

Do What You're Already Doing – Better

By Patrick Ruffini As advocates, we now have a dizzying array of online tools at our disposal, as demonstrated spectacularly in the 2012 presidential campaign. While that example can be instructive for nonprofits, it can also be daunting. Both the Obama and Romney campaigns raised hundreds of millions of dollars online (two thirds of the Obama campaign's total fundraising, or \$690 million, came via the Internet). Both dedicated hundreds of staff to online fundraising, social media, technology, data analytics, design, video and photography, advertising, online communications and rapid response, and digital organizing. Effective nonprofit operations will need to do most or all of these things on a shoestring budget.

Nonprofits, like political campaigns, must constantly be informing, mobilizing, and fundraising. Rather than treating digital as something new, you should think of it as a force multiplier that enables you to do the things you already do, better. Without the luxury to build out huge digital teams, small groups will need to integrate digital into every aspect of the operation. The person who talks to the press will also be blogging and tweeting; the lines between digital and non-digital will continue to blur as digital skills become essential for those hired into “traditional” roles.

As our lives and those of our supporters go online, no organization will be exempt from the shift. All will have to think about how to reach existing supporters in an increasingly fragmented media environment, and how to tap into the opportunity digital gives us to reach new audiences. Over the last several years, I've worked to apply lessons learned at the national level to organizations of all shapes and sizes. Here are some of the principles I've found it helpful to keep in mind.

1. Understand (and quantify) the ladder of engagement.

Organizations constantly strive to nudge their supporters up the ladder of engagement – moving e-mail list members to volunteers, and volunteers to donors. Today, they must learn what to make of the newest rung – social media – and figure out how to move its participants up to higher levels of engagement.

Social media can be hard to quantify. What do all those “likes” on Facebook or views on a YouTube video mean, if they don't lead directly to a donation? The nonprofit community has coined a new term for those who will gladly sign a Change.org petition or share a Facebook post but won't take meaningful offline action: “slacktivists.”

Slacktivism is a function of the fact that it's easier than ever to start engaging with a cause. Twenty years ago, you had to be on a mailing list or have a volunteer knock on your door to get involved; the vast majority of people never got the opportunity. The web made it dramatically easier to find causes you're interested in and instantly sign on. Organizations, impressed by the influx of early interest, think that should automatically translate into a swell of new donors and volunteers. They pick up new supporters on social media much faster than on e-mail, only to see many fewer of them convert as donors. Organizations need to be persistent, patiently cultivate relationships, and make it easy for people to take the next step.

We are approaching this problem statistically. Working at the Republican National Committee, and later in the software we designed at our agency, we worked to quantify positions on the ladder of engagement by assigning scores to each online activity. Opening an e-mail might be worth one point, a click through might be worth three, a “like” on Facebook five, a donation fifty, and so on. This allowed us to approach each person with customized communication directing them to the next rung up the ladder.

Organizations should see social media for what it is, the first rung on the ladder. People don't jump immediately from the lowest rung to the highest. Organizations have found success by treating e-mail list sign-ups and petitions as a necessary intermediate step between social media and fundraising. One group with hundreds of thousands of followers routinely posts petitions supported by images to their social media accounts. Once a person has signed, they are skipped to a donation page tied to a petition. The organization has raised more than \$300,000 in annual revenue this way.

Having the right database and measurement tools will help illuminate this process. Too many organizations invest in database solutions centered exclusively around fundraising needs, which don't allow for much analysis of online objectives, like matching an e-mail address to a Facebook profile to count the number of times the owner has "liked" your content. You can also tie together activity on other social networks like Twitter, e-mail opens, web form submissions, and donations.

When it comes to assessing who will become a donor, the person's past behavior is often more important than their stated preferences. Fundraising asks driven by data about past activity are especially powerful. E-mails that cite earlier donation amounts and ask users to double down their support have boosted giving many times over, as have those that target non-donating "slackers" by citing their lack of previous action.

Having the right data and analytic tools is the essential foundation of an effective program to move people up the ladder and turn slacktivists into activists.

2. Ask people clearly and concisely what you want them to do.

Knowing that each e-mail or website visit may be one of the few chances you have to reach someone, it can be tempting to cram in as much detail as possible and hope they soak it all up. This is almost always the wrong instinct. It's the reason many organizational websites are overly cluttered and e-mail communications cover multiple topics with no clear "ask."

When you want supporters to take action, be extremely clear and upfront. Don't bury your call to action in a sea of secondary and tertiary policy points. Most presidential campaign e-mails sent this year contained no more than a few short paragraphs. Generally, the longer it takes for supporters to wade through extraneous content, the less likely they are to act.

This applies to websites, too. Splash pages, which typically prompt users to sign on to your organization before reaching your site, can grow your e-mail list many times faster than a small e-mail signup box buried on your homepage. If you really want your supporters to do something, it needs to catch their eye immediately.

This is why visual content, combined with clear calls to action, is so important on the social web: people can process it in a split second. For a conservative group targeting the youth vote in 2012, we tested numerous combinations of content and calls to action to maximize liking and sharing on Facebook. Visual content won the day: videos saw a 505 percent lift in sharing over links to other stories, and graphics saw a 367 percent lift. And we found that, far and away, the best way to get people to share something was to ask them to share it.

Win the Social Web

- > Watch what people Like and Share online
- > Use visual content like graphics and videos
- > Test different combinations to get the best performing outcome
- > Ask your supporters to share what you put out

You can apply the same focus on simple communications to your website, where most of the action you care about will happen. Breaking the engagement process into a series of sequential steps is a far better strategy than presenting everything to everyone all at once. At our agency, we've experimented with two different approaches. One presented users with a menu of activities: signing a petition, making a pledge, sharing on Facebook, or donating. The other, leveraging game mechanics and the concept of "leveling up," displayed one action at a time, patterned after the rungs of the engagement ladder. Many more people did everything that was asked of them when we presented it to them in sequenced, bite-sized increments. A buffet with too many dishes can overwhelm and confuse, but it's easy for people to sign on for just one more thing.

As the Internet's capacity to distract grows and our lives become busier and more complicated, make sure you are delivering clear, concise, and highly visual calls to action.

3. Test everything.

Perhaps you've been doing digital or direct marketing for a long time and have a gut sense of what works. Direct marketing professionals have long preached the value of testing, but it takes discipline to actually do it time and again and then integrate the learnings into your program. Digital marketing dramatically eases the process. Particularly since digital best practices are often not as well articulated as their offline counterparts, it is incumbent upon all organizations to test and re-test their assumptions and to remain agnostic between different methods until a proven winner emerges.

In the last campaign, both campaigns tested multiple variations of outbound e-mails. The Obama campaign deployed as many as 18 test versions per e-mail, each combining three or four variations each of subject lines and copy. Performance could vary by as much as 80 percent between versions. Though it's tempting to believe that a human being could have predicted the results, or at least come closer over time, a senior member of the team reported that no one could reliably predict the winner. "We basically found our guts were worthless," they confessed in a debriefing session after the election.

Sending 18 different test e-mails is an option only for a handful of groups with millions of members. But low-cost testing tools allow you to create simple tests, on e-mail and beyond. Optimizely offers a simple script you can install on your registration forms or petitions that allows a non-technical person to test page layouts, button colors, or call-to-action copy. Online advertising can be rigorously tested, with self-serve advertising platforms like Google AdWords or Facebook allowing for real-time optimization and rotation of creative material. Most mass e-mailers also offer an A/B testing module that allows for a "champion" version to be sent to the rest of the list. Groups of all sizes can see dramatic improvements by running A/B tests across all their digital properties.

A few rules of thumb: First, vary only one thing at a time so you can isolate the variable that increased performance. Second, run your test long enough to get valid data, preferably over thousands of views on a piece of content. Third, don't mix and match the winners of different tests on a single page without testing the combination, since the elements can interact with unintended effects. Finally, periodically re-test, as the novelty of a tactic can wear off.

Test Everything

- > Vary one thing at a time
- > Give your test time to get the best results
- > Test the combination of best performing elements
- > Periodically retest to keep your content fresh and engaging

4. What works offline will probably work online.

In a small nonprofit, every staffer is to some degree responsible for digital integration, and frequently staff with significant offline experience have responsibility for the digital program. That can be a strength, because quite often the lessons of offline organizing and marketing translate well to the online world.

Human behavior is human behavior; it does not change whether one is online or off. Technology can foster real-time, two-way dialogue – something we wish we could do more offline – but people's underlying desire to participate doesn't change just because they're online. When building an online program, think of things that have worked well for you offline and seek ways of applying them online.

In this last election cycle campaigns found that contests featuring dinner with President Obama and Governor Romney were extremely effective in getting people to donate. This is essentially the same insight that drives the success of high-dollar fundraising events, the ones that candidates spend an inordinate amount of time attending. These contests work because they offer a benefit, rather than simply describing the positive features of the candidate. This old-school lesson works just as well in new online marketing.

The science of human behavior offers insights for understanding political and cause-based mobilization. For example, people want to feel that they are part of something big, and that they won't be alone if they take action. That insight has led campaigns to change how we talk about voting: we no longer emphasize the potential for low turnout ("Your vote could really decide things!"); instead we stress high turnout ("Everyone is doing it!"). The notion of civic participation as a popular social act inspires more people to want to participate.

Finally, integrate your offline and online programs. Many nonprofits still focus on direct mail, which is fruitful but expensive. To identify the most effective pieces, you can feature a unique web address on each mailing and then check the overall performance of that campaign. Or you can combine different media to reinforce appeals, sending out e-mail reminders asking people to check their mailbox or making phone calls to drive responses to e-mails. Finally, many people find it more convenient to give online. The Obama campaign saw a double-digit performance increase by making their contribution page load more quickly; anything you do to make the process faster and more convenient will likely yield measurable results.

5. Communicate consciously.

Often the best way to start a conversation online is by listening. This approach is helpful with anyone from the closest circle of activists to the broader online community.

In communicating with your base on e-mail and social media, think of yourself as engaging in a conversation. The tone must be consistent, and supporters should leave the interaction feeling involved, valued, and listened to. Show personality in your writing and build characters around the people who are communicating. Be sure to listen and find opportunities to share the best stories and content from the grassroots.

Engaging social media, you can quickly get a sense of what works and what doesn't. Pay attention to content that gets shared widely, even if it's outside your field of interest. **Note the humor, visual content, "memes," and content with strong emotional or logical appeal. Staying attuned to what people respond to on the Internet can help you act quickly and effectively when the opportunity arises.**

Speed is essential. Conversation, particularly on Twitter, moves fast; delay means a lost opportunity to enter the conversation. For one group, we created a vast amount of shareable image-based content for Facebook and other social media. We had designers churning out highly polished images daily. Yet some of our greatest hits were also the most visceral: the "meme" type graphics spun up in five minutes with applause lines from the Republican convention slapped atop a stock image. It turns out that our audience just then cared more about authenticity than about production values. To ensure you can respond to fast-moving events, the person who posts to your social media needs to be trusted, capture the voice of the organization, and be empowered to respond at a moment's notice.

Also remember that social platforms vary in what they can do. In general, Facebook will reach around four times as many users as Twitter here in the U.S. But Twitter provides opportunities for real-time dialogue and co-creating content, including retweeting and more interactive forms. As part of our work with young voters in 2012, we took slogans provided to us by people on Facebook and Twitter and mocked them up in graphic form. For the most part, these interactions were not pre-planned: we saw something that just clicked, and jumped on it. While you are well served by meticulously planning out the different elements of your online program, always keep a certain amount of flexibility, as the most successful content can often be the most visceral, spontaneous – and unexpected.

Conclusion: Relationships matter.

Digital often gets described in terms of "technology" and "tools." At a tactical level, this might be fine, but it does a disservice if it places digital in the realm of the elusive data geek or "ninja" who must decode it all for us. In a sense, the only true "digital director" today is the organization's leader. Digital integration is no longer a side project, but core to every function. Staffing and budget are important; even more important is the recognition that digital serves a larger purpose guided by an organization's core values. For the organization to succeed online, people at the top must take a deep interest in digital, constantly challenging their teams to do better.

The focus must be on the human side of the Internet, something all of us are part of, and that we all use to create and strengthen relationships. The key to understanding the Internet is understanding the importance of relationships. This is not the province of digital specialists, but something within reach of us all.

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