

Silver Linings Fundraising: Emphasizing what works in a challenging political environment

There's no doubt that today's political environment is challenging for all marginalized communities, including the LGBT community. If there's any silver lining, it's that many individuals are stepping up philanthropic support for the causes they care about, especially those they feel are under threat; and others are engaging as donors, volunteers and advocates for the first time. **This series begins to address:**

- **How LGBT-focused organizations can take advantage of this environment to maximize fundraising**
- **How you can convert those efforts into long-term relationships that help sustain your work**

For each of the seven topics linked below, we provide background information on what you should know as well as ideas, strategies, and links to resources to put that knowledge into action. The series includes the following posts:

Be prepared: How can you position your organization to move fundraising forward when time is of the essence?

- **Give new meaning to “the first 100 days:”** What steps should you take to make a new donor feel welcome immediately after they've made a gift?
- **Moving donors up the ladder of engagement:** What should you be doing to engage your best prospects—your current donors?
- **Win back lapsed donors:** What are the best strategies for bringing past donors back into the fold?
- **Tread cautiously on acquisition:** Working to attract new donors can be a costly endeavor. When is it worth it for your organization, and how can you make the most of an investment in acquisition?
- **Messaging matters:** How can you craft donor communications that motivate and move your supporters?
- **Integrating digital advocacy and fundraising:** How can you mobilize your social media audience and begin to turn likes into philanthropic relationships?
- **Just ask:** At the end of the day, what can you do to maintain the momentum and keep the focus on fundraising for your organization?

This series offers lessons from The LGBT Giving Project and other research, best practice recommendations, and tools you can use today to find your silver lining for fundraising in this challenging political environment. The LGBT Giving Project is a national effort to increase giving from LGBT individuals to LGBT causes across the country. This work has been generously funded by Evelyn & Walter Haas, Jr. Fund, Horizons Foundation, Kevin J. Mossier Foundation, Movement Advancement Project, Pride Foundation, Wellspring Philanthropic Fund, and an anonymous donor.

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BE PREPARED

It's a fact: in recent months, attacks on the rights and dignity of LGBT people have escalated across the nation. Federal administrative actions have undermined the last decade's hard-won victories. The Department of Justice has stopped trying to protect transgender kids from discrimination, and President Trump has tweeted that he wants to ban transgender individuals from military service. The new Supreme Court Justice has already signaled his willingness to erode the court's historic 2015 marriage equality ruling. And, more than half the states have been considering measures to allow discrimination against LGBT people and same-sex families or to overturn local civil rights protections. But there's another fact: this painful and profoundly challenging environment also offers **an opportunity**.

Things to Know:

- New controversies, federal and state legislation proposals, political appointments and other headline-worthy developments can spur donors to give.
- Following the 2016 election, Planned Parenthood received 80,000 donations in three days, and the ACLU received 120,000 donations—\$7.2 million—within five days.
- But today's quickly changing political landscape and news cycle means donors' attention may shift quickly. You need to ensure your organization is poised to respond.

Things to Do:

- **Avoid the last-minute scramble to send an urgent appeal.** Before news breaks, have a plan. When an uncertain political decision looms, prepare two versions of your appeals so that as soon as you know the outcome, you can hit "send" or "post."
- **Update your list:** Update your digital contacts with an appending service. Reduce undeliverable mail by sending your mail list through the National Change of Address file.
- **Send urgent updates via email and through social media** to get in front of your supporters ASAP.
- **Make sure it's easy for prospects who care about your issue to find you.** Optimize your keywords for online searches, and use a [Google Adwords](#) grant to run in-kind text ads on Google Search for free.

Not only do we need to be vigilant—we need to invite people to invest in our work in a bigger way, and do it ASAP in response to new attacks on the LGBT community. Stay tuned for our next post on how to make sure you're helping your new supporters feel welcome and valued— and help them stick with you.

GIVE NEW MEANING TO "THE FIRST 100 DAYS"

Our last post highlighted the politically challenging environment the LGBT community is in, and the opportunity to seize this moment to raise funds critically needed for our work. This post focuses on how to improve the chances that donors will stick with you.

Things to know:

- Only two out of 10 first-time donors continue to give versus six out of 10 existing donors, making the average donor retention rate 46 percent.

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- Acquiring new donors is significantly more expensive than keeping supporters who are already investing in your organization.
- In a political environment when many individuals may be supporting several causes for the first time, it's more important than ever to stand out as a responsive, grateful organization worthy of their investment.

Things to do:

- Make a “First 100 Days” plan for new donors. See the example below and right-size it for your organization.
- Create and follow “rules of engagement”—define levels of personalization based on cumulative annual gift size: who gets a personal thank-you call, or a hand-written thank-you note, versus a mail-merged acknowledgement with an electronic signature?
- Invite donors to engage with your organization in ways other than donating. Invite them to events. Take them on a tour. Ask for their help in your office.

EXAMPLE FIRST 100 DAYS PLAN	
When	Action
Day of gift	<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Online gifts conclude with a thank-you landing page (encourage donors to share their support on social media) and email acknowledgment.
Within three business days	<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Mailed acknowledgement letter and tax receipt.○ If possible, acknowledge new supporters especially.○ Depending on gift size, consider personal hand-written notes or thank-you letters.
Within two weeks	<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ New donor welcome packet (via email or mail) with program overview, upcoming events, volunteer opportunities, newsletter, a sticker or other simple “gift” if appropriate.○ Invite to follow you on social media channels.○ Consider including a survey (preferred contact method, interests, etc.).
Within two weeks	<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Thank-you call (by board, staff member or volunteer) for all gifts over a certain amount (such as \$250).
Within first two months	<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Invitation to existing event (such as annual fundraiser or tour), if applicable given timing.
Within 60–100 days	<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Second ask reiterating gratitude for first gift and describing its impact, and encouraging a new gift; invite to sign up for monthly giving program.

Focusing on new donor retention makes strategic and financial sense, and in these challenging political times, it's more important than ever. In our next post, we'll touch on how to more deeply engage donors over time.

MOVING DONORS UP THE LADDER OF ENGAGEMENT

Our last post in this series focused on retaining new donors. Now is also the time to specifically ask for increased support from your existing donors. The post-election political environment is nothing if not uncertain, especially for those in marginalized communities. The Southern Poverty Law Center documented 867 “hate incidents” in just 10 days after the election, including attacks targeting the LGBT

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community. In response, people—including your donors—want to do something to make a positive impact. These donors are already investing in you; help them engage in bigger ways.

Things to know:

- Across the nonprofit sector, organizations saw 41 percent of their retained donors make larger gifts in 2015.
- One organization in The LGBT Giving Project saw upgrade rates of 50 percent in its post-election appeal in 2016, suggesting that donors supporting LGBT causes may be especially primed to give more now. They want to feel acknowledged and reminded that you need their support now more than ever.

Things to do:

- Invest in wealth screening or prospect research, or look at subsets of donors (such as those who've given consistently big gifts over three years or more, or those whose annual gift doubled year-over-year) to develop a target list of donors who can be engaged more deeply. Set in-person meetings between now and end of the year.
- Refresh or launch giving circle/club levels with tangible and intangible benefits, and encourage long-time donors to reach the next tier. See the example below and right-size it for your organization.
- In appeals, make explicit reference to the need for increased support by explaining the urgency of the current landscape for LGBT individuals, then add custom merged fields to ask for a specific, increased gift from your repeat donors.
- Highlight monthly giving as a way to provide increased, sustained support for those your organization serves.
- Ask your board or a key donor to seed a giving challenge to match all upgraded gifts up to a certain amount.

EXAMPLE GIVING CLUB LEVELS AND BENEFITS	
Dollar Level	Recognition and Benefits
\$250	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Listed as giving club member in annual report.• Receives newsletter and annual report.
\$500	All of the above, plus: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Invited to join semi-annual conference call or Google hangout with organization's leadership to hear updates on recent news and work.
\$1,000	All of the above, plus: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Invited to annual donor recognition event. OR <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Invited to a VIP reception following a program or event.
\$2,500	All of the above, plus: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Invited for a one-on-one breakfast or lunch with organization's leadership. OR <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Invited for an individualized facility tour (such as for a community center).

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Focusing on donor upgrading makes strategic and financial sense, and in these challenging political times it's more important than ever. In our next post, we'll explore ways to win back lapsed donors.

WIN BACK LAPSED DONORS

It's critical to focus on donor retention, as discussed in our prior posts. Still, most of your donors will not renew their gift year-over-year. Can you leverage the current political environment as an opportunity to reach out, acknowledge past support, and reiterate the importance their support to those your organization serves? We certainly think so!

Things to know:

- The LGBT Giving Project research showed most LGBT donors reported that they stopped giving to LGBT causes because they perceived that the organization was poorly run or seemed ineffective, or made requests to donate too often.
- The LGBT Giving Project testing showed that lapsed donors responded on par with current donors and gave high average gifts—proving to be profitable segments to engage. By comparison, trying to solicit brand-new donors yielded low response rates and average gifts.

Things to do:

- Make your case. Speak to the donor's core values and connection to your mission. Demonstrate your impact and show how effective and financially responsible your organization is.
- Personalize an invitation to renew. It's hard to convince donors they were missed if you don't recognize them.
- Express your gratitude quickly and acknowledge their return with personal notes or thank-you calls. See the example thank-you call script below and adapt it for your organization.
- Balance donation requests with other forms of communication. In a win-back program, ensure that you are also reaching out to keep your lapsed donor up to date on what's at risk in today's political environment and what your organization is doing about it—without asking for a gift every time.
- Drop past donors who have stopped engaging with the organization for multiple years—you'll avoid the appearance of inefficiency.

SAMPLE THANK-YOU CALL SCRIPT

EXAMPLE WIN-BACK THANK-YOU CALL SCRIPT	
Introduction and establish purpose of call	Hello, [DONOR FIRST NAME]. My name is [CALLER NAME], and I am [ROLE] at [ORGANIZATION]. I am calling today to thank you for your recent gift. I'd love to share a little more with you about the impact your gift is already making. Is this a good time to talk for a just a couple of minutes?
Demonstrate impact of gift	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>If "yes" to prior question:</i> Great! We truly appreciate your support, as our donors are a crucial part of [BRIEFLY DESCRIBE ORGANIZATION'S IMPACT]. Thanks to gifts like yours so far this year, we have been able to [PROVIDE ONE OR TWO EXAMPLES OF YOUR MISSION IN ACTION].• <i>If "no" to prior question:</i> Not to worry. Thank you for your time today, and thank you for making such a meaningful gift at a truly important time for the LGBT community. If you'd like to learn more about our work, please feel free to

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	visit our website [WEBSITE]. Thanks again, and have a great day. <i>[End call.]</i>
Understand donor's motivation	We know that you've been a supporter of [ORGANIZATION]'s work in the past, and we're so grateful that you've decided to renew your commitment. As I'm sure you can imagine, donor support is especially important right now. What was it that motivated you to want to give now? <i>[Discuss.]</i>
Connect and engage (optional)	<p><i>[If the donor seems interested in the conversation and not rushed to get off the phone, ask questions that can help you identify opportunities for the donor to learn more about your work. Don't ask for anything (such as a volunteer commitment), but focus instead on what you can provide the donor (such as additional information or invitations to upcoming free events). Ask one of the following questions or another similar question that fits for your organization:]</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It sounds like [MOTIVATING FACTOR IN MAKING A GIFT] is important to you. Have you heard about our [RELEVANT PROGRAMS OR SERVICES]? <i>[Discuss, offer to send more information or invite to a relevant upcoming program or event.]</i> • We want to be responsive to how our donors prefer to be informed about our work. Are there particular programs or services that you are interested in learning more about? <i>[Discuss, offer to send more information or invite to a relevant upcoming program or event.]</i>
If you get voicemail	<p><i>[Decide ahead of time whether you want callers to leave voicemail messages for donors, recognizing that you do not want to inadvertently out anyone. Determine whether callers might only leave messages in certain circumstances, such as when the voicemail is clearly an individual's voicemail box and not a home landline or office number. If you are leaving a message, keep it short and simple, such as:]</i></p> <p>Hello, [DONOR FIRST NAME]. My name is [CALLER NAME], and I am [ROLE] at [ORGANIZATION]. I am calling today to thank you for your past support. Donors like you make it possible for us to [BRIEFLY DESCRIBE MISSION IN ACTION], and we're grateful to be able to call you a supporter. Thank you again, and have a great day.</p>

Winning back lapsed donors can be one of the best returns on investment in expanding your base—much more so than trying to acquire new donors, which we'll address in our next post.

TREAD CAUTIOUSLY ON ACQUISITION

Our last post focused on winning back lapsed donors. But in the aftermath of the election, many organizations are seeing new donors come in the door without being directly solicited. Does that mean you should invest in acquiring new donors? Yes, because you'll always need new supporters ... but do so strategically.

Things to know:

- Almost all acquisition campaigns will require you to spend more money than you make in that first campaign.

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- The LGBT Giving Project research showed that LGBT prospects (in comparison to donors) have significantly lower income/wealth and are less likely to donate (even to an LGBT-focused organization); be active/engaged in the community; and consider their sexual orientation or gender identity to be important in making decisions about where to give.

Things to do:

- Focus on building your base of supporters, even if they're not yet donors. Engage new stakeholders through social media and activism, or event attendance. The question isn't about the cost of gaining an activist or a social media follower, but how you can make them valuable for the organization. Many of these people will become donors if solicited effectively.
- Leverage high-profile moments for low-cost acquisition. Participate in Give OUT Day, Giving Tuesday, and other public, collaborative fundraising days. These can be promoted with little cost via your website, email, and social media. Check out the [Giving Tuesday Toolkit](#) for steps for using crowdfunding, social media, and events like Giving Tuesday and Give OUT Day.
- Encourage your supporters to host their own events on your organization's behalf, or launch a crowdfunding project to benefit your programs that your supporters can easily promote.

Paid acquisition is a long-term investment. The hope, of course, is that you will invest in bringing a new donor in the door, and that they'll give again if they receive the TLC they deserve. In our next post, we'll explore the messages most likely to inspire giving.

MESSAGING MATTERS

In past posts, we've talked about acquiring new donors, winning back lapsed donors, and upgrading and retaining current donors. But how do you talk to them in a way that inspires giving? With the threats to LGBT people's rights—legally and culturally—in the current political landscape, people want to do something and be part of a movement, and supporting LGBT causes is at the nexus of many movements.

Things to know:

- The LGBT Giving Project tested various message frames, tones and donor archetypes. What made the most difference was making a strong, timely case that calls out increased threats and shows how the organization offers solutions. Framing has become less important in a swiftly-changing landscape with a highly activated base.
- Another study showed a significant increase in response by calling out direct threats to mission because of election outcomes or current political shifts. One-third of the organizations studied referenced the election generally in appeals, and these saw an average 12 percent improvement in revenue year over year. The organizations that called out direct threats to their organization's mission because of election results averaged a 103 percent increase.

Things to do:

Tell your story as emotionally as you can, in the context of today's political threats and challenges. Show that your organization is rapidly responding to whatever's being thrown your way right now—and that you've been there for the long haul, and will be until you achieve your mission.

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- Make it urgent. Tap into people’s acute desire to do something by showing that donating to your organization is playing a part in the movement. Where authentic, add a deadline as a reason to give now (e.g., time is running out on a legislative battle, or a matching gift challenge is ending soon).
- Demonstrate impact. Illustrate the shared vision you want to achieve (e.g., “with your gift, you send a message that you stand for LGBT equality”). Share personal stories about what people are up against, how it affects their lives, and what your organization is doing to make progress or prevent setbacks.
- Show how your organization collaborates and leads at the nexus of many movements: civil rights, equality, justice, and also health, youth homelessness, suicide and violence, racial equity, immigrant rights and economic justice. As a queer-led organization dedicated to working against oppression, you can become the institution to depend on in uncertain times.

Emotional, urgent, compelling messaging that demonstrates the impact of a donor’s gift can inspire increased giving and deeper engagement—especially so in a political climate where LGBT people’s rights are being threatened and attacked daily. In our next and final post in this series, we’ll share one simple tip that can make a dramatic difference in your funding.

INTEGRATING DIGITAL ADVOCACY/ACTION AND FUNDRAISING

In our prior post, we talked about talking to donors in a way that inspires giving. But if you are only asking for donations, you’re leaving money on the table. By integrating digital advocacy/action-oriented communications and appeals, you can learn more about your donors and what motivates them, raise more money, and deliver real, measurable victories for the LGBT movement.

Things to Know:

- Donors will take action, and those who have taken action will donate. It’s a myth that these are mutually exclusive groups, but many organizations manage their donor and advocate lists separately. Donors will often want to do something besides make a gift, and those who’ve taken action are your most likely targets for donor acquisition. In one LGBT Giving Project test, those who had taken action but had not yet donated responded to an appeal with an average gift that was three times higher than that of respondents from a rented mailing list.
- Online campaigns have shown the potential to double giving response rates when connecting a fundraising ask with an advocacy initiative¹.
- Integrated campaigns allow you to get more value from the same amount of work. Rather than starting every digital communication with a blank slate, you can re-purpose language and images across communications. This makes it easier on your staff and also offers a consistent reinforcement of your message to your supporters.

Things to Do:

¹ https://www.blackbaud.com/files/resources/downloads/WhitePaper_ConnectingOnlineAdvocacyAndFundraising.pdf

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- Collaborate across your organization. Agree on mutually beneficial goals (donations, actions, shares, etc.) and integrate your list (combine lists for volunteers, advocates, event attendees, donors, pledgers, downloaders, sharers, etc.) Create an organization-wide, stakeholder-centric “editorial calendar” to map out the stories your stakeholders will hear from you over the course of the year.
- Qualify your leads. Look for engagement that goes beyond a passive follow or like. Rather than focusing on getting as many new names on your list as possible, focus on authentically engaging stakeholders. This might mean asking them to read a bit more deeply about your issue or to take a bolder action (e.g., calling a legislator versus signing a petition). You might get a lower response rate, but you’ll get new stakeholders who are more likely to become your champion supporters.
- Have a “campaign” state of mind. Rather than sending one-off emails for every communication, organize relevant, themed campaigns (e.g., rapid response needed for current political climate, HIV/AIDS prevention, LGBT youth, trans inclusion and advocacy, specific legislative battles) that encompass all your stakeholder outreach. The timing for these campaigns can likely align with what you’re already doing (year-end, Pride month, legislative session, etc.). Deliver a campaign that engages them further on the issue: take a quiz or poll, complete an advocacy action, respond to an appeal, share a social media post, etc. Telegraph each communication across channels (email, targeted direct mail, social/mobile, phone calls, website home page and landing pages). When this campaign is running, your stakeholders shouldn’t be able to miss it!

Making it quick, easy and convenient for your stakeholders to engage with your organization – in many ways, across many channels – is a clear path to increasing the funding that’s so critically needed in this challenging political environment. Start the journey today. And in our next and final post in this series, we’ll share one simple tip that can make a dramatic difference in your funding.

JUST ASK!

This blog series has covered the importance of being prepared in a quickly shifting political environment; how to make the most of new donor relationships; how to move donors up the ladder of engagement; how to win back lapsed donors; a caution on investing in acquiring new donors; and messaging to members of the LGBT movement. But if you take nothing else away from this series, know that organizations that don’t ask for support are those that see a decline in funding.

Things to know:

- In both the Reagan-era political turmoil and in the 2008 financial crisis, organizations that reported the biggest decline in income were the ones that reduced their fundraising activities.
- In LGBT Giving Project testing, there was little evidence that “too many” appeals can hurt. Results held steady from appeal to appeal whether the group sent one mail appeal or six email blasts (in fact, for some groups, open email rates increased after multiple appeals).
- When the political sands are shifting on a day-to-day basis, it can seem easier to put development efforts on autopilot or, worse yet, delay your appeals. This means less revenue and a donor base that might infer that you’re not taking action that matters to them or that you don’t need their gift.

Things to do:

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- Don't stop! Don't stop communicating, don't stop asking, and don't stop investing in growing your base.
- Be confident. In tumultuous times like this when the LGBT community is under attack, your organization is a proven and indispensable resource. Donors need you to help address today's uncertain landscape as much as you need their investment to do the work. Help fulfill their needs by giving them an opportunity to invest with you, in a big way.
- Don't overthink it—especially at the cost of delaying an ask.

We hope these tips and tools have built momentum for your organization to increase donor giving and engagement!