

How Nonprofits Can Navigate the COVID-19 Pandemic

Nonprofits are facing uncertainty as our communities work to reduce the impact of COVID-19. Yet recent crises — including H1N1 and the 2008 financial crisis — have shown us that those who continue outreach, deepening relationships with donors and constituents during difficult times, best navigate these troubled waters to a stronger recovery.

Depending on your mission, you may not be fundraising for COVID-19 response efforts, but that doesn't mean that you should stop communicating or even asking for support during this time. Below, we share some tips to keep in mind as you continue outreach to different audiences.

Keep those affected by the crisis first. The values of our sector are naturally community-oriented, and we should lead with messages of solidarity, empathy and concern for those most affected. Most importantly, you do not want to underplay the severity of COVID-19's potential impact on the community and individuals, because you don't know the personal situations that people are coping with right now.

If your nonprofit serves marginalized and vulnerable communities, explain how you are continuing to help them during this crisis. During any emergency like we are seeing today, those on the margins are at elevated risk and more likely to be left behind during response. Tell stories of how you are responding to keep your program participants safe. For example, do you have a video conferencing system for seniors? Are you delivering food packages to families with kids out of school? It is certainly appropriate to ask for funds to support this urgent work.

If your mission is unrelated to the COVID-19 response, you can be transparent about funding needs, but consider messaging and timing carefully. Nonprofits are not alone in facing financial strains right now, and if you thoughtfully communicate the position that you are in — for example, lost revenue from cancelled events — donors can appreciate your transparency. If you can draw a line to COVID-19 authentically, do so, and remember that a call to action and give is not off-limits — just be cautious of timing and message to reflect an understanding of the current environment.

In all cases, don't undervalue stewardship! People are scared and anxious, and being reminded of a cause that they care about — as well as an organization that cares about them — can be incredibly welcome. If you have the capacity for one-to-one check-in calls, that is great. You can also share news and educational, video or interactive resources such as activities to do at home. Pushing these out through indirect means, like social channels, opens your programs to new audiences — like the 92Y sharing online and remote programming through 92Y@Home.

Detail how people can continue to reach you and what you are doing to keep “business as usual”. Many organizations are implementing a remote work policy for the safety of their staff, families and community. But, a different structure doesn't mean that business stops. Create dedicated points of contact or even Zoom Room office hours for those who may be trying to reach your team. For current contacts, make sure you explain the current office setup, how you are adapting to this crisis and how you can continue to be reached.

Centralize your messaging through a core team for consistency and calm. Depending on the size of your organization, messaging may be spread across multiple departments. But during a crisis more than ever, you must speak with one voice. This is true even in one-to-one interactions that staff may be having. Consider creating a one-page sheet of guidelines and messages that everyone can refer to, which can be drafted with a core group of staff across communications, development and the executive level.

Take your communications and development planning week-by-week or even day-by-day. A lot is happening right now, and each day or week can be dramatically different from the last. While you may have a set communications plan in place, it is best to revisit this on a regular basis to see what has changed and how you should adapt. Consider creating different scenarios during each meeting that will help to guide changes to the plan down the line.

Be careful with humor — or simply avoid it at all costs. Humor can be a powerful tool, but it is tricky to say the least in the midst of a crisis. Remember that you don't know if individuals have an ill family member, underlying health conditions or other challenges, and the last thing you want is to create feelings of shame or judgment.

Remain positive, calm and optimistic. Remember that stress and panic are also contagious, and you should avoid fear-mongering at all costs. The guidance from health officials around things like social distancing are proactive, preventative measures — and we should do the most we can to follow them while continuing to be positive and calm in our day-to-day. Your constituents may enjoy coming to you for a break from the news cycle with a dose of positivity!

We are all in this challenging moment together — and your donors and constituents are right here with us too. But together, we can also stay the course, be true to our community values and make it through to the other side. The most important thing is that we continue to communicate, share and support one another.

And we are here for you — to talk through the concerns that you have, and develop and implement strategies to keep your organization steady during COVID-19 and stronger in the future. **Our team can be reached at 212.727.3876, or by emailing sally@faircomny.com.**