

# How to Manage Donors and Fundraisers in a Hybrid World



- Fine-Tune your Storytelling
- Give Donors Flexibility
- Create a Supportive Culture for Fundraisers
- Prioritize Small Fundraising Events
- Foster Personal Connections with Supporters

**N**ow that nonprofits know how to do nearly everything online — from hosting engaging events to managing staff, volunteers, and donors — many hybrid approaches are here to stay.

If one thing is clear, experts say, it's that fundraising now is much less about where donors are physically and more about where — and how — nonprofits are meeting them online. Savvy groups

are building “global digital communities” among donors and trying new things, says Becky Endicott, co-founder of We Are For Good, which trains and advises nonprofit professionals.

“It's about having a growth mind-set post-Covid,” she says. Now is a time to think differently, be curious, and embrace digital, Endicott says. Those that don't may be left behind, she cautions.

Fostering online community doesn't mean simply pushing out content or asking for money all the time, Endicott says.

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You need to interact with donors: thank them, ask questions, and start conversations. And be sure to make those who respond to your emails or other online messages feel seen and heard.

One simple thing any nonprofit can do: Put a “Why Did You Give?” textbox on your online giving page, Endicott says. Make responses optional, and be sure to thank anyone who takes the time to fill it out. Such personalized treatment makes donors feel appreciated, she says, and the tool makes it easy to learn more about donors and gather stories for future communications.

Some groups are using fun virtual events to build community. For example, Washington Performing Arts hosted two online holiday parties for young professionals that worked particularly well, says Elizabeth Racheva, chief advancement officer. The parties, co-hosted by the group’s junior board, included interactive games, like an ugly sweater contest, a variation of “Name That Tune,” and a trivia game show.

A key factor in the events’ success was hiring a consultant to handle production, Racheva says. That freed up her team to focus on interacting with donors in the chat and building enthusiasm for the things the speakers were sharing.

Post-event follow-up is critical, experts say. Endicott suggests sharing content from the gathering to continue the momentum and engage supporters who didn’t join live. For instance, you could highlight selections from a speech through graphics on social media or post a video highlights reel.

Here are five more ways to manage donors and fundraisers effectively — and raise more money — in shifting times.

## Fine-Tune Your Storytelling

It’s more important to share authentic and vulnerable messages about the impact of giving than to develop glossy, expensive-looking marketing materials, experts say. “The work feels so visceral and critical right now that, that kind of packaging isn’t resonating,” says Liz Fitzgerald, director of development at the ACLU.

Current challenges and uncertainty may have people feeling overwhelmed, she says,

so start small when communicating impact. Lead with how support will make a concrete difference for a specific individual, she suggests, then tie that to your larger mission.

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Share stories that are gritty, raw, and human, Endicott says. In this time of political polarization, people want to connect with something real, she says. Create content that is “scroll-stopping” — meaning it will make people want to stop, click, read, and take action.

Emphasize the impact gifts will create right away, suggests Tycely Williams, chief development officer at the Bipartisan Policy Center, a think tank in Washington, D.C. Before Covid, donors typically understood that it could take two to three years to demonstrate results, she says. But now people want to know about changes their support will help bring about in the next 12 months.

To meet donors’ changed expectations, the organization is retooling its messages and marketing materials to highlight incremental progress toward longer-term goals. For example, instead of asking donors to help advance its energy goals for 2050, the group is highlighting milestones that must be reached in 2023. It’s important to showcase a pathway for meeting the need, Williams says. People won’t want to invest in work that seems to address an impossible set of circumstances.

## Give Donors Flexibility

When planning an event or a one-on-one conversation with a donor, adapt to supporters’ preferences for meeting online

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or in person. Washington Performing Arts is finding that many donors are craving face-to-face connection after two years of a pandemic, Racheva says, so the group is focusing mainly on in-person events in 2023.

The organization plans to stop offering hybrid donor events because it doesn’t have the technological resources needed to do so exceptionally well, she says. However, it will host at least one fully virtual event next year for donors who prefer to gather online.

If your nonprofit is prioritizing in-person events, Endicott says, it’s smart to add a digital element if you can afford it. For hybrid events, it’s ideal to have two production teams — one running the in-person activities and another dedicated to engaging viewers at home.

When it comes to individual donor meetings, it’s best to ask supporters for their preference. Online meetings offer some benefits. For example, when meeting with a corporate grant maker, it can be easier to get decision makers to join a Zoom meeting.

Virtual donor meetings can also feel “cozier” since people often join from their homes, Racheva says, which fosters a more intimate and casual atmosphere. “There’s an interesting rapport that’s developed with many of our donors through the pandemic that’s been delightful and surprising to discover,” she says.

### **Create A Supportive Culture For Fundraisers**

If you can provide staff members flexibility in terms of how, where, and when they work, do so. “If you’re on the fence right now about whether you want to go to

remote work, then you are living in the past,” Endicott says. Working remotely some or all of the time must be an option, she says, and it is a big plus in a benefits package.

Being flexible with staff can also help your fundraising, Williams says. The Bipartisan Policy Center lets employees adapt their schedules to accommodate needs outside of work, she says. As a result, the team as a whole works longer hours; people choose when to start and end their days, often earlier or later than standard office hours. This flexibility benefits individual fundraisers while also enabling the team to be responsive to donors in other time zones.

People are exhausted after two difficult years, Racheva says, so leaders need to model self-care for their employees. She did this recently by using vacation time that had piled up during the pandemic. “Take the time you need to be rejuvenated and whole, and lead with enthusiasm and clarity,” she says. “It’s really important for all of your staff to see that you as a leader prioritize that ... to bring your best to the table.”

Keep in mind, donors are tired, too, she says, and it can be hard to land meetings. Fundraisers can get discouraged, she says, so create metrics that assess their efforts, not just making an ask and closing a gift. “In this moment, that kind of activity has got to be celebrated and acknowledged,” she says.

And because times are so uncertain, adjust strategies as needed and set more conservative fundraising goals where possible, she suggests, to give your team room to overperform.

### **Prioritize Small Fundraising Events**

The pandemic created an opportunity to shift away from large fundraising galas toward smaller, more intimate gatherings, says Gail Perry, a fundraising consultant. Small events cost less, require less staff time to pull off, and offer a more personal and productive way to engage donors, she says.

For example, “porch parties” — smallish, high-touch gatherings held at a board member’s or other supporter’s home — are growing in popularity as a tactic to appeal to donors who are wary of gathering indoors or in large groups. Donors can get a chance to meet an insider at your nonprofit, such

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as a program director who offers a behind-the-scenes look at the work. A personalized approach such as this can strengthen relationships with key donors, deepen their understanding of your organization, and build trust, says Kathryn Gamble, who works with Perry. It helps people get excited about their commitments to your work, she says.

Some groups are taking a similar approach online. Before the pandemic, the Bipartisan Policy Center traditionally hosted “salon dinners,” gatherings of about 25 people in targeted cities, as part of its fundraising strategy. The group replicated the series online and is getting such good results that it plans to continue the approach, Williams says. Virtual dinners raise a similar amount but cost much less to host while enabling the center to engage far-flung donors in a personalized way.

### **Foster Personal Connections With Supporters**

“High-touch stewardship” has always been integral to fundraising at Washington

Performing Arts, Racheva says, but the group intensified this focus in recent years.

Racheva’s team never stopped going into the office during Covid, even if only one at a time, to hand-sign acknowledgment letters and include a personal note. “I just don’t think that you can overestimate how meaningful that is to donors, and folks have called that out to us,” she says.

The organization also found ways to offer virtual versions of popular donor benefits. For example, the group historically gave donors who sponsored performances a chance to meet artists after shows. In 2021, when WPA took its performance season online, they created a virtual backstage pass that connected donors with artists online in the week following an event.

Donors loved it, Racheva says. The online experience created a much more meaningful and intimate connection than a handshake right after a show, when artists are often exhausted and distracted. So, the group kept this virtual benefit even as in-person performances resumed and plans to continue offering it.

Racheva stresses the importance of following up with donors after an event. Block off an hour or two the next day to email each person with whom you interacted to reinforce that personal connection, she suggests.

Racheva also recommends setting aside time each month to write a letter to a donor. In one case, this correspondence blossomed into a pen-pal relationship with an older donor who hadn’t been to a performance in a few years. Nonprofits of any size can use this kind of personal touch, she says, and it lets donors feel seen as individuals. “That’s got to be happening in between the formalized appeals that are going to the masses,” she says.

*“How to Manage Donors and Fundraisers in a Hybrid World” was produced by Chronicle Intelligence. Please contact [CI@chronicle.com](mailto:CI@chronicle.com) with questions or comments.*