

# Do's and Don'ts for Fundraising in the Era of COVID-19

by Denise Fredericks, CFRE and  
Shandra Niswander, CFRE

First: Breathe...

Second: Don't panic! That never helps anyway.

Yes, COVID-19 is going to impact **everything**, including your fundraising. But: In every crisis, there is also an opportunity!

## **DO'S AND DON'TS**

**DO: Take care of yourself! Put your own mask on first!** Everyone is under stress, including you. Burnout is real, and if you don't put your needs first you won't be as effective at helping your organization.

**DO: Make a plan!** Your current fundraising and communications plan might have just gone out the window. Make a new one! Tweak as the situation changes.

**DO: Be flexible!**

**DO: Be prepared:**

- For changes in giving patterns by your donors. Some donors may pull back, and others may give smaller donations. Keep the door open for when things get better! It's also possible donors will be more generous as they understand the need and reflect on the value they place on your organization. Thank them all for their gifts! Share your gratitude!
- For changes in foundation funding strategies. Some may choose temporarily to focus on COVID-19 related causes only. Also, because they likely have lost substantial value in their portfolios, foundations may reduce giving. They may even re-assess entirely how they provide support. After the 2008 financial crisis, two prominent DC-based foundations closed. Others changed their giving priorities, resulting in a painful loss of anticipated funding for organizations who had previously received their support.

**DO: Build your donor base.** Reach out to the larger world. Invite people to join you for a virtual tour. Post important successes on social media. Share pictures of your mission in action. Introduce yourself to a bigger world! Do it often!

**DO: Encourage monthly giving.** Smaller amounts more frequently might be less scary.

**DO: Communicate with your donors!** Let them know what great work their donations are making possible.

**DON'T:** Cancel any fundraising you don't have to cancel. You still need the money!

## **EVENTS:**

**DO: Cancel your events planned in the next 8 weeks at least.** Do it now. Convert them to virtual events if possible. If you're planning to reschedule, mention that without a strict timeline - you might need to change those plans later, too.

**DO: Talk with your sponsors personally,** preferably *before* you announce the cancellation publicly. Talk with them about how you can help them meet the goals of their sponsorship. **REMEMBER:** Most corporate sponsorships come out of marketing budgets, so visibility among your patrons is one of their goals.

**DO: Talk with anyone who has already purchased a ticket** and ask if they wish to convert their ticket purchase to a donation.

**DO: Write them a very nice thank you letter** acknowledging the donation!

## **APPEALS:**

**DO: Understand that your donors may also be scared about their own finances, but most people are feeling powerless and want to help.** Your ask gives them something tangible to do. Your donors are already invested in you, and they know how their prior support of your organization makes a difference because you have been a good donor steward and as part of your on-going messaging, you've been telling them that all along!

**DON'T start an appeal with: "I know you're scared and we are too ..."**

**DO: Continue with your planned appeals.** Everyone is still going to need money to survive this crisis, so keep fundraising!

Consider:

- **Crisis appeal** if your organization is on the front lines. Tell your donors what you're doing, and HOW their gift is going to make things better for the people you serve. Tell them you need their help.
- **Emergency appeal** if you are not. Tell your donors how the crisis is affecting you (fewer ticket sales, cancelled fundraising event that pays your teachers, more dogs are given up to your shelter, fewer in-kind meal donations, etc.). How the current COVID-19 crisis impacts you may be obvious to you, but not to your donors.
- **For both:** Remind your donors how your work makes a difference (like it always has), and that their support makes it possible.

**DO: Tweak your messaging** to acknowledge the COVID-19 elephant in the room.

## **DONOR RELATIONS**

**DO: Use this time for good donor stewardship.** Individual donors are your best bet for sustainability and future growth.

- **DO:** Love your donors! Thank, appreciate and generally love your donors.
- **DO:** Fundraising thought leader Tom Ahern regularly reminds us to create donor centric copy: “Because of you ...” “You make our work possible...” Make sure the donors feel like they are the heart of what you do – because they are!
- **DO:** Send thank you cards to donors!
- **DO:** Send email updates – on services, successes, etc. Keep you donors in the loop.
- **DO:** Call your donors to say thank you for their prior support and share the impact of their donations. They might even answer the phone this time! Work on these relationships.
- **DO:** Ask how they are! They might be home alone and scared, and it might feel good to chat.

EXAMPLE of fundraising during a crisis: AFP member Denise Fredericks, CFRE, was working for a very small DC-based foster care agency in September 2001. After the terror attacks, everyone's focus was on supporting the aftermath – health services, firefighters, search and rescue, mental health support, etc. However, the Washington Post cover story on Sunday, September 9 highlighted failures in the CDC child protective service system that resulted in the deaths of many children. She used that front page as a focal point at every presentation she made during the Combined Federal Campaign that year. The point: The work of the foster care agency was just as important on Wednesday September 12, as it was the week before. (The reporters who wrote that story won a 2002 Pulitzer prize for their work.) **Remember: Your organization matters even when the circumstances seem to put you on the back burner.**