

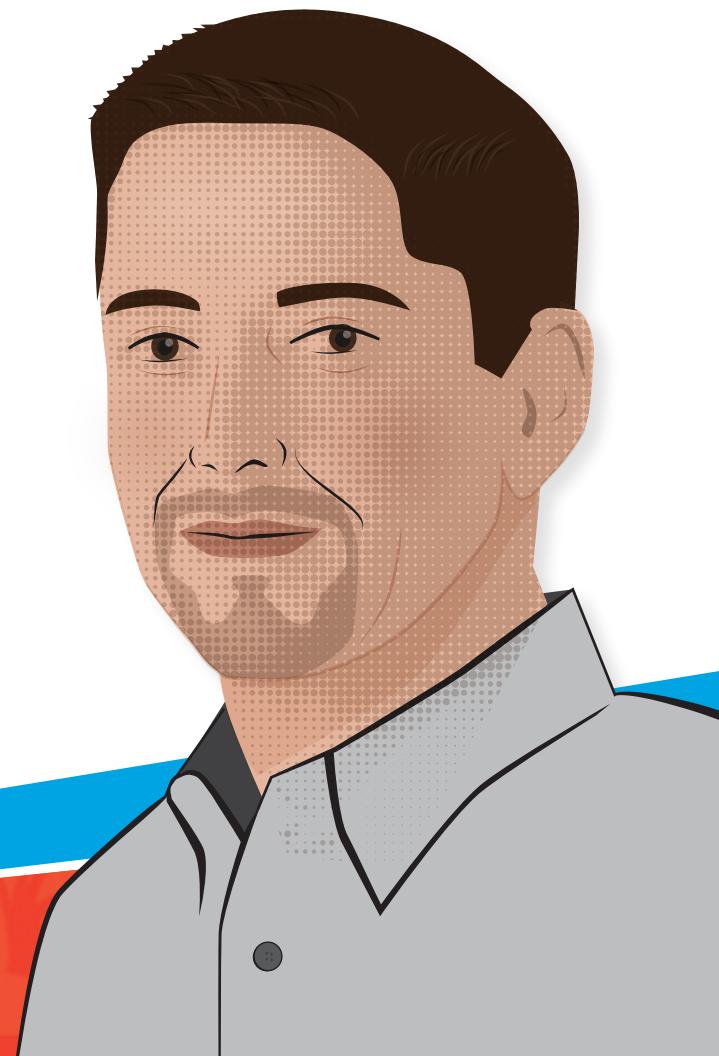
# ONLINE FUNDRAISING

There can be no doubt anymore about the importance of charities having an online strategy and raising funds online. Most surveys and research show that nearly all charities have some sort of online presence, and the remaining few that don't are well on their way to being there.

The question for most charities now regarding online fundraising isn't whether to be online, but rather relate to the quality of their online presence, their own expectations about being online, and how they continue to remain relevant for their donors. And these issues are all connected.

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SCOTT PEARL is chief marketing officer at the Association of Fundraising Professionals (AFP), the world's largest network of fundraising professionals. AFP's members raise more than \$100 billion annually, equivalent to one-third of charitable giving in North America and millions more around the world. Prior to AFP, Scott served in leadership roles for companies across industries, many of which have been acquired, and started businesses in the telecommunications and technology industries. He led business development for two leading Internet retailers, a multinational software firm and an email deliverability company (now part of IBM), and also worked in the nonprofit sector where he oversaw national marketing and corporate development efforts. Scott was also recently named to Social Media Marketing Magazine's list of the Top CMOs on Twitter. Follow him on Twitter @scottpearlmktg.



Technology has completely turned the traditional relationship between the charity and the donor on its head. No longer must the donor rely on the charity for information about a cause, or let the charity dictate the nature of the relationship. Donors can go online to get information about an organization—as well as its competitors. They can engage and give online, as well as share their experiences with charities. The online environment is the domain of the donor, not the charity.

Currently, online giving is relatively small. Even the most effective charities are raising, typically, around five percent of their overall gifts online. That number, while small, actually represents growth—even just five years ago, that figure was at about two percent (or less). Our return on investment (in terms of pure dollars) isn't that great...yet.

So the main reason many of us are online now is because of the future: our donors will be using it, and we need to be where our donors are. But that situation colors our expectations. How much can we afford to spend (in both financial and human resources) for online work compared to the better return on investment we're receiving from other fundraising techniques? How can we create any type of sustained and comprehensive fundraising campaign online when ways of engaging just continue to multiply (Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, Pinterest, etc.)?

Even successful online charities constantly have to address these questions. There's no one-size-fits-all answer for every organization, but there are commonalities that successful organizations have—approaches and strategies that emerge again and again.

First, we have to make a commitment to online fundraising—not just to be online, but to remain relevant in the online universe. That means not just having a website, but allocating the appropriate resources so that your organization is engaging with supporters online. This is much harder than it sounds, especially

when your direct mail campaign is starting or a special event is coming up. You may not initially see huge gains from your online investments, and you might consider refocusing your attention elsewhere. Don't! Online is where donors are and will continue to be.

Which leads to the second point: we don't have to be everywhere online. In fact, trying to do everything will simply stretch our resources and be a waste of time and money. We know our donors are going online; the question is where. Find out how your donors are going online and what they're using, and then tailor your online work to fit their needs and expectations. Having an online strategy probably (but not necessarily) means you'll be on Facebook and Twitter, but it doesn't mean you have to be active on every online forum that emerges.

But on the other hand, you might. We need to be flexible and experiment with some of the online spaces that some donors are enjoying. One example is Pinterest. While you might think that a website devoted to pictures isn't serious enough for

your cause, the capacity of people to connect with visual images cannot be overstated. During Hurricane Sandy, more than ten pictures a second were being posted on Pinterest. It might not be a valuable online resource for every charity, but organizations should not be afraid to try it or other sites like YouTube or Reddit.

Fourth, go mobile. The number of mobile devices now exceeds the number of people on Earth. More and more people are accessing email and browsing the Internet using mobile, and in a few years, a majority will be conducting a majority of their work with mobile devices. You must ensure your emails and websites are not only legible but also compelling when individuals try to engage with your organization using mobile.

Fifth, we always have to keep in mind that donors are leading the online experience. Philanthropy should be donor-centric, and that's never truer than in the online arena. Our organizations should be looking to enhance our supporters' online experience, not just ask them for money. Content is king, whether it is articles, tips, guidelines, blogs, photos, games, videos, reminders or anything else. Online is perfect for relationship-building, and your content doesn't always have to be serious or relate directly to the cause.

Related to content, charities should actively consider harnessing the immediacy of online communications.

Use tools like Facebook and Twitter to share comments and start conversations. Keep interested donors updated in real time about how fundraising campaigns are going. The online universe isn't static but constantly changing. Your organization may not have the resources to be on top of every new trend or conversation, but don't be afraid to try starting some.

Finally, online fundraising is another tool in your organization's overall development toolbox. It's not a separate function, and therefore must be integrated into your fundraising, just like any other aspect of your program. Research increasingly shows that a combination of integrated communications in different mediums (direct mail, telephone, email, etc.) leads to better fundraising results. In fact, one survey found that more people gave online in response to a direct mail solicitation than they did to an email. People are getting information and responding to it in a variety of ways now—online needs to be just one of many mediums for your fundraising.

As with any new fundraising medium, online fundraising remains more art than science, especially with the wide array of choices that donors have online. And that is perhaps the final word of advice: let donors lead. The online world is their domain, and if we follow them, we'll find success online.