Effectively Promoting Your Planned Giving Program

PG CALC WEBINAR

November 18, 2021

Presented by:

Andrew Palmer
Director of Marketing Services
PG Calc
129 Mount Auburn Street
Cambridge, MA 02138
(888) 497-4970
Email address: apalmer@pgcalc.com

Jonathan Steele
Director of Marketing
PG Calc
129 Mount Auburn Street
Cambridge, MA 02138
(888) 497-4970
Email address: jsteele@pgcalc.com

I. Introduction

"Master the topic, the message, and the delivery." — Steve Jobs

Marketing a planned giving program is a very specialized undertaking. Unlike traditional business-to-consumer or business-to-business marketing, planned giving is about building and sustaining close relationships with long-time supporters of a charity. These relationships can last years and even generations. Rather than driving your intended audience to take a single action, such as making a one-time purchase, the marketing goals you have as a fundraiser are often designed to better understand the motivations and values of your donors. Equally important is the educational aspect of planned giving and using your communications to educate your donors about planned giving options and helping them come to decisions.

While traditional advancement and non-profit marketing is inherently more closely related to planned giving marketing, there are still key differences. The letter you send for an annual fund appeal or the email campaign you have for Giving Tuesday are distant cousins of what you would send regarding planned giving. Understanding and appreciating that distinction is crucial for you and for your organization. In my previous role as assistant vice president of Advancement Communications at Simmons University, a key aspect of my position was helping bridge that understanding with our University Communications team and ensuring that alumnae/i perspectives were factored in when we were making university-wide communications decisions.

Marketing charities is very different from traditional business-to-consumer (B2C) or business-to-business (B2B) marketing, so it's not surprising that many of the B2C methods and tactics are of limited use to us in the non-profit sector and even more so for fundraising and planned giving. While traditional B2C and B2B marketing are very different, there is a wealth of knowledge, best practices, and market research that we can learn from and apply to planned giving. In this paper, we'll examine what's happening in the broader marketing landscape to understand how it impacts non-profit marketing, and then we'll dive deeper to understand more specifically how it can be applied or adapted for planned giving marketing.

II. Strategy

"A goal without a plan is just a wish." — Unknown

What Is a Marketing Strategy?
A marketing strategy is the roadmap from which you guide your marketing initiatives. It's a review of where you've been, it's an acknowledgement of where you are, and it's a declaration of where you want to go and the map to get you there. It must be tied to the goals and objectives of your organization and, more specifically, to your fundraising and planned giving program.

Key to its success is working with your leadership team to build agreement and consensus around what it is your marketing efforts will achieve and articulating the key institutional goals the marketing strategy is designed to address. Without that fundamental agreement, it's easy to go off course.

Where Are You Coming From?

The first step in developing a marketing strategy is a candid assessment of your market position.

- Who are your key audiences?
    - Who have you been communicating with (board of directors/trustees, supporters, volunteers, press/media, consumers of your goods/services, government/regulators, influencers, internal constituencies, other external constituencies)?
    - Are you missing any, or are there any new audiences you want to target?
    - *A sound strategy will account for each of these, and an effective marketing plan will outline how to tailor your marketing and communications for each.*
- What is the strength of your brand?
    - Are people familiar with your organization (brand awareness)?
    - Do they understand its mission?
    - What's your value proposition?
    - How have you shown them how you accomplish your mission (positive outcomes)?
- Who is your competition?
    - What other organizations compete for funding/resources in the same space?
    - What other organizations perform similar services?
    - What are the obstacles to those using your services?
    - What are the obstacles to raising funds?
    - *These can sometimes be internal forces at your organization or competing priorities among donors and not always straight forward "competitors."*

Where You Are

Developing a strategy is an excellent opportunity to review what's currently working and (inherent in the act of deciding you need a new marketing strategy) what's not.

- Which of your marketing and fundraising efforts have been successful?
- How do you measure that success? Metrics are the lifeblood of marketing, and you should plan what you want to measure, what you want to learn, how you're going to measure your efforts, and what form the analysis and reporting on those efforts will take.
- What goals and objectives have you defined to be addressed by this strategy?
- What's missing?

Where You Are Going

Your marketing strategy should account for each of the organizational goals and objectives you've defined as an organization.

- Your strategy should articulate the tactics you'll use to reach each objective or goal.
- It should also detail how it will work for each of your audience segments.
- Look at the big picture: how do all the pieces of this strategy fit together? What's the larger whole you're trying to create? This is sometimes only fully realized once you have all the pieces mapped out, but it can give shape to your brand identity and even inform your mission.
- P.S. You're going to either forget to measure your marketing efforts or someone will distract you from doing the thorough analysis and reporting you need to be doing, so here's a reminder.

- So, you're done, right? Nope – a good strategy is never complete. It should continue to evolve and be revised, because marketing is equal parts art and science with no right or final answer.

Creating a marketing strategy often takes the form of a SWOT Analysis: a review of your organization's Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats. For eighteen years, I worked as a marketing consultant for colleges and universities, and I prefer using SWOT+. The "plus" is identifying a key distinction that defines your organization – a unique, differentiating characteristic that captures the essence of what you do and how you do it. Sometimes this can be one that has evolved organically from within the organization. Other times it is one that doesn't exist yet and must be created. It is worth doing some deep digging within your organization and surveying your constituencies to find out what that special something is, because it can help define your marketing strategy and even your identity. This is often that differentiator that your planned giving donors latch onto and what compels them to want to make a transformational gift. It is what binds them to your organization and drives them to a planned gift.

For Planned Giving

According to the Giving USA 2020 annual report, Americans gave a record $449.64 billion in 2019. Bequest receipts were 10% of all giving, representing $43.21 billion. Planned giving is your organization's future.

It represents a culmination of your donor's values and their life's work, balancing their family's needs with their goals of supporting your organization, their legacy and sense of posterity, and the fate of the assets they've worked a lifetime to accumulate. It requires listening to their needs and interests. It requires meeting them where they are. It also carries a heavy service and educational component: you are there to help guide them in a very personal decision and teach them about the best options available to them. These are, for the most part, antithetical to mass communication, where information flows one way. What's important is what they tell you and evaluating your interactions based on what they tell you coupled with the quality of the interaction. It is about building trust, and the ultimate goal of your marketing is a one-to-one conversation.

Whether you have a new program or are relaunching an existing one, you'll want to start thinking about a long-term marketing strategy that will promote and stimulate interest in planned giving. Your marketing plan is your guide to successfully promoting and growing the program. Executing it will help ensure that you're using your resources most effectively and will align your activities and goals, providing you the best chance for success.

A marketing strategy that works for one organization will not work for all. It must be tailored to your charity and its mission.

Identify what you want to accomplish. It could be as simple as acquiring more bequests and beneficiary designation intentions. Establishing and publicizing your marketing objectives is important to your success for several reasons. It will allow you to proceed with the confidence knowing your efforts are aligned with your organizational plans. It also allows you to share your strategic marketing vision with senior management with the hope that doing so will ensure your program is allocated the resources needed to get the job done.

Your messaging must also be tailored to your goals. Make sure your marketing message and collateral are consistent and that your marketing tactics are focused to achieve your goals.

An effective marketing plan will give you clear goals, strategies, and tactics to reach those targets. You'll also need to choose the appropriate metrics to help you track your progress, so you can revise your efforts for continuous improvement. Creating a marketing plan by itself will not make you a better marketer or bring in more gifts. It is your execution of the marketing plan that will. If you are a small program with little staff and little time to waste, the more prepared and methodical you can be, the better. Other things to consider:

1. **Budget.** How much can you afford to spend each fiscal year? Does the time savings of using a vendor outweigh the overall cost to your budget? Is print-on-demand a better option than the cost of pre-printed collateral and marketing material? Is digital marketing effective enough to allow less direct mail if the justification is cost savings?
2. **Your target donors.** Use predictive modeling to analyze the distinct characteristics of your donors. If you have not used a data-analysis package or a scoring service, now is the time. Indicators such as donor loyalty can be huge factors in identifying your top planned giving prospects.
3. **Marketing schedule.** Create and follow a marketing schedule. Schedule all planned giving mailings with all other internal communications in mind. Overlapping mailings can be a waste of money, and over-sending email can cause spam complaints and unsubscribes.

Lastly, marketing must be consistent. One mailing every other year is not a plan. You need constant cultivation with your marketing mix. Sometimes your best donors might see your direct mail several times before reaching out to you. They save it and discuss it later with a spouse or advisor. And when the time is right, they will call you.

III. MESSAGING

"Simplicity is the keynote of all true elegance." — Coco Chanel

Underpinning your marketing plan is developing your **messaging platform**: the system of interconnected messages that you communicate with your constituencies. At the core of this messaging is your **value proposition**, which should be meaningful, newsworthy, and differentiated. It is the core statement that conveys your organizational mission, articulates why the work you do matters, and how you are able to do it differently or better than anyone else. This is what makes your donors loyal to your organization.

Marketing non-profits is about sharing a vision, engaging constituents, building shared values, demonstrating outcomes (showing how you fulfill your organization's mission), and making your organization's mission important and personal to them. It is not about driving a sale or promoting a product; it is about cultivating long-standing relationships with supporters and constituencies.

Example from Higher Education Marketing:
Before coming to PG Calc, I spent 18 years as a marketing consultant for colleges and universities. While some of that focus was on institutional advancement and positioning, I also worked extensively on student recruitment marketing. Ironically, the model my firm utilized to recruit students borrowed extensively from the fundraising world.

When you convince a 17-year-old and their family why the investment in a four-year degree is a sound one – and increasingly, a reason to take on large amounts of debt – you must understand their values and interests, their aspirations, their concerns, the obstacles to enrolling, and build a highly customized case as to why they should enroll at your college. This courtship usually lasted the better part of three years with a family as they worked through what was important to them and determined how good a fit the college or university was for the student. In the end, the best recruitment tool we had was a campus visit to help students envision what it would be like to attend. It is as much about creating a shared vision of what the student wants to be and how they see themselves as it is about the nuts and bolts of academic major requirements, extracurriculars, and what's served in the dining hall.

Planned giving marketing is also about building a shared vision for what will be as much as it is about what our organization is doing in the here and now.

Restating with Repetitive Redundancy
Once you have established your messaging platform and your core messages, do not hesitate to repeat them. It may feel dogmatic to reuse language, but stick with what works – even down to the same phrasing of key statements – because it takes a great deal of repetition to get your messaging to stick and begin to resonate. In marketing, we often feel compelled to change things for the sake of change. While experimentation and testing are good, and mixing mediums is a healthy part of effective marketing, your core messaging should be consistent and used repeatedly. Teach everyone in your organization (including volunteers) what your core messaging is and encourage its use in all your communications – you are all brand ambassadors. Brand saturation works when everyone is using the same language and striking all the same notes in the chord.

Good Marketing Means Good Listening
What your constituents tell you is at least as important as what you tell them. As all good fundraisers know, you are constantly looking for feedback from donors to better understand how they are reacting to what they are hearing from you, indications that your messages are resonating with them, and creating opportunities in your communications for them to express themselves and share their thoughts and ideas back with you. It is through this dialog that you can build a relationship of shared values and inspire giving.

Your institutional messaging should clearly state your organizational value proposition and mission. Your fundraising messaging should demonstrate your charity's impact and the benefit it provides. It should also show how your supporters fit into helping you achieve that mission and how their shared values empower the work of the charity.

Your planned giving messaging should build a dialog with your donors that helps them see their role as crucial to the success of the organization. It should provide them with the opportunity to put their stamp of ownership on your mission and express how their values align with those of the charity. Perhaps unlike any other area of fundraising, however, planned giving marketing has a unique educational element to it. A planned giving fundraiser can help donors understand the different giving mechanisms available to them and counsel them about how those options align with their personal and family goals. It is also often about creating a legacy and helping donors find a way to make a lasting impact.

That is why planned giving marketing will never be just about sending messages one way from the organization to prospective donors. To be effective, your messaging platform must incorporate input from donors, create opportunities for good listening, and steward your relationship with them.

For Planned Giving

At the start of any giving program, branding is essential. Brand your program as an opportunity for donors to gain the satisfaction of creating a legacy and leaving a lasting impact with their gift. Your initial promotions should try to include testimonials of current donors. Let their words sell the viability of the program. New donors look to see themselves in these current members. Showcase their judgment and knowledge. Nothing is stronger for your marketing.

Your message should also be more about the huge impact a gift will have on your mission rather than the technical aspects of any gift. Keep the messaging simple. Tax benefits can be important to many donors, but the bottom line is that a planned gift can create a life-changing impact like no other. Even the use of the terms “planned giving” or “bequest” can be troublesome to some donors. It can seem confusing and/or overwhelming. Yet once they learn the basics, your donors will begin to comprehend that a planned gift can be made simply and be very rewarding.

For more on the use of language, read the research of Dr. Russell James of Texas Tech University. Dr. James is the leading academic studying planned giving, and he has done extensive research on the best phrases and words to use when promoting planned giving. Dr. James found that formal and technical terms reduce the chances that a donor will be interested in making a planned gift. For example, saying “a gift from your will” may be more impactful than using the term “bequest.” Also, “receive a tax deduction and make a gift that pays you income for life” is more attractive to donors than just using the term “charitable gift annuity.” And so on.

You can see the logic here, but there are no absolutes. Your best donors may react differently. Keep in mind the language used is important, and it can drive interest to you or away from you. There is no one right way to communicate, or any perfect phrasing about planned giving.

Your messaging should always be dictated by your top donors. You want to build awareness, educate them, and let them know they are important to you. The most successful organizations make certain that the following messages come across to donors:

- We care about you.
- This is your organization.
- Our donors are our greatest assets.

One of the best ways to send this message to donors is via a donor survey. A survey empowers donors by letting them know they can have a direct impact on the future of the institution. Even though the survey is really a discovery tool, (data collection, leads, intentions, etc.), it engages donors and gives them an opportunity to make their voices heard. Often donors give because they want to change something they don't like about the world, or they want your mission to continue, and the survey gives them an additional opportunity to express those feelings in other ways besides a gift. It allows them to provide feedback on the organizations they've chosen to support year after year. They get the satisfaction of helping by giving feedback, and your institution is able to measure a donor's satisfaction, commitment, intimacy, and trust.

Survey answers help your program alter course, as needed. You'll be able to tell who's engaged, who isn't, collect additional data, and clean up your list of donor prospects. Simply put, it is just another avenue for donors to support your mission.

IV. TACTICS

"I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." — Maya Angelou

A. Digital Mail [Email]

As noted above, there are lessons to be learned from B2C and B2B marketing, but we have to take them with a grain of salt and adapt them to the non-profit sector, fundraising, and planned giving marketing.

Here's what's happening overall in email marketing.

Email remains an incredibly effective marketing vehicle, and it has only grown in importance during the pandemic. As many of us were homebound, the boundaries between work and home life became blurred and more remote and hybrid work patterns are here to stay.

According to World Data Research, a firm that studies millions of emails sent each year around the globe, our tolerance for email is very high, and we're as likely to respond to an email sent on a Friday afternoon and even over the weekend as we are during the week. Obviously, this is not something you would want to abuse, particularly with key constituencies, but it does show that our work/life boundaries are increasingly merged with people checking both work and personal email simultaneously. In fact, open rates increased since the beginning of the pandemic, and the theory is that we are all looking for ways to stay connected while socially distant.

This also means that there is more email clutter to cut through, so generally speaking, you should not be as concerned about sending too much email (if only because everyone else is). Although "everyone is screaming, so I'll scream louder" doesn't seem like best practice, we should never assume that people are reading everything we send them. In a focus group I conducted a few years ago, I was surprised to learn that the prevailing attitude was that if an email was important, the sender would send another one.

That makes you think twice about including all your most important information in a single email and only sending it once. It's also a reminder that we should not load too much into a single email. While e-newsletters serve a very specific and different function than other types of emails, with the expectation that multiple topics will be covered, and remain a very important exception, most emails should focus on a single topic and should include a single call-to-action. It's fine to use multiple links and mix text links with call-to-action buttons or images, but generally speaking, they should all point to the same action you want your audience to take.

Here are some benchmark statistics that may help you compare how your organization's emails are performing:

- Average email open rate across industries – 20.94% (Hubspot)
  - Education – 25% (Hubspot)
  - Healthcare – 21% (Hubspot)
  - Nonprofits generally – 20.39% (Campaign Monitor)
- Average email click rate across industries – 7.8% (Hubspot)
  - Education – 7.49% (Hubspot)
  - Healthcare – 8.94% (Hubspot)
  - Nonprofits generally – 2.66% (Campaign Monitor)
- Average email bounce rate across industries - 0.63% (Hubspot)
  - Education - 0.5% (Hubspot)
  - Healthcare 0.6% (Hubspot)
  - Nonprofits generally – 1.09% (Campaign Monitor)
- Average unsubscribe rate by industry - 0.48% (Hubspot)
  - Education - 0.4% (Hubspot)
  - Healthcare - 0.4% (Hubspot)
  - Nonprofits generally - 0.17% (Campaign Monitor)

It is important to point out that these are general figures. Your organization's metrics may look very different. The important thing is to measure metrics for your organization and your audience and to constantly test, when possible, to better understand what works best with your audience.

One significant factor happening now is Apple's release of its new iOS 15 on iPhones and Apple devices. The new privacy settings change how open rates on emails are tracked. Basically, any email you send to an iOS 15 device will automatically be counted as an "open," even if the recipient never opens your email. This is currently inflating your open rates by about 10%, and by January/February of 2022, could throw off open rates on as many as 46% of all devices. It's therefore very important to understand what your historic open rate baseline is and factor this into any major shifts you see. If possible, segment your iOS users from the rest of your mailing list and send to them separately to keep track of your true open rate.

For Planned Giving

Digital marketing can be the quickest and most cost-effective way of conveying your planned giving message, but that does not always mean it is the most effective. Remember, a tremendously effective email campaign might receive a 50% open rate, with even fewer reading. At best, only half of the email you send has the chance of being read.

Your digital messaging must be relevant to your donors to elicit a response. Sending a weekly email just to send email or sending a syndicated pre-written message will not build awareness. That's the quickest way to the "delete and/or unsubscribe" file. Effective email needs to be customized to your donor's needs and generate engagement. If your email is well-written, personal, and a benefit to your donors, then your email channel will build relationships faster and more economically than anything else.

1. **E-Newsletters**
   Each e-newsletter should have a bequest theme focused around a donor story. Your e-newsletter can be a digital version of your print newsletter for maximum exposure to your targeted list, or it can be written as a separate marketing piece.

   It should be customized to your organization's look and feel and include a responsive design for mobile viewing. Your goal should be to make every e-newsletter a benefit to your donors. Sending consistent emails because you think you need to send something will only lead to unsubscribes and spam complaints. Make certain that your e-newsletter is interesting, educational, and entertaining. In other words, "a good read."

2. **Single Issue and Follow-up Emails**
   Several times per year you may want to send your donors a simple email on bequest giving or beneficiary designation. This type of campaign can be used for awareness-building or updating donors on changes in the law and how it affects giving. A well-crafted email strategy allows your donors to not only begin to see planned giving as a viable option to support your mission, but also to see you as a trusted friend.

   Many planned giving marketers are using an integrated approach by using email to support all direct mail campaigns. Email can reference the direct mail piece, provide additional follow-up information, and include a link to a website landing page. Sending a consistent message using two different mediums with similar imagery to touch your donors can have a dramatic effect on the success of the overall bequest giving campaign. Once again, this must be a customized effort to see success. A non-tailored canned message will fall terribly short.

B. Direct Mail

As any fundraiser will tell you, direct mail remains highly relevant and a potent element in the marketing mix.

- More than half of Americans enjoy receiving mail – 56% of respondents to the USPS's *The Mail Moment* survey say that receiving mail is a "real pleasure"
- 73% of Americans say they prefer being contacted by companies via direct mail (compu-mail.com)

Direct mail is read and, unlike email, has more staying power.

- 58% of the mail American households receive is marketing mail (USPS)
- 50.9% say they find postcards useful (Data & Marketing Association)

- Direct mail open rates can reach up to 90% (Inkit)
- Advertising mail is kept in a household for 17 days on average (Mailmen)
- Direct mail response rates are five to nine times higher than any other advertising channel (datatargetingsolutions.com)

Direct mail can remain as a tangible reminder to take action and can resurface weeks or months after it's received.

- Only 44% of people can recall a brand immediately after seeing a digital ad compared to 75% of people who receive direct mail (Marketing Profs)
- 64% of marketers say direct mail has the highest response rate (Lob State of Direct Mail Study)
- Direct mail increases online donations by 40% to non-profits (Dunham & Company)

The key to a successful direct mail appeal is making a lasting impression, giving the recipient a clear call-to-action, and always including a reply mechanism (even if it's seldom used). While a URL is more likely to be used to reply, best practice is to always include a reply envelope or reply card. Keep in mind that if you use a postage-paid indicia, you only pay the postage when it goes in a mailbox.

Writing a moving letter is a nuanced artform. Anecdotes and stories are particularly compelling, and above all, the best letters are personal from someone the recipient recognizes (or will easily find on your website). It's good to be passionate and expressive, because yours is an organization your donors care about. When I worked in advancement communications, I saw more than a few hand-written replies included with reply slips. As with your other messaging, be sure to reiterate the core messaging from your message platform. Be consistent and never be afraid to repeat your messages.

For Planned Giving

Constant cultivation is a key to success in fundraising, and it's no different with planned giving. Building awareness with custom direct mail that includes your organization's mission and branding is essential. Your older donors will respond to messaging directed to them on an emotional level. Younger donors will respond similarly; however, most of your younger audience will respond because a direct mail message is different from the constant barrage of email, spam, and social media noise they receive. This makes direct mail stand out as something different. Either way, it's the personal nature of the message that is the key. The content of the mailing must be tailored to your donors and your mission.

1. **Simple Mail Campaign**
   A personalized letter is a wonderful way to start reaching out to your donors about a planned gift, such as a concise letter discussing the impact of a bequest on your organization and the benefits to the donor. It should explain the important role planned gifts have played at your institution and encourage donors to learn more at your planned giving website or to call your office for more information. Include a postcard-sized reply card and a self-addressed envelope that can be mailed back. Include language on the reply card that allows the donor to state, in effect:

- I have included the [name of charity] in our will or trust.
- I am interested in including the [name of charity] in our will or trust.
- Please send me information on leaving a gift in my will or trust to [name of charity]

Two or three weeks later, follow up with either another letter, a postcard, or a phone call from a donor or board member who has made a planned gift. Sending the follow-up from a person who has already made a gift sets a strong example. Donors see themselves in the actions of others and look to emulate those whom they respect.

2. **Newsletters**

A planned giving print newsletter should educate donors on the benefits and ease of making a gift with a donor story example. The planned giving articles should be topical, informative, and interesting to read. The newsletter should be customized to your brand and include design best practices. Images of donors and infographics that can help explain difficult concepts should be included. No one wants a newsletter that is too dense.

To do it right takes time and effort, and often the best option is to use a vendor who can design it and provide the planned giving content. The donor story should be your responsibility. If your newsletter has valuable information and is an interesting read, it can be your best source of leads. Good newsletters, unlike other direct mail, are saved and shared. It brings like-minded individuals direct to donors' homes and shows them the impact and the self-satisfaction of bequest giving.

3. **Postcards & Self-Mailers**

Postcards are your most cost-effective form of direct mail, and they work very well to build bequest giving awareness. They also must contain your brand and imagery, and then mix in bequest messaging and mission copy. Remember to include a custom call-to-action. This includes a link to a relevant landing page on your website. Do not just stick a logo on a canned piece of direct mail and do your best to stay away from stock photos. These will not produce the desired results; in fact, they may have a detrimental effect on the credibility of your program.

Be it a postcard or a self-mailer with a reply card, all direct mail should promote your program in the most positive way: educating with planned giving content, reassuring with mission, and triggering emotion with images.

C. Social Media

Someone at your organization has probably told you that social media has already or will soon be killing direct mail and print communications as we know it. Just like TV killed radio, Facebook killed email, and Snapchat killed YouTube. In communications and technology, there's always something new and different that changes how we behave and communicate, but it doesn't mean it's necessarily going to replace what was. Sometimes you have a Netflix meteor to the Blockbuster dinosaur, but more often than not, we adopt what's new and change how we use what was.

- Email marketing is more likely to drive sales than social media marketing
- 60% of consumers say they've made a purchase as the result of a marketing email as opposed to 12.5% of people who have used the "buy" button on a social media post.
- 67% said that mail was more personal than the internet (OptinMonster)

Social media is an important channel, but in non-profit marketing – and especially in planned giving marketing – print communications, direct mail, and email are still crucial. What social media is good at is connecting people and leveraging personal relationships to influence others. Having donors share their stories on social media can be incredibly effective. Likewise, video testimonials make donor stories personal and can show donor impact in a way that print never will. What's important is evaluating what each platform is good for and being creative about how you adapt your messaging to them. Most importantly, meet your donors where they are.

Younger donors are among the fastest adopters of new mediums, but that's not necessarily where your planned giving audience is likely to be. Pay attention to how your donors prefer to communicate and use every opportunity to ask them how they want to hear from you and what motivates them. The best marketing ideas are often borrowed (or stolen outright), so keep an eye out for what's developing and how others are using social channels, then run some tests of your own to see what works with your key audiences.

For Planned Giving

Today's social networks are the crossroads of the country – the modern-day Times Square where anyone and everyone can get their message out. So, every planned giving program should be there too, right?

Not necessarily. It's easy to be seduced by Facebook, with its audience of billions worldwide, but according to Blackbaud research, only about 1% of all online fundraising can be attributed to social media.

No social media platform is focused on successfully connecting with donors and getting them to pull out a credit card. Facebook for one, is not the place where people want to be educated on life income gifts and planned-giving professionals say that social media has yet to earn a place among their most valuable tools. Only 17% say it can have a strong impact on their program.

Perhaps when the next generation enters their 60s, social media will start to have a significant impact on planned giving marketing. This does not mean social media is something you should not test. But it does mean that most of the industry is not relying on it for planned giving marketing. That said, the "social" nature of social media makes it very enticing to aid in stewardship and build a community of volunteers. Its essence is community-building with like-minded people who have the same interests and shared experiences.

This is why social media may not work to build planned giving awareness but does work well with alumni groups and legacy societies for stewardship: not to solicit, but to support events, fundraisers, and other volunteer activities. Make your volunteers and donors feel special through your appreciation. Don't hold back. A good public "thank you" is all some ever want. Post pictures of the volunteers, as well as tag them. It'll show up in their friends' news feeds, and you may get even more volunteers next year. Build buzz, get folks excited, and have fun. It should all be a part of your stewardship and awareness-building strategy.

V. Effect of Covid

"When times are good you should advertise. When times are bad you must advertise."
— Popular Adage

The pandemic changed a lot about how we communicate as well as our behavior in response to marketing. As noted earlier, people became more engaged with email while living in lockdown.

- 78% of marketers have seen an increase in email engagement over the last 12 months (Hubspot)

The boundaries between work and home blurred.

- Fridays now see the highest email open rates (Used to be mid-week).
- Saturdays see the lowest. (Campaign Monitor)

People check work and personal email interchangeably.

- The best time of day to send an email is 10:00 am. (CoSchedule)

People have been craving connection.

- 61% of consumers enjoy receiving promotional email weekly.
- 38% would like emails to come even more frequently. (ConstantContact)

Customization is key to making that connection. For example, when there's personalization:

- Click through rates increase by an average of 14%.
- Conversion rates increase by 10%. (Causevox.com)

Your donors are no different.

- Only 44% of donors are currently satisfied with the level of personalization they currently receive, (compu-mail.com)

Understanding this need for connection and respecting the new outlook many of us have after facing more than a year of the pandemic is crucial to our work and the form our marketing takes. Many people are taking a long, hard look at how they live their lives, how they prioritize life, family, and work, and their role in society. While some parts of life will go back to pre-pandemic normal, some of these other, more philosophical changes may be here to stay.

For Planned Giving

Successful planned giving messaging focuses on the benefits to the donor, the self-satisfaction of giving, and the impact the gift will have to the mission of the organization. This continues to be true, but in the age of COVID-19, messaging is a bit more complicated. We still live in a world with panic-inducing news each and every day. It's not a post-COVID world yet. There are constant reports of virus flare ups for the still-dangerous pandemic that include daily death tolls, anti-vax protesting, and supply chain trouble. 2020 was a year we will not soon forget, but 2021 has not gotten much easier.

But we must keep marketing. The worst thing your organization can do in a crisis is to go silent. Keep marketing, or maybe a better way to say it is keep communicating. Use Skype, Zoom, or the like to meet with individuals or groups of donors, and state your plans and answer questions.

Suggesting ways donors can help your organization in the coming months of the pandemic is a great way to keep them informed and engaged.

The donor communications you send at this time can certainly strengthen your case for future support, and your marketing message should still avoid describing the technical complexity of gift vehicles and the dry professional language of giving. However, due to the pandemic and the resulting economic disruption, we have to provide more for donors. We need to provide guidance, wisdom, planning, and concern for their well-being. Each correspondence should be more personal and empathic than ever before, even if it is just a well-placed, "we are here to help," or "we care." Look at it as a transition to stewardship, rather than just marketing. But your mail plans, even if altered and budget constrained, should still continue.

The fear now is being tone deaf. Our donors are concerned about their physical and financial health, and it is up to us to continue to educate while understanding the worry. Messaging must stay positive and not imply anything to do with death. Of course, you never would emphasize anyone's passing, but donors are more sensitive than ever. Just mentioning the term "legacy" was something I was afraid to do in the early days of the pandemic, and after a few months began to use it again.

More donors than usual are reaching out to advisors to finalize plans, which is good, but they don't want to hear they should do that in our marketing directly. They want to be in control of that narrative. It's one of the few things in their control these days. So how do you handle this in your donor correspondence?

Leading with empathy is important. Many at home are feeling that humanity is lacking today, so we want donors to understand we know how they feel. At that point, if, and when, they are ready to talk (gaining permission) they can reach out to us. Rather than directly telling them to create their legacy, this messaging is focusing on being smarter, and how you and your organization, are here to help them.

Some quick tips:

- Affirm donor connection and remind your donors why they were drawn to your mission in the first place. Remind them that while COVID-19 brought so many things to a halt, cancer, hunger, homelessness, or whatever problem you're working to solve hasn't stopped.
- Be upfront with your donors. Articulate the challenges you still face and urge donors to be part of the solution.
- Keep connecting with your donors online! People got used to spending time online during the pandemic. Older donors feel more comfortable than ever before making online donations, joining Zoom events, and engaging on social media.

Hopefully, the worst days of the pandemic are behind us. But that doesn't mean you should stop asking your donors to change the world. Your good communication can help make sure that their "new normal" includes consistently showing up for those in need.

VI. TESTING

"Do one thing every day that scares you." — Eleanor Roosevelt

Testing is a marketer's lifeblood.

Increasing your conversion rates in marketing is absolutely crucial. For planned giving marketing, a conversion can be measured every time a prospect picks up the phone to call you or emails you for more information. Turning more prospects into qualified leads means more planned gifts. But how do you convert "lookie-loos" into prospects, and prospects to qualified prospects and then closed gifts?

More advertising? More web content, or email? More time, effort, and money poured into marketing?

All of this could work, but it's much faster and cheaper to do it by increasing your conversion rate. The best way to do that is testing. Testing is more popular than ever (and trending) not just because it works, but because online you can do it with Google for free. Testing is the one rule of marketing that surpasses all others. No matter how well your landing pages or e-mails may be performing, they can always do better. If you don't have a goal for constant improvement, you're missing out on prospects that you should be talking to.

Sometimes just a small tweak can lead to significant improvement. Many small and a few big tweaks combined can bring a dramatic increase in your results. The easiest way to test is A/B testing. A/B testing, or split testing, is a process through which you run a simultaneous experiment between two pages with a single difference to see which performs better. It is a method for validating that any new addition or change will actually improve the page's conversion rate.

You create two alternative versions of your page (page A and page B), each for example, with a different headline. A/B testing software directs 50% of the incoming traffic to page A and 50% to page B. Both pages have a call to action, and in the end, you count how many people took the action. The page with more conversions (more people taking action) wins. NOTE: split testing cannot be considered conclusive (that is, statistically valid) unless 1) the total number of test subjects is more than an agreed upon number, ex. 1,000 recipients; or 2) one option or the other is a runaway winner.

While it may seem overwhelming at first, "continuous testing" is the mark of a successful marketing program. It seems more common online because it is so much faster to test one or more options and easier to measure results, but don't forget to test your direct mail campaigns, too!

Typically, you'll want to test pages that:

- have the most traffic, and
- are the most important in your conversion funnel.

It's important to test one hypothesis at a time - otherwise you won't know which change made the difference. Here are 3 popular test ideas…

1. **Subject Line or Headline**
   You should have a strong, compelling headline that encourages the reader to read more. I believe in a copywriting principle called the four U's. Every headline, subject line and/or bullet point should be Urgent, Unique, Useful and Ultra-specific. Try to incorporate them all. Let me explain.

   Urgency in headlines convinces people to take action. It triggers them to learn more and open the email, click through to the article, or just begin reading. It gives the reader a timely reason to continue. Urgency is so powerful that you can't fake it. If you do, your copy will sound too pushy or salesy, and you'll lose the reader. If it's not present, use the other three.

   Uniqueness fascinates readers. They like to learn new things. What they don't want is the same old story. Copy that energizes them with something new or different works very well to trigger interest.

   Useful information inherently promises a benefit to the reader for their time reading. If your content isn't useful, why should visitors read it? Usefulness compels them to keep reading. Include a benefit, solve a problem, or otherwise provide value.

   Ultra-specificity dictates the usefulness of your message. A vague headline rarely works. If the reader doesn't understand the promise you are making or the benefit from the headline, they are less likely to move forward. This doesn't mean you need to write a list, or step-by-step guide. Just remember that exact numbers will pull in more readers than round numbers every time. Specificity heightens credibility, credibility builds engagement, and engagement equals clicks.

2. **The Call to Action**
   The size of your order/action buttons and the text on the button should always be tested. (e.g. "Join now and get our whitepaper" vs "Sign up: vs "Submit") Try enlarging your call-to-action buttons or using different colors. Standing out might work better than blending into your institution's style guide.

3. **Layout**
   Test removing all distractions from your call-to-action. This includes the "exit sign." When I want to really increase the conversion rate, I will send readers to a landing page without the main navigation. The reader can only click for more information (make a conversion) or leave (if you must, add a small text link back to your home page).

You can also test…

- Copywriting – All mission, gift type descriptions, etc.
- Forms – Their length, field types, text on the forms.
- Images – Their placement, content, and size.

- Amount of content on the page (short vs. long).

The key is to then learn from your results and make changes to incorporate what you learn. The retailer example I mentioned above paid an outside consultant to help them realize what they were doing wrong. Getting an outside expert is very helpful when there is a serious issue. The reporting and testing tools available with today's online platforms, however, make it possible to make smaller adjustments to optimize conversion yourself!

In sum, there's no excuse for NOT testing. Testing is easy, fast, and actually fun! You get to test your hypotheses, learn new things all the time, and exercise your creativity. It makes everything you do as a marketer better and leads to more gifts.

When did you last test something new? For example, have you tested including Emojis in your planned giving marketing? 🧐

Emojis – the tiny graphic icons that live in your text messages – sure have come a long way from the good old-fashioned emoticon. ;) Most people agree that emojis are fun, relatable, and conversational. But do emojis have a place in fundraising? Or planned giving?

Yes 👍 and no 👎.

Emojis can catch the eye, thus, they may increase engagement. They might also generally lighten the tone of your copy which might help in a social media post. Most importantly, they can make your email stand out in a crowded inbox. That's crucial when you consider how much email is sent these days. According to a report from Experian, using emojis in email subject lines increased email open rates by 56%.

But it's not all good news. For planned giving, their use may come off as flippant or insensitive. They're also small, and your donors may not see them. And what is the impact on delivery? Are they seen as a spam technique and thus sending your mailing to the junk box? Or worse, because some emojis aren't standardized the way letters and numbers are, will your recipient only receive an □ in its place?

To answer these questions… Test it. A subject line with a timer emoji may serve you well in an email about a matching gift's deadline or end of year giving. An animal lover is sure to notice a cute dog or cat face in their copy. Or will they be sent to the junk folder and never opened? You'll never know until you test.

VII. Conclusion

"People spend money when and where they feel good." — Walt Disney

By understanding the concerns of your donors and delivering them with beneficial information, you can have legacy-giving conversations that will impact your organization for years to come. It is still about building relationships. And those may start over email, direct mail, or social media. It differs for every organization and every donor.

Be persistent and consistent in your communications and sensitive to changes in a donor's life circumstances. Just don't stop marketing.