



A Compendium of the 12-Week Covid-19 Fundraising Blog **What Should We Be Doing Now?**

To assist our clients, colleagues and friends through the uncertain weeks of Covid-19, Goettler Associates began writing and circulating a weekly blog in late March 2020, and continued doing so for twelve weeks. Now that the country is beginning to re-emerge, we took a look back at what we wrote and felt there was value in compiling this information into a single source for on-going use in the weeks and months ahead.

The massive interruption to our nation and our cyclical routines that is Covid-19 calls for new strategies and a rededication to the essential foundations of effective development and fundraising. What should you be doing in times of crisis? Probably what you should have been doing all along.

1. Stay positive.

Why is everyone telling us to stay positive? Because right now it's hard to do! We don't know what's ahead, and that lack of certainty creates anxiety and doubt. So, it's best to focus on what we do know. We know that the nonprofit sector is resilient, we know that people still believe in our missions, and that in past recessions and downturns people still continued to give. What else do you know about your organization, and what decisions have been made in the short term and in your plans for the next few months? Certainly, some important decisions have been made that should be shared with your stakeholders, friends, and loyal donors. Timely communication with your constituents is essential, and it should be done with transparency, sincerity, and authenticity to lock in the trust relationship you have with donors and stakeholders.

2. Adopt a forward-thinking sensibility

Read your mission statement, and read it again. What is the vision for your organization? Because the imme-

diated future is not certain, your focus must be on mission and vision, and to delivering your mission-critical programs. Look at your case for support. Do you start with history and end with your vision of the future? Leave the 100 years of service message behind and lead with the vision. Adopt this strategy: “What do we need to do now so we can be here when we have re-emerged?” Don't lose the thread of excitement — your donors want to help you change the world for the better.

3. Use challenging times to focus (on fundamentals).

At the risk of exhausting all the fundraising clichés ever coined, the glass is still half full. Focus on the essential fundamentals of success. If we don't ask, we won't get. Use the difficulty of these days to heighten your senses and focus on the essentials of sound fundraising practices. Demonstrate your professional knowledge and expertise to your colleagues. Begin with your case and adjust your message and talking points to the current times, engage and involve volunteers, and ask for support when you are ready and when it is appropriate.

4. Improve your development practices every day.

Lead with compassion. Don't start with tactics, start with strategy. What do you want to achieve and what action is the best fit? Continue to fundraise but consider the message — what is the value exchange that you are offering? Challenge the standard “development speak” that we all use. It's time to consider what a donor to your organization experiences and make it better. Clearly communicate what you are doing at this time and concentrate on your mission, vision and values by focusing your efforts on stewardship, engagement, and retention. We could be facing a time of passion fatigue, and donors and potential donors are getting better at being “banner blind.” It is not the size of the

What Should We Be Doing Now? (continued)

organization that determines the importance of its work, it's the mission and the actual impact. People give because you meet needs, not because you have needs. Sharpen your skills by connecting your constituents and stakeholders with the values of your organization and bring the joy of giving to the forefront. It still exists.

5. Adapt to the current situation.

Turn things on a dime. Use technology to expand your message to engage new audiences and better engage existing audiences. Today's fundraising professionals have many new tools to employ. One of the great new tools demonstrated at AFP's 2020 VIRTUAL ICON was a terrific way to send short personalized videos to donors. Other interesting techno-tools to check out and potentially add to your fundraising and relationship building strategies include: handwritten emails; personalized video thank-you posts; personalized text messages to donors; features for email signatures; online design; and new applications to create stories for Instagram.

It is critical to adapt. Keep an open mind to change. Your organization may not be what it was when this crisis started. Consider new technologies and consider new collaborations. Adapting to the new situation may foster new ways of looking at partners and working with others to fulfill your mission.

6. Communicate with sincerity, purpose, and gratitude.

Let your donors, prospects, volunteers, stakeholders and organizational friends know what you are doing and what you plan to do. How are you delivering your services? How are you equipped to modify those plans? Let those closest to you know that your passion to fulfill your mission is the top priority. Be honest about the challenges you are facing and the assistance you are seeking to overcome them. Express your gratitude to your institutional "family" who are keeping things moving: your co-workers, volunteers, and board members. Above all, let your donors know that your ability to deal with the vagaries of today is made possible because of their investment. Express your concern and care for others — most all of us are in a similar position.

7. Hone your response to communications and planning.

A recent e-newsletter from a large and highly respected nonprofit institution featured the same old banner with the same stock photo that the organization had been using, featuring a group of smiling people casually chatting (no social distancing in that group!). What worked in the past now really struck a false note.

In a survey of nonprofit and for-profit employees conducted in late March 2020 by the *Chronicle of Philanthropy*, 75 percent of respondents from the nonprofit sector stated they had adjusted their messaging to acknowledge Covid-19. That is only appropriate. Take another look at every communication piece in your queue and seek the input of colleagues and volunteers to see if it is still relevant and sensitive to current circumstances.

8. Steward with dignity.

There is a delicate balance between the nonprofit's need for funding at a time when donors may be facing reduced wages, layoffs, or a stark decline in asset value. Is now the right time to make the ask? Lessons learned from the Great Recession showed that nonprofit development leaders who communicated with grace and dignity to long-time donors who needed to reduce or temporarily stop their contributions retained those donors when the economy improved. Your donors are your family — hold them close in tough times. Steward your donors with a longer-term relationship in mind.

9. Plan with flexibility.

Today does not look like last week. In fact, today does not look like any other day. Regardless of the size of your organization, your ability to be flexible with plans and deadlines will be critical. Pull out your development plan and look at what appeals need to be re-messaged, or moved to a later date. Look at your events calendar and see what can be shifted to the future, such as donor recognition events. Cancellations of major fundraising events will be painful to your bottom line so consider hosting a virtual one instead. Back in the days before the Internet we used to call them "No Ball Balls"

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and patrons and sponsors were ready and willing to buy a ticket to stay home. Remind yourself that your faithful supporters have already planned to contribute to your organization. The main point: don't throw out that plan, adjust it accordingly.

10. New levels of cooperation and systematic change.

One of the extraordinary things we have witnessed across many communities is the coming together of large organizations and systems, working in tandem to combat Covid-19. Arts groups are promoting one another's virtual programs. Food banks are doubling down to ensure small pantries can still serve their ever-growing clientele. How can we, in our respective communities, use this time to establish new and exciting collaborations? How can we harness the talent of our own team, and that of others, to restructure events, activities and programs for greater efficiency and effectiveness? Let's all promise that, when this is over, we will never say "We've always done it this way" ever again.

11. Pursue rapid problem-solving and embrace innovation.

We have been forced to incorporate technology not as a tool but as THE tool. We are improving remote meeting practices that thankfully help to eliminate those time-wasting sidebar conversations. We are converting labor-intensive fundraising events into virtual toasts and online auctions, and converting event sponsorships into direct agency support. We are diving more deeply than ever into budget analysis and program evaluation to prepare for an inevitable reduction of expenses.

Perhaps, as a result, we are discovering there may be a different and better way to operate. Can the more expensive full-color (and way-too-long) annual report that "we always do" be converted into a creative infographic that clearly and succinctly shouts IMPACT? Can we substitute the costly event for an appeal that yields more returns — not just in money, but in terms of relationships? Can we turn stale meetings into significant exchanges of ideas? Now is the time to line

up the sacred cows and tired practices and give them the boot.

12. Don't assume! You don't know what the donor thinks . . . until you ask.

Maintaining a focus on the donor's perspective is absolutely essential today. Resist the urge to decide for your donor whether or not they are interested in giving to your organization at this time. The decision to give is up to your donor. Your obligation is to continue to provide them with the opportunity to invest in your mission. The current times of course call for increased sensitivity and increased personalization. The need to segment donors and personalize your message and ask is of greatest importance today. The best advice is to segment and to specialize.

Do your homework before asking, reach out, talk to friends, colleagues, board members, volunteers, advisors, and donors, and ask them for advice and input. You will quickly learn a great deal from those closest to you about how your organization's message is perceived during Covid-19 and how to best move forward. Ask with concern, with sincerity, and end with authenticity. When you are back in action, you'll want them to be right by your side.

13. People are naturally inclined to give.

Studies from the Great Recession (and there were lots of them!) showed that while the economy took a hit, people still gave at a consistent level. They may have curtailed some of their incidental contributions, but they stuck with the organizations where they had a long-standing and rewarding relationship. Even in times of great uncertainty, people do not change their giving habits dramatically. They are naturally generous and want to help. Make sure it is easy for them to give and work to actively reinforce a positive relationship with your donors.

14. Keep moving forward.

Don't be distracted by the bad news all around because there may be more to come. Dramatic headlines are designed to get attention. Don't jump



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to those doom-and-gloom conclusions! We know from the donor renewal data compiled by the AFP's Fundraising Effectiveness Project (<http://afpfe.org/>) that the average donor renewal rate is just 46 percent. If your organization only loses one in five donors this year, you are well ahead of the national average. Communicate, steward and follow-up to keep your "yes" donors and to move your "maybes" into the affirmative column.

Embrace the F.O.N.K.

Humans seek knowledge to inform their decisions, to plan, to act, and to make positive changes. When we are afraid of not knowing, our brains tend to search for the negative. When our heads are full of negative thoughts we fail to act.

It is fair to say that most of us can acknowledge an increasing sense of fear about our uncertain futures because of Covid-19. **FONK is upon us: Fear of Not Knowing.** FONK can be debilitating, and lead to poor decisions, or even total paralysis.

How do we embrace not knowing? We need to remember that we've been here before. In fact, we wake up and face every day of our lives not knowing — something. Let's turn FONK on its head.

Have you ever noticed how joyous children are when they are exploring, and their sheer surprise of discovery? We all need to embrace our FONK and the opportunity it presents to get comfortable with change and to discover something new.

In concluding this compendium, we offer a few suggestions for embracing your FONK and rejecting paralysis:

- **Try something new, act now!** Acknowledge the very real effect of FONK and find the fortitude to act. That annual special event isn't going to happen, so try something new. Start smaller if you need to build your confidence, but embrace your FONK and act today.
- **Embrace your mistakes.** When you do something new it is likely that you'll make a mistake and when you do, embrace it as growth. Realize your discovery and channel your new knowledge to act again. Messing up is not failure if you identify it and learn from it. Use it as a way to get better, to grow and to get stronger.
- **See the wonder and opportunity of change.** Change can be scary, because it forces you to leave your comfort zone. See it instead as a new opportunity to explore and to discover, to meet new people and to reinvent success for your organization and your donors. Change has happened. Look for the wonder in it, and the new doors that can open.

