Online messaging for fundraising during COVID-19

By Lisa Sock, Online Fundraising + Advocacy Strategist

The COVID-19 pandemic has upended much of our lives in a very short amount of time. For many organizations, events have been postponed or cancelled altogether. Others are making adjustments to programs and services as their teams work from home. And others are just trying to figure out what, if anything, to say and if and when it is the right time to resume fundraising.

1. Do not stop communicating. Your donors and supporters want to hear from you; they want to know how you are doing and how they can help. Stories and messages about the impact of your work are always critical to sustain relationships with donors and other supporters. But they are even more important right now when so much feels uncertain. Avoid sensationalizing the current situation. Instead, focus on the work you do, why it is important, how people can be engaged right now, and your plans for the future.

2. Dial-in to empathy. Anxiety levels are high right now. But you can convey empathy by emphasizing what we do together. Not only do people want to find ways to be helpful, they are looking for hopeful stories and for connection. Share powerful stories, photos, hand-drawn pictures, videos, etc. that amplify what we (organization + donor) do together. Some examples:
   - “We know you love experiencing our exhibits as much as we love bringing them to you. Although we are not open, we want to share some pieces from our recent show,” and include photos from an exhibit.
   - “Like many of you, we are practicing social distancing by working from home. Here we are holding our staff meeting by video today. While we know we need to stay at home, we look forward to seeing you all soon,” and include a screenshot of the video meeting.
   - “#TBT when our amazing volunteers were rocking the community clean up. We look forward to seeing you all soon. In the meantime, be safe!” and include a photo album of the event.

3. Do not assume everyone is online. Take time to reach out to donors, including loyal donors and those for whom you do not have an email address. Tell them you hope they are okay, thank them for their ongoing support, and share with them how you are managing the organization and its needs right now. Tell them that your mission remains the same and that you look forward to connecting again soon. It is also helpful to ask them if they need anything right now. A 5-10 minute conversation will go a long way to reminding the donor you value them and are thinking of them.

4. Do not stop asking. While there are many pressing needs right now, do not shy away from asking for support. Your donors care about your mission and work, they want to be helpful, and likely expect to be asked. So, do not hold back on the direct mail appeal you had planned, the online fundraising series you were writing, or the phone call you were planning to make.
5. Create an un-event online. So many organizations hold a fundraising event in the spring, and are now postponing or canceling. You can still hold a celebration, but online or over the phone. People are craving connection! Consider a Facebook Live event or a teleconference to celebrate the work you do together. Put your creative hat on and think about how you can visually or audibly convey a celebration. Maybe you queue up some music, have a few speakers delivering short speeches, read a poem, or ask everyone to raise a glass in honor of the change you are making.

6. Be social (media, that is) and repurpose content. This social distancing thing has a lot of people craving social time, and they are going online to find it (see #1 and 2 above). You likely have a captive audience that is looking for uplifting content. Do not forget the social side of social media. Engage your audiences by asking them to share a tip, a message of solidarity, or just a friendly hello. Engage with everyone who engages in your content. If someone comments on a post, write them back. Keep connecting where people are spending their time, online.

I hope these brief tips are helpful to you as we all navigate these uncertain times together. Here are a few resources to help guide you:

- **Crisis Communications: What do I do right now? Eight actions to take from a master crisis communications expert**, by Jan Winuk of Winuk Communications, includes key steps to take right now and how to stay focused on the messages that matter.

- **5 Ways to Raise Money When Donors Are Consumed by Nonstop News** by Rebecca Koenig of the Chronicle of Philanthropy, on how to connect with donors right now.

- **Fundraising in a Crisis**, by Penelope Burke, a well-respected fundraiser who leverages behavioral research for fundraising, will help you get a sense of how donors are feeling right now.

- **Fundraising Action Plan for Crisis Response**, by Gail Perry, international fundraising expert, provides tips on how to talk to donors right now.

- **10 Ways to Repurpose Content on Digital Channels**, by Julia Campbell, a noted social media expert, will help you reuse content you already have to engage people.

Lisa Sock has more than 20 years of experience working with nonprofits to leverage communications and advocacy tactics to engage audiences, raise money, and heighten public awareness. She currently works with national and state-based organizations to expand their digital fundraising and advocacy capacity, leveraging innovative engagement strategies and data-driven campaigns. For eight years, Lisa worked for the American Civil Liberties Union in New York City, where she ran the digital fundraising and engagement program. She has also worked with the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, the Human Rights Campaign, City Meals-on-Wheels, Greenpeace, and Amnesty International USA. After living in Washington, DC, and New York City for 15 years, Lisa now lives in her home state of Nebraska.