

COVID-19 Fundraising

WHAT DO I NEED TO DO?

It seems that every hour there are new updates and recommendations from public health officials about the spread of COVID-19 and it is near top of mind for each of us, our friends and families, and our viewers and donors.

While America has not seen a nationwide disaster like this in nearly 100 years, regional fundraising experience with natural disasters and economic downturns gives us a guide to how to best react and communicate to our donors all across this unsettling time.

Regular, thoughtful communication with donors is critical to strengthening the relationship your station has, especially with your sustainers. Even in the turmoil, this should be seen as a strong opportunity to remind donors that your station is serving an important and essential need in your community - right now.

The following checklist will help you create a plan for how to build out a fundraising and communications plan that will take you through this pandemic and beyond into the months where the economic situation will remain uncertain and could even be dire for many Americans.

- ☑ Make a list of every communication to donors you were planning to send and/or create in the next four weeks, on every platform. This includes communications, such as acknowledgements, which may be on auto-pilot. Be as thorough as possible so you and your team can see and understand every element.
- ☑ Check in with your print or letter shops to find out if there are likely to be any production delays that may impact your mail dates. Ask them for their own plans to ensure that they continue to operate during this crisis.
- ☑ Review and reassess any copy that has already been written, especially the copy for April renewals. Consider adding a PS or a line or paragraph to the letter that addresses the service that your station provides during this public health emergency. Be sure your letters still strongly alert donors that there is still a need and that gifts are very important. But mostly, ensure that none of your copy sounds tone-deaf in this new situation. **DO NOT STOP SENDING YOUR RENEWAL MAIL OR EMAILS.**
- ☑ Echo the new messaging in the print renewals in the e-renewals - or test versions with COVID-19 related content vs evergreen language.
- ☑ Carefully read every fundraising piece that is set to go to donors in the next four to eight weeks to make sure the copy fits the mood of the moment and will not appear to diminish the seriousness of the public health situation. This is the time to dial in on mission, vital programming, and children's services. This is probably not the time to play up "how much you love Sanditon."

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- ✓ Keep your stop-loss procedures in place. Employees may need to work from home and volunteers are not able to assist, so it is important that you ensure that the process to update their credit cards does not falter.
 - ✓ Let donors know about any programming changes or additions. Using an e-newsletter and updated page online are easy ways. Choose transparency and inclusion for your donors.
 - ✓ Send donors information on how your station is providing a critical service to your community. Be specific and include links that they can explore and share with friends and family.
 - ✓ Make a plan for donor services calls if your staff move to working from home. You don't want issues or questions to pile up in a voicemail box that no one checks for weeks.
 - ✓ If you are running a telemarketing campaign, check in more frequently with your representative so you know how the calls are going and know if you need to pause the campaign if the ROI goes down too much. Conversely, it's possible results might go up since people are staying home more. (As of this writing, many telemarketing firms and callers are reporting no negative reaction to fundraising calls. This could change of course, which is why it's important to stay in close contact.)
 - ✓ The economy will be deeply shaken, and people's confidence around money and resources will be equally so. This WILL impact your fundraising results at least through the summer and quite possibly beyond. This is the time to reforecast your fundraising revenue goals. If you were counting on a big boost in April and May to end the fiscal year strong, that may not be possible now. Work collaboratively as a station and share those new forecasts with your finance team to test assumptions.
 - ✓ Carefully review all on-air spots to ensure that their tone matches the mood of your community and update as possible. You don't want to risk appearing to be out of touch with what is happening by ignoring the worry in your community.
 - ✓ Passport is one bright light, given the fact that many people are stuck at home for the foreseeable future. Don't hesitate to celebrate the service and be proud of how you can help people get through this, lift their moods, and find interesting programs to keep their minds active. Passport Picks messaging might focus on shows to binge while social distancing. Highlight some of the lighter programs you offer as a distraction. Make sure your communications are personal, friendly, and timely.
 - ✓ If you offer a travel program for donors, work closely with your vendor to make sure you are communicating as transparently and honestly as you can while the situation is rapidly changing.
 - ✓ If you haven't already, you will need to cancel in-person donor events. Then research ways you can create an online or video/audio experience that can mimic the in-person gathering.
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- ☑ Give your donors something to do. People want to feel useful in a crisis, PBS stations can act as a social connector while we are physically separated. Here are a few ideas to get started:
 - a. Share PBS kids content for locations where school has been canceled
 - b. Host a virtual watch party online for your top viewed programs
 - c. Re-connect donors with the resources from #ProtectMyPublicMedia and ask donors to reach out to their lawmakers
 - d. Direct viewers to the local blood bank, most of which are struggling to get enough blood donations with social distancing
 - e. Highlight local shows that have reviewed local arts groups and restaurants that have been forced to close to keep them top of mind for your viewers
 - ☑ DO NOT STOP fundraising, even with the stock market declines. Yes, the economic outlook is bleaker than it was two months ago. But, you can't possibly know what that means for your donors finances. For example, in the 2008 downturn, donations overall took 12 months to drop, that is a lot of time for you to keep planning and working with donors. This does not mean that you should continue with your plans exactly as you built them back at budget time. Be smart about it, but do not stop. Organizations that pulled back significantly following previous economic challenges or natural disasters did take much longer to recover on the other end. It's your job now to protect your organization and its future.
 - ☑ Use the resources on Our Neighborhood and keep in touch with colleagues across the country. There are resources and discussion threads that will help you not only feel less alone but inspire you and keep you motivated.