

Fundraising in Crisis: Trusting and Distrusting Your Instincts

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Good fundraising practices urge organizations to showcase the work they do because if you demonstrate community value, the dollars will follow. You send appeal letters with moving stories. You reach out to donors and thank them. You nurture relationships that blossom into partnerships. Your nonprofit thrives when your fundraising cycle is in motion.

Today we have a public health epidemic with COVID-19. Everything that was familiar is now disrupted. You are likely at home and thinking perhaps this is a bad time to send appeal letters. My nonprofit doesn't address health or human service needs. How can I ask for support when donors are probably anxious and overwhelmed?

I was a few months into my development role at a nonprofit art center in Napa in October 2017. Overnight, fires began to ravage the valley and continued into November. It was truly unbelievable. Smoke and flame affected the physical property, closing our doors and forcing staff to work remotely for four months. People lost their homes, their livelihoods, friends and family. The community was hurting. Normalcy eventually returned but in a permanently altered state.

That experience defined my approach to fundraising in uncertain times and I'm drawing upon it now at PBS KVIE. Here are some of the lessons I learned then that are guiding my actions now:

Do not presume you know everyone's situation.

Donors give to organizations they know and trust. It doesn't matter what's going on in the world. If they are supporting other organizations right now, it does not mean they don't care about you. They are doing what feels right to them in this moment. Giving is heartfelt and it feels good to help. During the fires, I sent our annual appeal with no reservations and no specific ask amount. In the letter I acknowledged that supporters may choose to support fire relief and I thanked them for their generosity in helping our community. Giving amounts varied but most of our donors participated with what they could. In the years that followed, we saw an increase in our retention rate. People stood with us.

Avoid triggering language.

The last thing anyone wants to talk about when they lost their home in a fire, is fire. Think about the communications you've received recently. How do they make you feel? I've stopped using the words coronavirus, COVID-19, crisis, and pandemic. They create a visceral reaction. Instead, I choose inclusive language to cut through the noise. We are all affected. We are all anxious. But we are not alone. We're in this situation together.

Call your donors.

If you're feeling isolated and stressed, chances are your donors are too. Reach out and offer conversation. Find out how they are doing. It's important to recognize that their priorities may be shifting with each day. The stock market is a rollercoaster. Older donors may be struggling on a diminishing income. Be benevolent.

Be authentic.

Your nonprofit may not have a front-line role in our current situation. Does your work still matter? Absolutely. Acknowledge this in your communications. How exactly did a nonprofit art center impact fire relief? We opened our doors with free programming and family art-making activities as a respite. At PBS KVIE, we're airing programming grounded in an educational curriculum for K-12 learners on KVIE2 and KVIE World along with lesson plans and other learning assets available through pbslearningmedia.org. Be authentic, be responsive, and be innovative. When you stay true to your mission, your donors will support you.

Above all: Do not stop fundraising.

The best thing you can do for the sake of your nonprofit is to ensure the fundraising cycle remains in motion. If you take the actions above, you will maintain the momentum. You might see your contributed income decline a little bit. Don't worry. Keep sending your appeal letters with moving stories. Keep reaching out to your donors and thank them. I think you'll find what I know to be true: You are not alone in this.