



Planned Giving Marketing and the Novel Coronavirus

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The novel coronavirus, or COVID-19, is spreading like wildfire around the globe, unsettling the stock market and causing operational disruptions to industries of every description. High schools and colleges are sending students home for the remainder of the term. Social distancing and self-quarantine are being applied by health officials. Millions of Americans are living in uncertainty and fear of what will come next.

So... Is now a good time to send that next direct mail postcard on CGAs or QCDs? Yes!

In business, if travel is curtailed and supply chains are interrupted and you can't get your products to market, what do you do? You stop marketing.

In times of crisis, for-profits must rethink their strategy in order to be able to keep their heads above water and maintain profitability against a backdrop of budget cuts and hiring freezes if the economy goes into recession. For-profit marketers will pull back on marketing until products are accessible again. But rarely will they stop entirely. Even marketers that live in a transactional world know that consistent marketing is best for their brands and their bottom lines in the long term. But in the non-profit world, the services we provide generally continue in times of crisis. In fact, for some charities a time of crisis is when they are needed most.

So for planned giving marketing, it's business as usual? Not necessarily.

Marketing for your planned giving program can consist of digital, direct mail, events, and face-to-face meetings. With our donors living in uncertainty and fear, your management team should discuss your marketing plan and examine if changes are required during this crisis.

Face-to-Face Meetings

Face-to-face personal cultivation between you and your donor is the most effective marketing you can do. It's relationship-building and although it may start through other marketing, it's the personal meeting that gives you direct insight into the interests of your donor. It's the personal

sharing that will help you connect your donor with the gift vehicle that best suits their needs and wants. Personal donor contact and visits should be a priority for your program.

However, it might not make sense at this time to jump on a plane to talk to an 80-year-old donor.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) considers people over age 60 to be at risk for serious illness from COVID-19, with much older people at much higher risk.

So, should you make that trip? This must be a case-by-case decision for each organization based on factors such as age of donor, method of transportation, venue for your meeting, and the intent of the donor. Perhaps you continue to meet with younger donors, but not with those older donors at risk. Or, after obtaining the donor's consent, you go to visits within driving distance, but don't meet with anyone if a train or plane is required. A decision needs to be made that takes into account the best interests of the donor and the planned giving officer. AND if a donor you are working with is adamant to see you? That's a tough choice, but if you think an in-person visit would put the donor at unacceptable risk, politely decline and offer alternatives. Nothing prevents you from having those same conversations over the phone or via FaceTime or Skype. It's not the same as an in-person visit, but it still shows you care. These are alternatives that need to be considered more today than ever before.

Events

Unfortunately, seminars, conferences, and events of all shapes and sizes are being canceled and postponed around the globe to prevent the spread of the COVID-19. Sporting events, concerts, town hall meetings, and even the famous South by Southwest annual media festival in Austin, Texas. Both public and private gatherings are being cancelled. Any gathering which involves a large group of people, many of them elderly, convening in tightly enclosed space is a risk to the participants. Canceling events must also be a case-by-case determination for each organization. That being said, include in your decision-making the likelihood that your event will not draw much of a crowd until the COVID-19 pandemic is under control.

Direct Mail and Email

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. It's the personal nature of the message that is the key.

And it's no different during a crisis.

Whether 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 via images. Email can be the quickest and most cost-effective way to convey your planned giving message. If your email is well-written, personal, and a benefit to your donors, then your email channel will build relationships faster and cheaper than anything else.

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 media to reach your donors can have a dramatic effect on the success of the overall campaign.

Yes, I know all that, but do I send a planned giving marketing piece now or wait?

Wait for what?

Donors look to the institutions they support for education, guidance, and leadership. What better time to continue and deepen your relationship with them than in a time of anxiety? Many donors may be in self-induced isolation and afraid of this new virus. They need to hear your voice, whether by phone or via other channels. Not to mention they are a captive audience and are probably looking for something to read that is of benefit to them.

Remember, with planned giving marketing you should be investing time and resources into a relationship with your donors. Educate them and build awareness of your program so when they are ready, they reach out to you. You cannot force that. The best direct mail piece cannot create that interest. As you know, it's often a lifestyle change that causes donors to finally reach out about their legacy, not a marketing piece. Yet, it is those mailings that regularly reaffirm the relationship between your organization and your donors and ensure that relationship is strong when the time is right for a donor to take action. They let the donor know, "We are here when you need us, and in this mailing/email is something you may find of interest."

Perhaps that right time is now?

Smart planned giving marketing that enhances your relationship should not be seen as transactional. It is not focused on closing one gift or making one conversion. Instead, it's all about developing a long-term, strong relationship with your organization's donors. This, in turn, encourages repeat gifts and legacy building.

This crisis will pass and when it does legacies will still need to be created. Donors may stop giving for a while, but don't stop educating and informing them of the benefits planned giving may bring to them and your institution. If anything, there is an argument to be made that you should increase your planned giving marketing now to make up for the events and meetings you forgo due to COVID-19.

Lastly, as to messaging, it can be dangerous to change your message to include reference to the COVID-19 virus. The news cycle has been dominated by discussion and speculation about what is next, and donors don't want to read about it in your marketing unless your organization's mission includes addressing a specific aspect of the COVID-19 pandemic. There is so much uncertainty and anxiety about the virus that mentioning it may overwhelm your planned giving message, or worse, it may be seen as cynical. You also don't want to be perceived as trying to profit from a crisis.

A Final Note

The COVID-19 situation is very fluid. New information and guidelines are being posted by the CDC on a regular basis. Please check with them often. Depending on how the COVID-19 situation proceeds, PG Calc may soon have more (or perhaps all) of our staff working remotely, but we will continue to offer all of our software and services and would be very pleased to help you be successful with your planned giving marketing no matter what happens in the coming weeks and months.