

Opinion

Internet Fundraising: A Culture Shift?

Not long ago, at least not long enough to warrant the Grimm phrase, “Once upon a time,” decisions confronting middle class donors like me were pretty simple. We just selected a few donation recipients worthy of support at a level we could afford. We gave to a church, perhaps, or maybe an alma mater, or maybe a political candidate we knew. Then, we waited for the appeals by mail to trickle in over the first half of the year, building to a torrent toward New Year’s Eve. Each piece of bulk mail outlined the need to save somebody or something (children, animals, land, water, etc.). Usually the “ask” amount was less than \$100, and it sometimes masqueraded as an annual membership fee, or a reimbursement for the address labels on which our names were misspelled, or to qualify us for a free gift we didn’t really want. But the charitable organizations knew that it cost them a pile of bulk rate stamps to find out if we were willing to give anything, which enforced a modicum of restraint in fundraising efforts.

Fast-forward to the Internet age. Well, actually, it was only a few years forward. It took way less than a generation. The Nigerian bank proposition e-mail proved an extraordinary fundraising tool, costing nothing to send. Of course, it was founded on greed rather than any eleemosynary motivation, but it showed politicians the yellow brick Internet road. At first,

I thought that the daily inbox clog was a result of the coming election, “Help us reach our goal of \$75,000 by midnight tonight,” “An anonymous donor has pledged to match each dollar we receive by October 31,” “We can’t let these scurrilous lies go unanswered on television.” But the elections are finished, and my inbox is no less cluttered. Now the appeals are around specific pieces of legislation, “Sign our petition to let Sen. Snodgrass know he shouldn’t cave in to the special-interest lobbyists.” At the end of the message, or as a follow-up to those who signed the petition, was a call for donations, “To help us bring this message to millions more of your fellow Americans . . .”

Through all of this, I have noted a few subtle shifts in the political culture, and it affects the entire spectrum, from ultraconservative to wild-eyed liberal. First, political fundraising tries to ignite passion in potential donors. Instead of “Save the children,” it’s become “Save the Bush tax cuts.” Second, the message is competitive and polarizing, “The other side has \$2 million in its coffers; please help us to level the playing field.” (An unintended consequence may be the loss of civility in government that was the subject of an earlier Opinion.¹) And finally, the playing field has expanded to include the entire nation. The old saw “All politics is local” may be losing its validity as donations are requested to help

national Democratic or Republican Congressional Committees target the funds to local races they deem critical. I don’t know about you, but I resent big money coming from out of my state to buy media to sway voters in my local elections.

So, I’ve decided to limit my political giving to OphthPAC, my state PAC and local candidates I support, and mark the rest of the appeals as junk mail. At least until I can reminisce to my grandchildren, “Once upon a time . . .”

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