Nonprofit 911 – December 9, 2008

A Procrastinator's Guide to Year-end Fundraising

with Mark Rovner
Sponsored by Network for Good

The MP3 audio transcript can be found at
www.fundraising123.org or www.Nonprofit911.org

Mark Rovner: I know that on the sign-up page for today's talk there was a link to download the document that we put out last year called "The Procrastinator's Guide to Year End Fundraising." I'm going to use that as an outline for the next 20-25 minutes and talk through what we think are some of the most important points to keep in mind.

What I will try to do as we go along is also weave in anything that's either new or especially important given the fact that the economy stinks right now. I also want to say that there's nothing in the advice that I'm going to share today or in the Q&A that cannot be done by a smaller nonprofit.

I know the Network for Good people have heard me say this before, but one of the reasons I really enjoy talking to small and medium nonprofits is it takes a lot of money to really screw up your year-end fundraising and it doesn't take a lot of money to do the right things.

So if you're taking online donations and you have some sort of rudimentary email communications, the truth is that tools-wise, you've got what you need.

So without further ado, item one, or point one of our 10-point plan for year-end fundraising is to inspire your donors every day. And if I was going to spend all of our time on only one of the 10 points, this would be the one point. It is simultaneously the most important thing you can do and the thing that most fundraisers spend the least time doing.

I think this has been an interesting and relatively unproductive year from an online fundraising point of view. Yes, more people are giving online. Yes, Barack Obama raised half a billion dollars online. No, you are not Barack Obama. I think we're spent the last year very fixated on tools, on how to use Twitter, on how to use Facebook, on how to include social networking in general in your fundraising, and I think it's actually taken us further from the basics.

The basics is, remind people why you exists, remind people why you are excited and inspired to work where you work every day. And really stay close to your core mission, to the passion of your organization to do whatever it's doing to change the world. Communicate that in an authentic way.

If you can do that and do that well, you can hang up now, or actually we can un-mute you and you can teach the rest of the hour, because that's really the most important thing.

Now, people often ask, how do you that? How do you build passion? How do you inspire people every day? Let me just give you two or three examples.

One is to tell your organization's founding story. Almost every organization was born in some sort of crisis and came into being as a response to that crisis. That story, in and of itself, is told within the organization, is told to a new employee when they join the organization, and is so rarely told to the public. Go back to your roots and share with people why you exists, and what was going on around the time you came into being, and how your mission has changed.

Another way to inspire your people every day is to tell stories and share successes. And not only communicate with them you're asking for money. Now that doesn't apply so much between now and December 31, because it is, as Jono suggested, fundraising season. And there are indeed some of these things where you've been doing them all year and you're going to reap the benefits of that. And if you haven't, you're not.

But making sure, if you haven't been doing good storytelling, if you haven't been sharing your successes, if you haven't been sending emails that have no donate links in them whatsoever over the course of the year, make sure you do that next year.

Another way to inspire people is to listen to them. Ask their opinion. Ask what they are interested in about your work. Ask them what they would like to hear more of. We find that most donors are not shy with their opinions in terms of what they would like to hear more or less of .

And you find that as many people will tell you, if you talk to them about things that interest them, they'd be willing to hear from you more frequently as will tell you the opposite.

The other small piece of advice for being more inspiring and being more authentic is making your organization a little bit more transparent for the outside world. Have a monthly online chat, much like this one, with your CEO. Or have him or her send out an email once every month or once every couple months about what's going on in their lives.

Your organization is real people, and the more people feel like they're contributing to real people rather than an institution, the better. And by the way, not to contradict Jono in any way, we are seeing - and this is just the point I wanted to make earlier on - we're seeing a very mixed bag, both in terms of money coming in and in terms of people's stated intentions.

We just did a survey for one client and asked their donor base whether they were going to be giving more or less this year, and 41% said they will be giving less. So, if you're not bringing in the money you expected or the money you brought in last year, it may not be something you're doing tactically wrong, it may just be the economy.

All right. That's enough on point one. Point two is blaze trails to your donate page. Your donate page is your most important page between now and December 31st. Getting people to that donate page is your number one job as fundraisers. How do you get people to that donate page?

One is think about keyword searches. This is the time of year when people are thinking about making their donations, and there's a very good chance they will search on your name. They will search on Greenpeace or they will search on World Wildlife Fund, or they will search on the Humane Society of Silicon Valley, to find you in order to donate to you.

So, create some keyword ads, and take those keyword ads straight to the donate page. Some groups have had donation-related Google keyword ads rejected, and others have had more success. My advice would be at least give it a try.

Make sure your home page has more than a typical number of calls to donate between now and the end of the year. Some people call it a "home page hijack," where the home page becomes essentially a year-end fundraising ask.

If your organization is not involved in programmatic work or service delivery that requires that your home page be business as usual, give at least half of the real estate between now and the end of the year over to making the case for year-end giving.

There are a couple of examples of good home page hijack in the document that you can download at Network for Good. And right now I think Network for Good is the only place you can download it. So, go to Network for Good. One example of the home page hijack that Amnesty International did a couple of years ago, and I think it's as good an example of any that's out there.

The third point is - and this is something you should do today - is take a quick audit of your donate form itself and make sure that it's up to snuff. There are some easy things that you can do that's going to increase your income from that donate form today.

One is to eliminate unnecessary fields. If you're asking people for their fax number, if you're asking people for a second phone number. Things like that tend to suppress completion rates, meaning it's just looks like too much information and they skip to the next thing.

Make sure that your form looks like a form when it loads. There are some forms I've seen that have so much text at the top you have to scroll down to realize that you're on a form. You're going to lose donations that way.

Try to suppress as much global navigation as possible. Don't give people a million other choices when what you really want to do is give. And by the way, the simplest thing you could do that could potentially make the biggest difference is to make sure your mailing address and a telephone number are both on the bottom of your home page and on the bottom of your donate page. There are still quite a few people who would prefer to print and mail. There's still quite a few people who would prefer to phone in their gift, and that's what you're looking for. There's no reason not to make is super, super easy to find it.

That's some example of some good donate forms, that again are available on the PDF at Network for Good Fundraising 911 site. You can take a look at those.

Number four, and this is kind of related, is test-drive the whole process. You never know what's tripping people up until you watch a normal person. And the chances are, by virtue of the fact that you're on this call, that you are not a normal person, and therefore not a good test subject.

Get a wife or a girlfriend or a colleague or a neighbor to find your website and make a hypothetical donation. Give them $10 and have them actually do it with their credit card. Watch them do it. See if they get stuck, see if they get lost, see if they get confused. Chances are there is some little tweak or two you're going to find that I wouldn't have thought of and you wouldn't have thought of that is going to help smooth the way to the donation page.

The next point, number five, create a "why donate" page. Here's where the current situation might come into play. It is best practice, and I have to say not frequently done, to have a page that makes the case for giving to your organization in very simple, very concise terms, both in terms of what you have achieved and how you are a good steward of donated funds.

That is still the best practice and you should absolutely have that. Again, it doesn't require fancy software or anything. It just requires the thoughtful use of one HTML page, and maybe a couple of graphs. I might add to this what you're doing to weather the economic storm. And I might incorporate into your messaging not "Hey, times are tough, we need your money more than ever, " because there's actually some evidence that may or may not be helpful.

But "Here's how my organization is planning to deal with the current hardships. Here are the concrete steps we're taking. Here are our contingency plans." That will be very confidence-inspiring on the part of the donor who wants to know whether they are contributing to a failing enterprise or whether you're thinking about the economy and how you plan to deal with it. I'm happy to talk about that more and brainstorm with you during the Q&A.

The next point, number six, thank your donor three times. In almost any online giving system you have three easy opportunities to say thank you and you should make use of all three of them. One is the finish page that comes up after someone makes an online donation. The second is the auto-responder that the system kicks out to confirm the donation. And the third is your ability to send an email out a couple of days after the donation is made.

These people did not just buy a widget on Amazon.com. These people did not just engage in what is to them an arms-length transaction. Every donation to a cause like yours is an expression of hope. And there is a lot of heart in it and there is a lot of emotion in it. What you want to do is mirror that emotion in your thank you, and not send them a receipt, though obviously you want your tax ID on one of them and have something that they can use at tax time.

But also a heartfelt thank you. It's an opportunity to reinforce that they just made a good decision, that they just changed someone's life or some people's lives or some animals' lives or made the world a better place You want to make full use of all three of those opportunities.

Again, some examples of thank you pages and thank you letters in the PDF - which I haven't mentioned is free. It's not only free, but we encourage you to Xerox it, pass it around, rip it off, quote from it, plagiarize it, just use it. I hope it's useful.

Number seven kind of follows on the thank you, and that is providing for a warm welcome. Particularly people who are giving for the first time. Make sure they get an email within a week that says, "Welcome to my organization. Here's a little bit you may not know about us. Here are a couple of links to my favorite pages on the website that you might want to look at." Make it personal, if possible.

And again, this is part of that reinforcing process. This is especially true if someone has made a donation, say, to a health charity in the name of someone who has passes away or is sick. Or a charity where I gave $100 because my next-door neighbor ran a marathon or whatever, and I may be giving because of someone I care about and not because of your organization. That welcome is especially important.

Number eight, and we're kind of circling back around to that "inspire people every day" point. Launch a cultivation plan. And that means sending out emails on a regular basis to your donors that are not asking for money. I will say if there is any kind of a link to a donate page it is not a cultivation.

If you link to a donate page, even what we call in the business a "soft ask" the whole document becomes a solicitation in the eyes of many donors. So, send out emails periodically. They don't have to be beautiful. They don't have to be super-well designed. They just have to be a clear, thoughtful, concise update on what's going on at your organization, what you're thinking about.

Again, you've got a perfectly good reason to talk to your donors even more frequently lately, as we all know, the recession. Keep them up to date and make a point of not asking them for money. One organization, the Nature Conservancy, has very publicly said they raise more money from their cultivations than they raise from outright solicitations.

And they almost never solicit any more. They will send out very beautiful, thoughtful cultivations and they know, or they think they know, that those cultivations are driving income, because they get huge online income spike on the days those cultivations go out, and there's no other thing that it can be.

This is an important element of fundraising and it's an important form of fundraising. And no I'm not telling you to go down the Nature Conservancy path necessarily, but it's a pretty provocative thing that they're doing.

Nine: measure and test throughout the whole year. You don't have to measure a million different things. I think it's one of the ironies of online fundraising and online marketing in general that we see it as the most measurable form of marketing, and yet it often turns out to be the least meaningful measurable form of marketing and fundraising.

And that's partly because we try to measure everything, or we don't know what to focus on, or we try to focus on too many things. So, decide now what you're going to measure in 2009. And as fundraisers, you really want to stick to the basics. You want to look at response rate, you want to look at average gift, you want to look at your total number of gifts.

You don't want to get stuck on things like open rates and click-through rates and your Google analytics and how many people are on your Facebook page. I'm not saying don't look, but don't fixate on those, because as fundraisers I'm honestly not sure how much you're going to learn.

And finally number 10, if you haven't been planning for December fundraising all year long in 2008, now's the time to get a jump on 2009 by laying out a really, really cool cultivation plan, by laying at a way of both listening to donors and letting them talk back to you, and keeping them abreast of your work. And by figuring out where you're going to be 12 months from now.

And with that, I'm going to turn things back to over to Jono. Jono, you had told me a couple of hours ago that there were already questions coming in, so I'm eager to hear what people have got.

Jono Smith: Excellent. Thank you, Mark. And just a reminder, if you have questions, please email them to fundraising123@networkforgood.org. And lets' go to our first question, which comes from Paige. "When is the best time in December to send the year-end email solicitation? Also, is there a better day of the week? We also have a monthly newsletter that goes out around the 15th of the month. How do you time that newsletter and the year-end solicitation?"

Mark: Great questions. Let me knock off the easy one first. There is no best day to email. If you get seven online marketers in the room you'll get seven different answers, and they're all equally right and equally wrong. The best day to email is the day you have something important to say. There is no ideal single time during the month of December to send your email solicitation, because you definitely do not want to only send one. December is one of those times where you need to be a little bit over the top in terms of frequency.

We have some clients who are sending eight or nine emails this month to their file. And while that is on the high side, I can tell you that every email returns income, and the complaint level is always quite low.

Now, if we did that every month of the year, we would essentially be training our folks to stop reading our emails. But, this is the giving season and they halfway expect it. So, I would say do not send fewer than three emails this month. I would send one along about now, sometime in the next seven days. I would send one within the last three days of the year, the 29th, 30th, 31st. And then if you were going to send one more I would send it around the 22nd or 23rd.

Part of the reason you want to send with frequency is because people give when they're ready to give, and they tend to be slaves to whatever they saw in their inbox last. So, being in their inbox between now and the 31st is part of the game.

Now, Jono, did I drop out part of that question?

Jono: No, I think the only other question was do we need to do anything special to balance this with the monthly newsletter that we've already got going out.

Mark: Ah, yeah. No. I mean, I would send straight out solicitation either 48 hours before or 48 hours after the newsletter. And I would also obviously use the newsletter as a reminder of end-of-the-year giving. And that's especially if you have a match or some other kind of special offer going on.

Jono: OK, great. Thanks, Mark. The next two questions are similar, I'll combine them from Mary and Kerry. And they both deal with having positive open rates, but poor conversion rates. Mary says, "We have a pretty good open rate but no action. There are links everywhere to the donation page, but no click-throughs. How do we change that? Our donation page has the high donation levels at the top of the page, with the low dollar options at the bottom. Are we scaring away donors by putting the big dollars at the top?" And along the same lines, Kerry says, "We send an annual letter about two and a half weeks ago. We haven't had a great response yet. Usually our donations are still coming in after the new year. Would you suggest sending a follow-up letter to those who didn't donate, saying, "If you did donate, thank you. If not, would you like to reconsider."

Mark: Yes. I would definitely send a follow-up. And I think particularly given the economy, a lot of people are going to be doing that. I think it's a perfectly acceptable practice in general. Remind me what the first question was?

Jono: Sure. Basically, tips for taking advantage of high open rates, but low conversation rates.

Mark: Ah. You know, particularly if that is something that is new that could very well be the economy. We are seeing reduced response rates with a number of clients. And we're seeing, contrary to what, Jono, you're seeing, we're seeing across-the-board drops in average gifts. So, it's a hard call right now. If you've done a really thorough audit of your giving process and you're sure that people are getting to your donate page, you're making the strongest possible offer, it may be that you've gone out too early. We've seen a sudden jump, even in the last seven days, between solicitations that were going out at Thanksgiving, the first part of December, and this week.

For whatever reason, and we have a number of theories, online giving is just starting to pick up. So, if you've gone out, go out again.

Jono: OK. The next question comes from Kristin. Kristin says, "Do you have recommendations for seeking in-kind marketing help? Many of your suggestions and references in the PDF have attractive graphic designs, but how do nonprofits with small budgets and little marketing experience put together compelling materials?"

Mark: Probably the easiest way to do that is to use photography. If you have good photos, if you're an animal shelter you have a natural source of photos. If you're an environmental group, you probably have a natural source of photos. If you don't have a natural source of photos, go our to your list and ask for it. I think getting basic graphic design help is something you could out to your list for. My only point of advice in terms of donated services is a volunteer job is still a job and those people expect a certain amount of supervision. You should expect to train them. The only difference between a volunteer job and a paid job is some money.

So it's more than no work, but particularly a list or a community bulletin board or something where you can advertise for that, I think it's a great idea.

Jono: I'll just throw in a couple of nonprofits that I'm aware of. One is Grassroots.org. They provide free web design and graphic design assistance. I know that the Taproot foundation also matches nonprofits with consultants to help them.

Mark: And Free Range Graphics, or I guess they're called Free Range Studios now. They are one of my favorite design firms, and the actually did the design pro bono for the "Procrastinator's Guide." And I know they do a couple of nonprofits a year on a pro bono basis.

Jono: OK. The next question comes from Jay. Jay is with an Alaskan-based nonprofit called Helping Hand for Nepal. Jay asks, "What suggestions do you have for NGOs or nonprofits in third-world or developing countries? We're an all-volunteer staff and 100% of every donations goes to on of our projects in Nepal. But, our problem is we're based in Alaska, and our projects do not benefit Alaska. When I do public speaking about Helping Hand for Nepal, at least once at every engagement I'm questioned about why I'm not helping people in the US and we're helping people outside of the US." Do you have any general tips for people who find themselves in this situation, Mark?

Mark: I think you are not going to convince people to care about Nepal who don't already care about it. Your task is to find the people who already care about Nepal and connect with them. I happen to be one of those. I traveled there twice and it's one of my favorite places on earth. Jono, if you could put us together, I'd be happy to talk to him offline. But, basically, don't waste your time trying to convince that person to care about the Nepalese. Find the people who've been trekking in Nepal. Find the returned Peace Corps volunteers. Track down the people who already care and convince them that you are a great investment in helping something they already care about.

Jono: Great. And Cheryl just wrote in and also suggested, to the previous question, that folks go to Volunteer Match and request a virtual volunteer match for graphic design and marketing.

Mark: Great idea. Thanks for that.

Jono: OK, let's see here. The next question is from Thomas, and he'd like to know what your thoughts are about text-based donations. I guess he means text to donate programs.

Mark: It's going to be a big thing someday, isn't it? I was just over in Europe and it already is a big thing. You see posters, even at - I can say I went to Starbucks in London - at Starbucks in London, where charities had really specific instructions on how to text to donate. It was ridiculously, insanely, obscenely expensive in this country, and now it's only moderately obscenely expensive in this country. I think over the next year or two you're going to start to see it take hold. It's going to be a great way to get people to make impulse donations. I think it's going to be really useful in political campaigns, I think it's going to be really useful in disaster fundraising. It's coming, but it's not quite here yet.

Jono: OK. This a great question from Mary, I'm really glad she asked this one. "Can you say anything about the subject line, and what tips you have for that?" What works better and other thing in the subject line, especially this time of year?

Mark: Yeah. First of all, stop thinking about the subject line. It's not about the subject line. It's about the envelope. And what I mean by that is someone who is getting an email from you is seeing a number of things. They're seeing your "from" name, they're probably seeing your "from" email address, and they're seeing the subject line. It's pretty well established at this point in the commercial sector that those three pieces work together to convince to open, delete, or hit the spam button on your email. We've done an enormous amount of subject line testing.

We kind of came to this the hard way. We kept varying up the subject line from "Please give now, " to "We're going to kill your cat unless you give, " and everything in between. And really couldn't affect the open or response rates until we realized that for a well-known organization, the thing that was really driving the open and response rates was the name of the organization in the "from" and address and the "from" name.

So, probably good to do your own testing, but the best practice is to think of those three pieces - the "from" name, the "from" address and the subject line - as a unit. Make sure your organization's name is in it. And the only other thing I'll say is generally speaking if you make it clear it's a solicitation for donations in the subject line, you may depress the open rate, but you may actually increase the response rate.

So something to test, but not something to get too hung up over.

Jono: OK. Several folks writing in asking for tips on growing an email list. Dullah, for example is with a historical foundation in southeast New Mexico. And she says, "How would we go about having people communicate by email or give us their email address? We are a small organization in a fairly small town and we obtain our major gifts from face-to-face meetings with donors and at shows to publicize our prints we sell to help raise funds."

Mark: I have kind of a minority view on this. Whereas the conventional wisdom - and I want to tell you what the conventional wisdom is and I want to tell you what my advice is. The conventional wisdom is to build the biggest possible email list you can possibly build so that when you're trying to solicit funds you've got the biggest possible list of prospects and to try and engage people you've got the biggest possible list of prospects, et cetera, et cetera. I'm not sure that's the best way to do it, because what we are finding is in most organizations - no matter how big their list is - there's a very intense, very passionate, small core group who came in organically or who you met at events or who wrote a check or who somehow came into you life, who are doing all the heavy lifting. Who are responding to your fundraising appeals, who are telling friends about you, who are doing all those kinds of volunteer efforts on your behalf.

And I think the trick is to find those super-inspired people and work more directly and more concertedly with them. It means you're going to have a smaller list. It means it's going to grow more slowly. But, I think your return on effort is going to be far, far higher. And I think that is becoming clearly the best practice in the commercial sector and it's just beginning to get a tippy-toe in the nonprofit sector.

Now, buried within that question I think was how do you get donors to give you their email addresses, and that is still something that doesn't have any simple answer. One thing we're doing with a client is offering to email them a tax receipt in early January if they provide us with their email address.

Basically, you need to give them a reason why they should give you an email address. Be clear with what you're going to do with it. If you plan is just to open up a new channel of solicitation, they're probably not going to want it, and they're probably not going to want to give it to you. So, you need to have some sort of cultivation plan via email that you can share with them that might inspire them to sign on.

Jono: Several folks are curious if you have any data on whether email is more effective than direct mail.

Mark: There's a loaded question. No, it's not. On a per email basis, the response rate is far lower and the acquisition costs are far higher. I don't see email as a substitute for direct mail. Which, by the way, is starting to fail, but it's going to be years and years before we can let go of it. I see email as a helper channel. I see email as an ability to rapidly communicate with donors, to communicate non-solicitations to donors. It is a solicitation channel for a certain minority of your donors. And it's a great way to communicate graphics. It's a great way to communicate video, or at least communicate the availability of video.

Jono: And Cynthia writes in and asks, "What should us 'little guys' learn from the Obama e-campaign?"

Mark: Well, let's go back to that inspiration point. I mean he sold hope. I'm certainly still drinking the Kool-Aid personally. But, I think the Obama campaign's success, and I'm not taking anything away from the brilliance of his web team, was 90% Obama himself and 10% the tools. So, what can the little guy learn? Don't wander far from the things that inspire your audience. Don't try to reach a million people out there, only a thousand people who are really super inspired by what you do. It's like that Nepal guy. He's not going to get people - and everyone has their equivalent - he's not going to get people to love Nepal if they don't already love it but he certainly going to get them excited about what he does if they do. So, anything that they love that you work on connects with them.

Jono: And we wrote about thanklessness in our new e-book.

Mark: [laughs]

Jono: But, Jolyn writes in and says, "What are your recommendations on thank you for those who are referring online donors?

Mark: Oh, great question. First of all no one has ever, ever reported that they had got a complaint from a donor who has been thanked too many times. So, if there is a theoretical limit on the number of times you can thank them I don't know what it is. Depending on how your sustainer program is set up, presumably we are talking about someone who is having money withdrawn by EFT or by monthly credit card, most of the programs I know that do that tend to kick out a receipt of some sort, an email notice of some sort.

That goes back to the point I was making earlier. That is a great opportunity to send not just a receipt and a tax number. Send a factoid about your institution. Send a little vignette about something that happened in the last month that will make them feel personally connected. Send a personal communication.

Once you start really auditing your communications process with your donors, you're going to find lots of opportunities to add some warmth to them.

Jono: OK. Debbie says they have collected quite a few email addresses from their constituents but these people haven't necessarily opted in for communications from their organization. Do we need to send an email to infringe on regular emails rather than just sending them emails?

Mark: Again, reasonable people will differ. Technically charities are exempt from most of the spam laws. But, individuals don't know that. The real issue isn't - are you going to violate canned spam - which you are probably not. The issue is - are you going to blow a relationship. So there is no easy answer. If I'm putting together really terrific copy and I'm communicating lots of cultivation information that goes beyond soliciting, I'm going to take the chance and I'm going to send it to them. I'm going to be very clear that not only am I giving them an opportunity to opt out now, but every communication going forward will be an opportunity to opt out. I think they will do fine. That's what I would do. But, that is not legal advice.

Jono: I agree with that one. Max has a question about your 10 tips for procrastinators. In there you talked about the passion principle and you talked about two passions times one usability equals return on investment essentially. Can you explain that a little bit in further detail?

Mark: The point that I was making, clearly not well enough, is that getting the donor excited about giving is more important than whether you have a C&C web page or whether or not you have a properly designed web page. If I really, really, really - that's three reallys - want to give to your charity, and you have got the crappiest page in the world, I'm going to find a way to do it. And by the way, we can all just network for good, as long as you are in the Guide Star database. It is the Guide Star database, right?

But if I am indifferent, between a couple of charities or only two reallys and you make it a little bit harder for me, then I might go to charity B. I'll give you a specific example. A friend of mine is getting married. I wanted to make a donation in her and her new husband's honor and she gave me two charities. I went to charity A and I couldn't figure out how to make a tribute gift. So, I went back. I went to charity B and charity B made it easy. So, charity B got my money instead of charity A even though I have a slight personal preference for charity A. I don't have a lot of passion in that situation.

If I really cared about charity A, I would get on the phone and call. So, you are in the passion-instilling business because the more passion they have for your cause, the harder they are going to work to give you their money.

Jono: And Jennifer leads to this question quite a bit, "Do you have any special tips for engaging the Board, particularly for year-end giving?"

Mark: Yes. One is that it is reasonable to expect every Board member to participate in year-end giving. The best way to get Board members to give is to have other Board members call them. I am on a number of nonprofit Boards, and I have been on the giving and receiving and of those calls. It is important, as every Board member ought to know, for there to be 100% participation by the Board in giving and I would give your Board Chair or the Chairman of your Development Committee for whoever the most important person is and make sure that every single one of them gets a phone call between now and year-end.

Jono: OK. The next question is from Leah. "What is the best way to speak about the recession/economic crisis with your donors? How can we use it as a way to acknowledge the constraints but still earnestly ask for their support? Is there a chance that donors who cannot give at the same level will be embarrassed?

Mark: That's a great, great question. As Jono knows, there has been some discussion and debate about it in nonprofit fundraising circles. I think the safe answer is this, and I will tell you what the debate has been about. The safe answer is if you have a plan for dealing with the recession, if you have a plan to make sure that your most important work will get done, no matter what, communicate that plan. If you are being affected in a very specific way and you are looking for either directed money or funds to deal with that particular way, for example, if you run a soup kitchen and all of a sudden you find yourself serving 300% more meals then you were serving this time last year, be very specific. Explain what you are doing. Explain how you are pinching every penny in order to serve every meal.

What I would avoid is saying, "The economy is shit. We need money because we are being affected too." One organization had a test that they shared recently where they basically did that. They said, "Times are tough. We need the money badly." So does everyone else so I'm not exactly sure what they said. It actually did more poorly than an organization that didn't reference the economy at all.

Here's the thing. Everyone in America knows there is a recession going on. Everyone in the world probably at this point knows there is a recession going on. They are bringing that part of the story to you. They know. They assume you are probably being affected. You are better off making a passionate case for what you do than you are telling them how the tough times are affecting you, because probably I can predict them myself.

But, I think the less you say about it, the better. The more concrete you are, the better.

Jono: I agree 100%. I think talking about the recession for the sake of talking about the recession is not going to stick in people's minds. The next question comes from Tim. He says, "We have an online campaign active right now with teams raising money online for our capital campaign." This is totally new to the organization, and our organization does not have a lot of fundraising, let alone, online stuff. What can we say to motivate the online participants who are not seasoned fundraisers, are not yet sure about the promises of online fundraising, and are worried about the timing/economy?"

Mark: I don't know where to start. I think the online channel is the side point. I think you would have the same challenges if you were meeting these people in the living room. Maybe that's a good place to start. If these people were sitting around your dining room table, what would you tell them? Presumably, your organization, or at least I hope your organization isn't in imminent danger of failing or going out of business. People do this kind of volunteer work because it's important to their sense of who they are - because it feels good. As Jono's colleague, Katya Andresen, often likes to point out, charitable giving and volunteer participation has the same biological effect on people as eating chocolate. So, make it clear to them that what they're doing right now has never been more important. A) It's true. B) It's giving individual volunteers the reward they're looking for by being volunteers to begin with - and then give them chocolate too.

Jono: Kathy is writing and asking: "Do direct mail copywriting techniques tend to work with online audiences? If not, can we take anything from the offline world and apply it to our online marketing and fundraising efforts?"

Mark: The thing that you need to do is be clear about 'the ask', and make sure that you're not making 'the ask' six paragraphs down. There are a lot of things about online writing that are very different than direct mail writing. In direct mail, the longer the copy the better it does. In online that is absolutely not true. In the long vs. short tests, it seems, at best, indeterminate in terms of length of copy. We try to stick in the 500- to 600-word range. I think the thing that has come from the direct mail world that is most useful in the online world is what direct mail fundraisers call the 'Johnson box'. In direct mail that's the box on top of the letter that has some kind of pithy quote, or restates 'the ask' or some emphasized point of text in it. In email solicitations that's usually a picture and a brief outline and a link to the donate page.

Jono: OK. I'm going to try to combine a couple of questions here. Robin says: "What is your general opinion about asking for a specific donation amount in an outreach piece?" And Eddie says: "What do you think about asking for specific resources? For example, we need a copier, we need funds for conference calls, etc."

Mark: In general, concrete appeals do better than abstract funds. And even if it's for something mundane about the copier, tell them what you're going to do about the copier. Tell them how the copier is going to change the world - it will help change the world. Connect that up for them. In terms of asked amounts, I would test asking for $250 if people have $30 in mind. Obviously, if you're going to communicate potentially with people, then you're not really communicating with them. So, if you're segmenting, if you can put various versions and various giving levels, it's absolutely worth testing specific a 'hard ask'. If not, I would avoid it.

Jono: And Jen says: "We haven't had funds to do our regular paper letter this year, but we did start a regular email newsletter. How likely are our mail donors to respond and give us their email address, if we let them know that we've stepped away from our print newsletter?"

Mark: How likely? If you can migrate 20% of them, I'd be amazed. There are still a lot of people out there who like the paper, who like the tangible quality, are not comfortable opening PDFs, and who use email to see pictures of their grandchildren and not do much more than that. Now, you have very good reasons for stopping the newsletter. I think you should explain that. And you should explain the steps that you're going through to get people to continue to be updated by your work, and continue to be inspired by your work. It's a great opportunity to try to collect email addresses. I just wouldn't be over-optimistic about what percentage you're going to get. Certainly, it's worth a try.

Jono: And Bretta asks for clarification on the previous question: "Did Mark just say that in direct 'asks' there needs to be more words? I also heard that the more pictures, links and bullet points the better."

Mark: In email that's fine. Honestly, there's no definitive answer, in terms of testing, as to whether or not longer copy is better than shorter copy. People definitely scan email copy as opposed to reading it. Direct mail copy tends to be pretty telegraphic. But, yes, the sense is that it should be shorter. The paragraphs should be shorter. There should be a lot of bullet points. Use boldface. An email approach should be a much shorter length than the direct mail. Thanks for asking for that clarification.

Jono: Elizabeth writes in and says they're just setting up their online donor database. And they're wondering what they should be measuring. Any suggestions on what sort of key metrics you can eye on, in terms of online fundraising and marketing?

Mark: It goes back to what we were saying a little bit earlier. Keep your eye on the same metrics that you're watching for your non-online people. What kind of contact are you having with them? What's their response rate on solicitations? What's their lifetime value? What other kinds of online opportunities that you're providing them are they engaging in? And try not to get too lost in the 'wild and woolly world' of online metrics because they often just distract you. I'm sure I made hundreds of Google analytic jockeys angry, but there you go.

Jono: Mark writes in and says: "How can you leverage the persona of the leader to make the donor or prospects feel like they're the most important part of the team?"

Mark: Get him or her to phone each of the donors. If your donor is reasonably charismatic, there is no reason why there should not be, if not a blog, a regular email communication from that leader in the first person. It doesn't have to be long. It's should be a hard sell. It should have a personal tone. It should include a picture, and bonus points for a video. Again, the barrier to entry for video is very low. A reasonably lit, handheld shot of your leader talking for a couple of minutes - sort of like what David Plouffe did for Obama - will get viewed and will get appreciated by donors.

Jono: Sara says you talked about having this page on your website, sort of like the 'reasons to give'. So, she says: "At what point should the home page take the place of the donation page, and where should the donation form be? You said it's good to have an HTML page that explicitly makes the argument for your organization. But, we don't want to drive donors away with too many pages."

Mark: I'm so glad you asked that. That's a really great point. And the answer is, the donate button should go to the donate form, period, full stop. Nothing in between. Do not take them to a landing page that shows them the 16 ways you can give. Do not take them to the case for giving. Remember I told you to hijack your home page? This in your opportunity to put a great big button next to your donate button that says, "Why give to my cause, " and take them there. You can put a link on your donate form saying, "Six reasons to give" to your cause, that they can link off to.

If you have someone that can make it spring up as a daughter window, that would be even better, because then you're not taking people away. The other thing is, if you happen to be a "Four-Star Charity" owned charity navigator, by all means have that or you're "Wise Giving" bug or any badge of stewardship honor, that should be on your form.

Jono: OK, the next question says, "When donors want their donations made in someone's honor or memory, what do they expect of our organization? I currently send them a letter thanking them for making the donation in the person's name, and I send the honored person or member a letter notifying them. Is that all I'm supposed to do, or should I be doing more?"

Mark: You should do whatever you're telling them you're going to do. Some organizations just send an email to the honor recipient, so the fact that you're sending a letter puts you ahead of the game. I would think about what you would do on the high end, if someone made $500 gift or a $1000 gift. There are very few organization I can think of who are so rich that they shouldn't not be calling $1000 donors, particularly new $1000 donors, on the phone to thank them. Not necessarily the honor recipient, but certainly the giver. I think what you're doing right now is fine, the trick is to be clear online how the honoree is going to be communicated with.

Jono: Kristin writes in and says, "I keep hearing people talk about the 'wired wealthy.' Who are they and is this something I need to have a strategy for?"

Mark: That's got to be a setup. Sea Change did a study with Research a year ago looking at higher dollar online donors and that study is free on our website at Seachangestrategies.com. Thanks, Kristin, for the plug. It basically looks at the behavior of people who are giving in the $1000 range and up. That would be a great conversation for another day. But, the big takeaway. But, there are people out there giving four and five figure gifts and some significant percentage of them are very open to having a more elaborate online relationship with you.

Jono: Great. Last question, Mark, and I'm going to take the liberty of asking this question. I recently read a whitepaper by Common Knowledge, it's in our Learning Center at www.fundrasing123.org, on rapid donor cultivation. And basically it talks about how on the online retail industry, for example places like J. Crew and so forth, they noticed that people are most likely to buy something in the first 30 days after they turn over their email address. From my understanding, Common Knowledge did a little test with a nonprofit and they found out that once people turn over their email address to nonprofit, they're most likely t donate in those first 30 days as well.

So, I'm just curious is you've had time to process these findings and if you've had any thoughts in setting up email streams when people opt into receiving communications from a nonprofit.

Mark: Yeah. It's great that Common Knowledge wrote that up. It's actually a fairly old technique and it's fairly well-established at this point. It's been tested quite a lot successfully, that a welcome series for either new donors or new prospects is going to be more remunerative from a fundraising point of view than letting people marinate on your list for months and months. What was interesting about the Common Knowledge test was they tested a 30-day cycle against a much longer cycle. Our advice is to run your welcome series in the first seven days, particularly for someone who comes on your list as an activist or something. If you've got a software program that can run the welcome series robotically, definitely send a two or three email series that has a solicitation within those two or three.

There's really no reason why the next communication should not be a solicitation. There are quite a number of organization who are doing this now, and it would probably be a good idea to build on some of their experience. But, the welcome series have been around for quite some time.

Jono: Great. Well, that is all the time we have for questions for today's call. I want to thank Mark for donating his time today. This was a fantastic call. I know that folks really enjoyed the opportunity to ask these questions. We has some fantastic questions, and we've been getting some great feedback. I just wanted to let people know that our next Nonprofit 911 call is coming up in January. And that will be opening registration for that after the first of the year. It's January 13 with Jeff Brooks, and the topic is "Prioritizing Your Marketing Budget During the Downturn."

And so I just wanted to offer Mark an opportunity to say some closing words.

Mark: Good luck. Don't let this crazy period that we're embarking on distract you from the core work of your organization. Don't think that you're going to be saved by Facebook. Keep going back to the core of what you do and keep making sure that you know how to inspire yourself. Because if you're inspired then your donors will be inspired.

Jono: Great. Thanks, Mark. And thanks everyone who dialed in today. And once again, if you want to contact us at Network for Good, the email address is fundraising123@networkforgood.org. And I encourage folks to visit our learning center and Fundraising123.org. Thank again, Mark, and thank everyone who dialed in. We look forward to speaking you with again on our next Nonprofit 911 call in January.

Mark: Thanks, Jono.

Jono: Thank you, bye-bye.