

Thoughts on Fund Raising for Campus Ministry

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“Fundraising Online”

Quick, easy, and inexpensive. Those are the three things that usually come to mind whenever anyone mentions raising money online. Sure, you could make up a phony story about the potential of inherited millions from a former potentate from Nigeria, but that would be illegal (and it’s already being done). On the other hand, there is a wealth of fund raising happening online that is legitimate.

Perhaps the best recent example is the response to the devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina. While there were the standard means provided to receive your contributions, many organizations felt the necessity of getting the message out as quickly as possible, letting supporters know that they were in a position to provide immediate response. The Humane Society of the United States, for example, raised more than \$1 million online in one day, most of it from a single e-mail. In the past few years their email address book has grown to over a half-million members.

According to a new publication by Madeline Stanionis titled, *Raising Thousands (if Not Tens of Thousands) of Dollars with Email* (Emerson & Church, May 2006), organizations are working at obtaining email addresses at a dizzying rate. She writes, “A central factor is access of course. A large percentage of Americans today access the Internet to do everything from buy tickets to shop to download music. Now, many of these people are responding to charity email.” She adds, “Raising money by email can be done at a fraction of the cost of traditional mail. Not only that, but donors tend to give larger gifts through email than regular mail.” She notes that with the old process, where 20% of the responders gave 80% of the donations, the online process will likely make the field more level, as millions of gifts pour in from all age and economic levels. “What better example can there be of technology affecting people’s lives in a positive way,” she says.¹

This approach to fund raising seems to be tailor-made for campus ministry. I would expect that we have a higher than normal support base connected to the Internet. We also have a younger clientele than many organizations, which means that email giving may be exactly the right way to appeal to younger donors. Before launching a new email style of fund raising, however, here are several things to consider.

¹ January 16, 2006 email notice from Emerson & Church, Publishers, featured on the Web site of ALDE.

Minneapolis consultant Stephen Wilbers offers the following suggestions for keeping your email on the “straight and narrow.”²

- Always proofread your text before you send it. Pay attention to grammar, spelling, and punctuation.
- Include a goodwill statement.
- Never put anything in an email message that you don’t want the entire world to see.
- Remember that email can be used as legal documentation. Don’t promise anything that cannot be delivered.
- Be careful not to hit the “reply all” button when you mean to respond only to the original sender.

Simple enough. Now let’s go a bit deeper. If email is quick, speed cuts both ways. While it may be less time-consuming to send a message via the Internet, those who read your posting are equally quick. To capture the attention of your prospective donors, you have the full span of, say, three seconds. If you think it was hard to get someone to open your envelope, imagine how creative you will have to be to get them to open your email.

If you decide make a transition to communicating and fund raising online, you will need to prepare your readers for the transition. Make the shift gradually, perhaps in the next two newsletters featuring a lead article about the “new electronic connection” you are going to begin using in 2007. It’s not likely that you will want to give up all other forms of communication, such as occasional letters or phone calls. So let them know that this is a NEW option among others.

Again, Madeline Stanionis:³ She instructs that when you compose an email there are two primary components, the “subject line” and the “body.” The subject line is what appears on the screen first. It gives your reader the first, quick clue about the content. It must convince the reader instantaneously that yours is the email they want to open—now! If they don’t it will slide on down the screen to be glanced at later, or they will delete it—now. Keep the subject line short and crisp, certainly no more than 50 characters. Avoid “shouting symbols” such as CAPS, underlines, free stuff, an offer you can’t refuse, etc. If you have a straight-forward subject, say it: “Tickets for the Centennial Celebration are ready now.” “Send Lutheran college students on a meaningful spring break.” “Help fight alcohol abuse on campus.” Be as specific as you can without overloading the subject line with the message. You want your readers to be curious enough to open your email, where you can then go into (somewhat) greater detail.

Then, Stanionis tells us, once the reader has opened the email, they must have something worthwhile to read. It starts, she says, with the composition technique of any good copy. There must be a compelling story line. There must be a reason to give, and to do it now. The message needs to be clear and persuasive, otherwise, like text in general, the reader will give up after the first sentence or two. She says that there are a few key elements, however, that distinguish email copy from other forms of writing.

² Wilbers’ Web page is located at www.wilbers.com

³ “Writing Fundraising Emails”, *Contributions*, January-February, 2006, pp. 14f.

- The email must be “scannable,” meaning that the reader has to be able to look over the content in a very brief time. Use short sentences and brief paragraphs. Provide numerous links to your donation page. Use bullets, but be selective about bold and italics.
- The text should be simple and short. You don’t have the luxury that you have with regular fund raising letters of rambling on for pages. A long-winded email will only leave your readers feeling overwhelmed. So, present only one or two key ideas and use as few words as possible to state your case. Avoid a history lesson. If you have more significant information you want to share, direct them to your Web site by way of a hotlink in your email.
- Beware of previous panels. If they have to scroll down to catch the drift of your message, many won’t take the time. Treat the top few inches of your copy as precious real estate.
- Email tends to be more informal and folksy than regular mail. If you know your readers well you can use first names. Use a style of writing that echoes a kind of conversation you might have if you were face to face. Don’t be crass or flippant, but don’t be overly formal either.

I would add to this helpful list the suggestion that you not get overly artistic with the background of your email and that you avoid using fonts that are in color and are hard to read.

~~Picture this colored font on a blue background with clouds!~~

Begin now to build an accurate list of email addresses. Take every opportunity to collect email addresses from graduates, parents, congregation members, faculty and staff—anyone at all who might be interested and invested in your ministry. One helpful thing about email is that it usually bounces back if the address changes. (At which point you may have to call the person to ask for the new address.) Also, it’s a good thing to tell people that their email will not be sold to another organization.

Send messages on a regular schedule. If you say that you are sending a monthly e-note, do so faithfully. One technology expert suggests that Tuesday is the best day to send email, because on Monday everyone is swamped with what arrived in their inbox over the weekend. On the other hand, many people read email at home when they have more leisure, so the weekend may be the best time to make contact.

Prepare to respond quickly. If you send out several hundred (thousand?) emails, you can expect that lots of responses will need happen within the next day or so. A slow email response is even worse than a slow snail-mail response. The expectation is that a quick reply will trigger a quick return response. There may be a question about the content of your original email, something on your Web site, or a comment in general. Try to respond to every email thoughtfully within two working days.

Allow people the option of not receiving your email. Perhaps they still want to hear from you, but not by email. For less savvy users, email may be more trouble than it’s worth. You don’t want people to feel overwhelmed or spammed by your email messages.

Include attachments occasionally. Email is a convenient and economical way to tuck a photo or an article into your electronic correspondence. Obviously, be careful not to make the file so large that it takes forever to open or download.

An Electronic Newsletter

One step beyond sending an email message is to send an electronic newsletter. Many synods and institutions are choosing this option to cut down on the expense of printing and mailing a hard copy newsletter. There are many advantages, but also some things to think about.

- An e-newsletter doesn't stand alone.⁴ It should be part of your overall communications strategy, which includes your Web site, phone-a-thon, other mailings, and personal visits.
- Content is highly important. Make sure your information is timely and relevant. It should read like today's newspaper, not yesterday's brochure.
- Be brief. Use the e-newsletter as a teaser to direct readers to your Web site, where you can post articles with more content. Use only about half of the words you would use in a regular news article. Use headers and bullets to make the scan easier.
- Think about whether to send your e-newsletter in an HTML format (which allows graphics and more complex formatting) which may be difficult for some to view, or in a plain text format (which assures that all will be able to read it). Even converting your text formatted newsletter to a pdf. document doesn't assure that everyone can view it.
- Timing matters. Tuesday was mentioned above as the best day of the week. Also, for campus ministry readers, consider appropriate times of the year, such as the beginning and end of the academic year, Christmas and Easter holidays, or special events in the life of the ministry, such as a Centennial celebration.
- There are a number of things to consider when setting up an e-newsletter using an Application Service Provider (ASP): setup and monthly fees, maximum number of emails or subscribers, Web site integration, personalization and segmentation, message preview and testing, ease of use, insurance of delivery, and reporting and support services.

I suggest that if you want to go the way of an e-newsletter, that you spend some time with an organization in your area that already publishes electronically. Find out what they use, how time-efficient it is, and what the reader response is. You don't want to spend a lot of time creating something that no one will read.

Blogging as a Fund Raising Strategy

I am not a blogger, but I know that a rapidly growing number of people are—especially young adults. There are roughly 8 million blogs out there, perhaps approaching 9 million by the

⁴ "E-Newsletter Tools on a Shoestring," part of Alder Consulting's *Technology on a Shoestring* series, available in full at www.alderconsulting.com/eneews.html

time you receive this message. Some organizations may use blogs to share information. Individuals can use blogs to express feelings or opinions, and invite other individuals to give feedback. The use of blogs by nonprofit organizations is largely undefined. Blogs are easy to use. You can start your own, for free, by visiting www.blogger.com, www.bloglines.com, or blogs for nonprofits at www.npoblogs.net

What is a blog? Here's how blogger.com defines it: "A blog is a personal diary. A daily pulpit. A collaborative space. A political soapbox. A breaking-news outlet. A collection of links. Your own private thoughts. Memos to the world. Your blog is whatever you want it to be. There are millions of them, in all shapes and sizes, and there are no real rules. In simple terms, a blog is a web site, where you write stuff on an ongoing basis. New stuff shows up at the top, so your visitors can read what's new. Then they comment on it or link to it or email you. Or not. Since Blogger was launched, almost five years ago, blogs have reshaped the web, impacted politics, shaken up journalism, and enabled millions of people to have a voice and connect with others. And we're pretty sure the whole deal is just getting started."⁵

Marnie Webb, Director of TechCommons, a technical assistance program run by CompuMentor, suggests that the time has come for organizations to experiment with blogs.⁶ She sees blogs as "an opportunity for organizations to create a circle of like-minded people." She suggests these tips for writing and marketing a blog:

- Pick people who like to write. The benefit of a blog is its immediacy and its voice.
- Use people to write who work on the programs of your organization. Their work is where the reader's interest lies.
- Stay on topic. More focus will keep the audience and help people find the blog.
- Update your blog frequently. This keeps it relevant and fresh in search results ratings.
- Be generous with links. Put links within your blog to your own sites and related sites.
- And simply write good content. This is why your blog will be successful.

Even though it will take considerable time and attention, a blog might just be the thing for keeping your friends and supporters in touch with your campus ministry. You can post photos, discuss topics, update information about a capital campaign, or invite comments about your ministry in general.

There is little doubt that the face of fund raising will change dramatically in the next decade. The opportunities and advances made possible over the Internet will be a major factor in this change. Campus ministry can be on the forefront of this change. Try a few new approaches, and let the rest of us know how it goes.

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⁵ www.blogger.com

⁶ Cited in "Blogging as a Fundraising Strategy," by Jenn Thompson, *Contributions*, May-June, 2005., p. 23.