. The video backgrounds were designed to highlight the locale and the speakers were chosen to address supporters’ needs. Some events even had a dance party at the end.

The results were solid. NEDA was able to attract hundreds of people to its virtual walks and saw a 78-percent increase in calls to the association chat line. People enjoyed them—especially the dance parties. “People were filming themselves and posting it on social media,” said National Walks Director Jessica Hickman. “They said, ‘we love this.’”

“We decided to focus on mission delivery, and providing support and connection, which is ultimately why people come to an event,” she said. “We wanted to provide what our community needs during difficult times. If we showed up for people without a direct fundraising ask, we hoped it would be something they remember and appreciate.”

Let Advocacy Boost Your Fundraising

Anyone doubting that nonprofits are doing more with digital needs only look at the advocacy numbers. Digital advocacy has exploded in the weeks following the U.S. emergency declaration of March 13.

More than 1,000 advocacy campaigns were launched between March 17 and 24, according to Phone2Action’s State of Advocacy data. The campaigns activated roughly 1 million people who sent almost 2.4 million messages to Congress and other elected officials. Even after the initial wave, people have been more active since COVID than they were before the pandemic struck. The conversion rate for advocacy campaigns has almost tripled to 16 percent.

How does this help fundraising? It does so in several ways. While there is not always overlap between an organization’s advocacy supporters and their donors, the work you do in advocacy can support your fundraising appeals.

For NEDA it was easy to pinpoint. “The advocacy side has benefitted from the fundraising and walking programs’,” said Public Policy Manager Kerry Donohue. “It’s a way for us to engage new advocates who might not participate. It’s a way for us to reach a new audience.”

TEXT MESSAGING CUTS THROUGH THE NOISE

For organizations worried about cutting through the increase in digital noise brought on by the pandemic, text messaging is an option.

Text has a 99 percent open rate and click and conversion rates that routinely run to double digits. Using custom keywords (e.g. text “info” to 52886) and SMS short codes can drive your audience to action in ways that email no longer can.

Text is a more intimate medium that requires your audience to opt in. But even a small list can have a big impact.



Hickman said that works in the other direction, too. Advocacy can show donors the organization's value in a very tangible way. "We are able to speak better to our impact," she said.

Roughly 50 percent of those who attended NEDA's virtual walks also took action on an advocacy campaign. One campaign drew 1,600 supporters, a NEDA record. Equally important, NEDA saw a 30 percent increase in its advocacy list.

The value of that advocacy also showed on the balance sheet. One campaign set a relatively modest \$40,000 goal (a NEDA walk can bring in up to \$100,000) and got half way there just days after the invitation was launched.

Advocacy represents tangible action that you are taking to support your community. It represents your mission in practice. The ability to point to advocacy victories, whether that is a successful virtual lobby day, a legislative win or thousands of names on a petition, can be used to show your value. Advocacy can help make a case to sustainers, reenergize lapsed donors and provide compelling appeals for funding to keep the action going.

"For organizations that have advocacy as part of their mission, this is absolutely the time to showcase that as one of your strengths," Leaver said.

Don't Forget the Election

Donations can increase following an election as people react—positively or negatively—to the results. The phenomenon was much in evidence after the 2016 election in what became known as the Trump Bump. In some sectors, it was pronounced.

For example, environmental organizations saw a 42 percent jump in revenue from monthly sustainer donors, according to the [Blackbaud Luminate Online Benchmark Report](#) for 2017. Both the number of new donors and the number of repeat donors also grew, reaching twice the industry average.

Whether donations will increase again after this year's

YOUR OWN 'CIVIC ACTION CENTER'

One of the most important roles that nonprofits can play in this year's election is to provide accurate voting information as states shift their process to accommodate social distancing and prioritize voting by mail.

Phone2Action's Civic Action Centers allow nonprofits to provide a branded page that allows their audience to check registration status and register to vote. They can also learn about mail and absentee voting rules, candidates, polling place locations and other important information.

Phone2Action's Civic Action Center puts everything your audience needs to know to get active in this year's election all in one place, and it's available in both English and Spanish.

election remains to be seen, but it is hard to recall an election with more at stake. Not only will November's polling determine which party controls the White House, Congress and thousands of state offices, but it will establish the government charged with steering America's recovery.

While the pandemic and the nationwide protests have overshadowed the election in terms of media attention in recent weeks, that will almost certainly change as the election draws closer, the parties make their presidential nominees official, the candidates begin campaigning full time and the media refocuses its lens in the wake of the protests. The election will draw attention, with the protests and the pandemic likely occupying center stage as issues.

"While COVID is really important, we are in an election season and the country remains at a crossroads," Leaver said. "There is important work to be done."

Inspiration is Where You Find It

So, there are some strategies to be employed as the new fundraising landscape reveals itself. Keep relevant. Make use of technology. Meet supporters where they are and show them what you are doing to help them and the mission. And there is one more thing: experiment to find what works with your audience.

If a development team set out to create a winning strategy this year, they would not likely ask a 100-year-old veteran to run laps. Yet Captain Tom raised \$40 million for medical charities. They probably would not ask donors to dump buckets of water on themselves. Yet the Ice Bucket Challenge raised roughly \$115 million for the ALS Association in 2014.

The activities that inspire people to give can be mysterious, and that's why it's important to try new things. Try a video-based fundraising event. Start a virtual walk-a-thon. Nonprofits are having success with a variety of digital strategies, many of which would never have been considered just six months ago. But the "new normal" is about finding what works—and America's recovery depends upon it.

"Nonprofits are essential to America's recovery," Hartsock said. "These are the organizations that are caring for people and providing relief. They must continue to operate so that our communities have the resources they need. They have to win this fight."

[To learn more about how Phone2Action's advanced digital advocacy tools and Blackbaud's integration can help your organization drive engagement and donations, schedule a time to talk with a Phone2Action Civic Engagement expert.](#)

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