

The sky is falling

Jo Burrows provides case study evidence that charities can, and should, carry on their usual fundraising programs in the face of wider disaster fundraising activities.

The scenario. You're just about to mail your tax time donor renewal appeal when a flood of biblical proportions hits your region and sweeps everything before it.

Your CEO calls you in and you debate the merits of going ahead with the mailing despite all the disaster fundraising going on around you. What do you do?

Some organisations cancel scheduled appeals because of a fear of low response rates and attracting the ire of donors for being unsympathetic to other, seemingly more urgent needs. However, before canceling, there are a number of questions you should ask:

- Can we afford to miss out on the income from our appeal?
- Are any of our donors directly affected i.e. living in the area?
- Is delaying our appeal an option? If so, for how long?

Generally, an organisation has to continue to provide the services and programs it was set up to provide, and so it must continue to fundraise.

The following case studies are charity clients that chose to go ahead with scheduled appeals to support their mission despite massive donor interest focused on giving to major disaster relief efforts.

Asian Tsunami - December 26, 2004

A national Australian health charity was due to mail a major donor renewal and acquisition (100,000 units) campaign in early January 2005. The CEO was very concerned about the impact that Tsunami fundraising might have on response rates to their appeal. After considering the impact of not mailing, the appeal proceeded to existing donors - two weeks later than was planned. The resulting response rate was higher than the same

time the previous year.

When it came to the acquisition component, the concern was: could new donors be acquired despite people supporting various Tsunami appeals, and would the organisation's reputation be damaged by asking for support at that time? Again, the appeal was delayed until early February and the response rate was over 3%.

Victorian Bushfires- January 2009

Charity A- national health disease nonprofit

Acquisition - the campaign was mailed a few days before the bushfires struck. The response dropped off immediately, but after three months the response rate was at 2.1% versus the usual 2.8%.

The head of the charity said that it was still worthwhile doing the campaign and would mail again if faced with the same situation.

Donor renewal - the decision was made to delay mailing the appeal by two weeks. The response rate was outstanding (19%) and exceeded all previous mailings. No complaints from donors were received. Receipt letters acknowledged that donors had made a contribution during the bushfire period.

Charity B- national cancer organisation

Acquisition - this was about to lodge but the decision was made to delay by two weeks. Prospects in the bushfire region were removed from the mailing. The response rate was equal to previous acquisition results.

Donor renewal (100,000+ units) - again it was decided to delay the appeal by two weeks. The bushfires were not mentioned in the letter (but were acknowledged in donation receipts). The appeal enjoyed a 19% response rate - significant income would have been missed if the appeal had not proceeded. This result is on par with subsequent mailings during the same period.

Christchurch Earthquake - September 2010

A health disease charity was about to send an acquisition mailing to 150,000 people across New Zealand when the earthquake struck. The mailing went ahead as planned with the exception of mail destined for Christchurch which was removed (and subsequently mailed a month later). The main mailing pulled a response rate of over 2.4% - similar to previous results. The delayed Christchurch segment got a response of over 3%!

Christchurch Earthquake - February 22, 2011

A national health disease nonprofit in New Zealand was due to lodge a 50,000 donor renewal mailing on February 28. This was put on hold and daily conversations with the CEO were held to decide the best time to proceed.

Once public sentiment reached the point where people started to say, "What can we do- life has to go on," we decided to hit the go button. On March 7 the mailing was lodged minus 4,500 donors in

Christchurch. Results to date (as at March 28) show that the response rate is at the same level as last year's campaign (and on budget), however the average gift is slightly higher than the previous two to three appeals.

A note on average gift

Apart from response rate, the other key measure of success of direct mail is the size of the average gift. For the campaigns mentioned above, the average gift was on par with other similar campaigns done at similar times of the year in the past (and in the future), i.e. there was no drop off in the level of giving by donors.

There are three key reasons why charities don't suffer a decline in response rate nor receive any significant damage to their reputation when they try to fundraise during times of disaster:

- 1. Donors know and understand that your organisation has to continue operating.**
- 2. Some charities get nervous and fearful and decide to cancel their scheduled fundraising programs as they believe that donors will be offended. This results in fewer charities asking for support for a period of time. Some organisations may even enjoy a lift in response rate because of the reduced competition.**
- 3. A disaster helps to create a favorable climate for caring and giving.**

Experience shows that donors do not stop supporting their usual causes during disasters; they just expand their giving to support the new need. However, consider the people directly affected and withhold contact if you have a choice.

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