Introduction

It’s never too early to start planning or fine-tune your year-end campaign. To take advantage of the typically higher volume of online giving at year end, you’ll want to think strategically about how to make it easier for donors to give when time and funds are short.

If you think about it, the holidays are the perfect time to focus your fundraising into a campaign, because at this time of year donors are already tuned in to the needs of charitable organizations and open to lending some support. You don’t have to worry about coming up with a new theme—charity is the reason for the season! A holiday campaign is the ideal way to introduce the organization to new potential donors, keep in touch and show appreciation for your current supporters, and renew concern and celebration of your cause. But the key is to get started early so that your campaign is well-structured and ready to execute by the time your team gets busy at year-end. If it sounds like a lot to tackle, don’t worry. Some of the best ways to kick-start your holiday campaign are also some of the easiest, cost-effective things you can do today.

This guide will let you in on three fail-safe strategies that are sure to get you going:

1. Optimize Your Home Page for the Holidays
2. Make Every Email Count
3. Tap into your Constituents’ Networks

Whether you need practical advice on where to start or you’re just looking for some ways to make the campaign you’re already planning even more effective, this guide focuses on simple strategies you can put into play now to get the most out of your year-end fundraising efforts.
1 Optimize Your Home page for the Holidays

Donors with an online relationship plan to donate almost $100 more per person than the average donor and are typically the most generous donors overall. Since your website often gives people their first real impression of your organization, think of it as your “front porch.” Make sure people feel welcome and invite them in by using these tips now:

Give development prime real estate on the home page.
This time of year belongs to your development department. Give them the most visible space on your home page so they can catch a visitor’s attention the second they arrive on your website. If it’s difficult for visitors to find the information they need to make a donation, then they will likely move on. A prominently placed “Donate/Give Now” button, combined with compelling copy about how their donation will help might be enough to convert a website visitor into a donor. For the most impact, take steps now to make holiday giving easy for site visitors. Start with your home page: plan to post preliminary promotions for your holiday campaign and activate your online donation forms the week before Thanksgiving.

A prominent “Donate” / “Give Now” button is critical. Insert it above the fold and make it visually stand out with graphics. When you can, suggest giving levels that align with your typical donor history.

1 2010 Holiday Giving: Research and Insights into the Most Charitable Time of the Year, a commissioned survey for Convio by Edge Research®, is available here: http://www.convio.com/signup/guides/2010-holiday-giving
Make gifts as tangible as possible.

Try to increase fundraising results by tying a tangible gift to specific donation amounts. Rather than asking people to make a donation to a general year-end fundraising campaign, make it real and fun! For example, a $10 donation might “buy” a seedling, a $25 donation might “buy” a mature tree, and a $75 donation might “buy” a forested acre. By communicating the impact of different donation amounts, you might sway donors to dig a little deeper into their wallets. After all, ‘tis the season! When writing copy for the ask, supply enough information to help donors make their giving decision (such as how their gift will impact your cause—meals served, children clothed, or vaccines given), and clearly state your need (such as how many pledges or dollars are needed to meet your goal) so that they understand the value of supporting your cause.

Online gift options, real and virtual, help the donor support your organization and show their love and affection for friends and family by combining giving and philanthropy. If you can tie traditional shopping with giving to your organization, you might attract more than your fair share of online donors.
Appeal to the emotions of website visitors with photos on donation forms.
As the saying goes, a picture is worth a thousand words. For your organization, a picture might be worth a thousand dollars! Use images to communicate your mission and show how your efforts are making the world a better place. A visual example of where a donation goes might inspire a first-time visitor to give more, or prompt a one-time donor to join your sustained giving program.

Make your fundraising goal and progress visible on your website.
Publicizing your organization’s goal for its year-end fundraising campaign is a great way to share information with website visitors. Showcase your progress on your home page so prospective donors know exactly how much more money you need to raise before the year is over. A visitor might feel compelled to give a little bit extra when they see that you are so close to your goal. Or, who knows, maybe they’ll return to your website more than once to see how close you’re getting to that magic number. They might even decide to donate a second time to push you past your target.

Consider search engine optimization and search engine marketing.
Before you can get people to make a donation via your website, you need to get them there first. Conduct a quick search engine audit to ensure that you are maximizing your placement in organic search. If your organization’s website doesn’t land on the first page of results, then it’s time to make some changes. Work with your marketing department to tweak website content and meta tags. If you have extra budget, consider search engine marketing or paid search, such as Google Adwords, to secure a prominent spot for your year-end giving campaign on search results.

Making gifts as tangible as possible gives donors more of a reason to buy them (and buy more of them). The American Brain Tumor Association suggested a multitude of fun holiday uses for the grey wristband gifts it sold.
Making Every Email Count

Trend analysis of giving patterns from various sources and nonprofit trade articles suggest that 35-42% of all online giving happens in November and December. That’s almost half of all annual online giving in just two months! Yet many groups still don’t ask their supporters during that window. There is no better time to send an appeal. Using email, you can be strategic and proactive with your year-end ask without a lot of resources or ramp-up time. Here’s how to plan a holiday email campaign that works:

Run multi-part appeals.
Everyone’s guilty of forgetting to respond to emails that are buried at the bottom of inboxes. This year, stay top of mind with a multi-part email appeal. A series of three emails could consist of a main ask, a stewardship or season’s greeting piece (e.g., an ecard), and a ‘last chance to give’ email.

> Spotlight: Multi-Part Appeals

A Kid Again ran a year-end campaign consisting of a three-part series that included a campaign launch in early December, followed by a holiday greeting eCard in mid-December segmented for donors vs. non-donors, and then a final year-end reminder on December 31st. Being part of an integrated campaign allows each message to complement the others and build up to the last day of the year.

Email #1: Main Ask

Email #2: Season’s Greeting

Email #3: “Last Chance to Give”
Segment your list.
You can make your messaging more compelling if you segment your list and customize email content based on your target audience. Recent donors? Thank them for their donation, and then tell them how your organization is rallying to meet its year-end giving goal. Last year’s donors? Thank them again for last year’s donation, and ask if they could give again this year. Lapsed donors? Get back on their radar with a brief summary of your progress this year, and explain how you still need their support. By taking the time to segment and target, you should boost overall response rates.

Send an email on December 31.
Yes, it might seem ‘last minute’ to send an email on December 31, but there are plenty of people who are motivated by tax benefits. Give these generous procrastinators a nudge with a reminder that this is their last chance to give this year. You might be surprised by how many dollars come through before the clock strikes twelve. (For best results, incorporate this tip with a multi-part appeal.)
Share outcomes.
People are interested in knowing that their donations are put to good use. So ask yourself, “What good did our organization do this year?” and then share the answer with supporters. Not every email you send should be an appeal. Take time to share success stories and results to reconnect people to your mission.

Use auto-responders more effectively.
After someone makes an online donation to your organization, they likely receive an automatically generated email, or “auto-responder,” to thank them for their donation. When was the last time you looked at the content of that email? Chances are, it’s been awhile. Take this unique opportunity to present copy that encourages the donor to take another action, such as join your sustained giving program or tell a friend about your organization.
Tap Into Your Supporters’ Networks

Many people’s decisions to support charities are influenced by what family and friends say on social media, in personal emails and through other word-of-mouth “marketing.” Make the most of this fact now by using these tips to plan your holiday campaign:

Send eCards.
A holiday message or thank you in the form of an ecard is an effective way to connect with supporters, without making a hard ask. If possible, give supporters the option of sending ecards from your website. You can reinforce your brand and messaging in the template, but give senders the option to customize their message.

Quick Tip: eCards

eCards are a powerful communication tool that can help you leverage one of your organization’s greatest assets—your existing supporters. An eCard is an online greeting card that you make available on your website for supporters to send to their friends and relatives. Because people send eCards to others whom they already have a personal relationship, recipients are more likely to open these communications and read the content, which may include a fundraising appeal.
Encourage family giving.
Many people are torn between gifts for loved ones and gifts to charity. Why not marry the two with an appealing ecommerce offering, membership or other holiday giving idea? By getting creative, a donation to your organization could make the perfect present.

Conservation International offered multiple levels of gift memberships in its holiday email campaign. To encourage increased levels of giving, consider providing donation fields at both the product listing level and during the checkout process.

Use social media.
Chances are that a growing percentage of your supporters are using social media in their daily lives. Don’t be shy about asking them to Tweet or to update their Facebook status about your organization. They could mention that they are making a donation to support your cause, or even ask family members to make a donation to your charity on their behalf rather than buying a present.

Ask constituents to forward emails or links to friends.
When an email is passed along from an individual they trust, recipients are more likely to respond or take action. With this in mind, you should ask your constituents to forward your year-end giving campaign emails and links to their family and friends.

Get your supporters’ families and friends to email people in their networks.
Take the networking effect one step further by asking supporters to ask their friends and family to make a donation, no matter how small. Again, when such requests come from a trusted source, it can be extremely influential in a person’s decision to give. Whether it’s $5 or $100, every donation counts.
Conclusion

The year-end/holiday giving season is pivotal to your fundraising success. Now is the time to start planning a holiday campaign that helps you be especially attentive to your donors—all of them—at year-end. That means not only courting potential new donors with a welcoming website focused on development and sending strategic holiday email appeals, but also connecting with existing supporters to share your victories and thank them for the part they’ve played in your success this year. The holidays give you all the perfect reasons to keep in touch, encourage constituents to spread your message and ask them to give to a good cause. Today’s tools give you the ability to connect with all your supporters according to their preferences. Use every channel at your disposal to communicate your appreciation for them, and the value and the need that are served both by your organization and their contributions.

About Blackbaud

Serving the nonprofit and education sectors for 30 years, Blackbaud (NASDAQ: BLKB) combines technology and expertise to help organizations achieve their missions. Blackbaud works with more than 27,000 customers in more than 60 countries that support higher education, healthcare, human services, arts and culture, faith, the environment, independent education, animal welfare, and other charitable causes. The company offers a full spectrum of cloud-based and on-premise software solutions, and related services for organizations of all sizes including: fundraising, eMarketing, social media, advocacy, constituent relationship management (CRM), analytics, financial management, and vertical-specific solutions. Using Blackbaud technology, these organizations raise more than $100 billion each year. Recognized as a top company by Forbes, InformationWeek, and Software Magazine and honored by Best Places to Work, Blackbaud is headquartered in Charleston, South Carolina and has employees throughout the US, and in Australia, Canada, Hong Kong, Mexico, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom.

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