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VALUE OF CONNECTING ONLINE

Virtual donor engagement beyond the webinar

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In year two of COVID-19 nonprofit leaders in North America have accepted a new normal and adjusted to a world without or with limited face-to-face donor engagement events. Donor cultivation programs and events are cornerstones of the fundraising toolbox as they bring donors and prospects closer to the organization and inform major giving decisions. Social-distancing requirements have propelled advancement staff into the virtual space to stay in touch with donors on Zoom.

Online presence of national and international organizations was quickly expanded to connect with a geographically diverse donor base. Many local organizations followed, and fundraising managers discovered Zoom as the prime outreach platform. However, it did not take long for Zoom fatigue to follow the initial hype and for fundraisers to seek solutions.

The most significant reason for Zoom fatigue is that donors participate in online events but are rarely fully engaged. Webinars, online presentations, or panel discussions invite individual donors and funders to consume rather than participate. They replicate a TV-style experience, often with high-production value but minimal direct participant or audience engagement.

Video fatigue sets in when donors and prospects “check-out,” feel unengaged, and are invisible during the online program. Donors attending cultivation events have clear expectations. They want to have a good and meaningful time, connect with peers, engage and be part of a community and feel good about affiliating with the organization. Individuals and couples who support nonprofits financially want to be valued and noticed, get excited about the organization’s mission, learn and explore and bring meaning into their

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lives. These expectations can guide fundraisers to create virtual events and replace video-fatigue with online excitement.

Virtual donor cultivation experiences that move the needle focus on the human connection and put donors front and center. The hallmark of virtual donor-centered cultivation events is their intentional design as interactive and engaging experiences. Thoughtfully designed online facilitation techniques that take advantage of digital features (i.e., breakout rooms, video features, view options, participant features, presenter tools) humanize the virtual environment. They allow participants to build connections, dive into meaningful conversations -- and to have fun. They are personable online events that invite donors and funders to co-create the experience. Online fatigue doesn't set in as donors are actively drawn into the experience. Donors who don't attend will be missed and, in turn, miss an opportunity to mingle and engage with peers and organizational leaders.

By putting the donors in the center of the online outreach strategy, online programs can turn into energizing, engaging, meaningful, and memorable experiences for donors and funders. Interactive virtual formats have several benefits: A benefit is that interactive and engaging virtual donor cultivation experiences that are engaging and interactive facilitate socializing while social-distancing. They help build community. Another advantage is that virtual experiences are a perfect vehicle for organizations to develop and deepen relationships with prospects and donors in times of uncertainty.

How nonprofit manager and staff take care of donors in times of crisis impacts how donors feel about the organization and the philanthropic investment they will make down the road. Interactive online formats increase donor loyalty and affiliation. An additional benefit is that advancement professionals and organizational leaders can turn online events into memorable donor stewardship moments.

Interactive online events have another significant benefit to nonprofits, as they allow organizations to expand their reach. Geographic boundaries and time zones that usually define how fundraisers can engage and meet donors and funders can easily be overcome in the virtual environment. Furthermore, organizations can tap into cultivating donors and prospects who typically might not attend in-person events. Another benefit of designing

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engaging online donor experiences is inviting donors to conversations that matter and co-initiating the future of the organization. And above all, a big plus is that interactive and engaging donor events in the virtual space are cost-effective, relatively easy to do, and scalable.

Fundraisers can get started by making virtual donor experiences a strategy fundraising priority in 2021. Fundraisers can pave the way by assembling a team of volunteer leaders and staff who share the excitement and help develop an online donor cultivation plan composed of traditional Zoom formats and interactive Zoom based experiences.

Organizations will be best positioned by development staff that invests in the design of the event, clearly defines target audiences and groups of donors to engage, markets the event in compelling and personalized ways, and sets a goal to leverage the connections made after the event. Since the virtual space comes with its own set of rules, a variety of online facilitation and collaboration techniques can help development and organizational leaders design memorable donor experiences. Besides methods from the facilitation and innovation field, the education sector offers online tools and game-based learning platforms to enrich a nonprofit's virtual donor cultivation experience on Zoom.

Here are a two innovative techniques and activities that fundraisers (adapted from Liberating Structures) can use to engage donors online:

Virtual Networking: This interactive technique is all about helping donors make rapid and meaningful connections online. Fundraisers can integrate this activity as a warm-up or introduce it at a later time during the virtual cultivation program. It includes 1-2 pointed and engaging questions relevant to the event, environment or organization, and 3-4 rounds of breakout rooms. 2 guests will be paired up and meet for 4-5 minutes in the breakout rooms to respond to the prompt(s). Once the time is up, the donors will meet another participant, a peer or organizational representative, respond to the same question(s) and build on what they've heard in the previous breakout room. This cycle will repeat 1-2 more times. The breakout rooms are intentionally designed as short encounters. The big plus of including the Networking activity is that it creates quick rapport among donors and peers. It creates an intimacy that is seldom in the virtual space.

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Chat Waterfall: This activity works best at the end of an online event to debrief the shared experience. The event guests will be invited to respond to 4-5 different prompts in chat. The questions are thoughtfully designed, and may include:

- “I am leaving this event with ...”,
- “Something I heard today that will stay with me ...”, or
- ”What I’d like to share at the end of this session ...”.

The facilitator will share the first prompt and post it into chat. S/he will ask the event guests to finish the sentence by typing an answer into chat. The key is that the virtual event attendees hold off hitting the “enter” button until the host says “Go” (this requires some reminders). All the individual responses will then come in like a waterfall. The facilitator moves immediately on to the next prompt. At the end of all the prompts, everyone will have time to go back to the chat entries and peruse the responses. It is a powerful way of bringing everyone together at the end of the online event and leaving the experience on a meaningful note.

In addition, fundraiser and organizational leaders can personalize the online experience by welcoming donors by name when they log on and seek out other opportunities throughout the program to call upon donors. It is powerful to be “seen” during the event and to be actively included in the event. Another easy way to engage donors is through online meeting features, such as polls and reactions. Furthermore, following a presentation or panel, fundraisers can invite donors and prospects to share their questions in chat or raise their hand to share their questions directly – it all depends on the size of the guest list. The meeting host can spotlight the donor or prospect for everyone and bring them directly into the conversation. It is all about testing out activities and ideas to transform the online environment into a community-building and donor-centered space.

The commitment to donor-centered virtual programs will overcome online fatigue, but most importantly, it will help organizations turn the COVID-19 years into a time of increased donor engagement. Leaders at nonprofits that invest now in spending quality time with their most loyal supporters and friends online will pivot and emerge stronger.

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Fundraisers are relationship builders, and donors want to connect - it is simple to make a difference.

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