

Nonprofit donors have more options for giving

BY SARAH MASON

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When it's time to bring in cash for a charity, nonprofits don't up the ante on production or marketing of their merchandise in order to put their numbers in the black. Without a product to vend, nonprofits instead turn to the power of fund raising – baking pies, washing cars and calling hundreds of numbers.

While these may be traditional ways to drum up money for a cause, such methods tend to be labor intensive for both the charity and for donors, said Aly Burroughs, the corporate marketing director for the American Heart Association's Start! Tarrant County Heart Walk.

To save time and precious dollars, nonprofits are using technology to tug on the heart and purse strings of donors.

“We have to do something to raise money, but something that doesn't take time away from [donors'] jobs,” Burroughs said. “Most of our clients are hospitals; we want them out there taking care of people, not making brownies for a bake sale.”

For the Start! Tarrant County Heart Walk, an online fund-raising campaign utilizes donors' social networks. Registered participants can personalize a Web page where they can appeal to friends and family for donations, keep track of money raised and send mass e-mails to hundreds of contacts at a time.

This method, which creates personalized social groups of donors, is extremely effective, Burroughs said. Within a 20-minute conversation, Burroughs' site and e-mails generated \$100, she said.

“Through this new vehicle we can increase our contact base exponentially and build upon our grass root effort,” said Mark Denzin, senior vice president and chief development officer of United Cerebral Palsy of Greater DFW.

Because money is so tight for nonprofit agencies, crossing the threshold to online fund raising – with all the overhead and upkeep costs – has been difficult for many organizations, Denzin said.

This year's Life Without Limits Run Walk And Roll marked the first online fund-raising campaign for the Dallas-Fort Worth UCP, Denzin said.

Before UCP could get the campaign off the ground, money had to be spent to purchase services from a software company that hosts and organizes the fund-raising site, online account security services were purchased to protect donors' identities and UCP had to train some staff members to use and maintain the site.

“Online fund raising for the nonprofit sector tends to lag behind about five years or more, due to the costs,” Denzin said. “Nonprofits have to be very conscientious about upstart costs.”

Though UCP was “pleasantly surprised” by its first online campaign, the cost of starting and maintaining the online fundraiser will take years before it starts to pay for itself.

Both Denzin and Burroughs agree they will not cut traditional fund-raising methods for fear of alienating long-time donors. One of the most important elements for charities to keep in mind is to maintain a personal feel while raising funds, Denzin said. While the Internet provides a forum for groups of donors to communicate, UCP staff still plans to do its part by sending out postcards and newsletters, Denzin said.

Another way some nonprofits are using technology to illustrate their message and drum up funding is through video. Within the past few years, prices of movie making equipment such as sound mixers and editing devices have gone down, making movie magic affordable and accessible to nonprofits, said Middlin' Creative Film and Video owner John Reynolds.

"The tools at my disposal are so much less expensive, I can make a Hollywood looking production that will fit to [any] budget," said Reynolds, who directs and produces all Middlin's products.

Not only does the lower cost of equipment make video a viable option for nonprofit marketing, but the lower cost to reproduce a DVD means charities can hand out thousands while only paying a few cents apiece.

Such videos can be handed out at conferences, used on television commercials and added to nonprofit Web sites, potentially stirring up many viewers and donors.

"You could read a paragraph, but it's so much more compelling to watch a four- to five-minute video," Reynolds said. "My method is something new that helps nonprofits break away from a flat corporate image."

Though the cost may range between \$5,000 and \$7,000, Reynolds said a quality nonprofit video can be used throughout the years, as the human success stories he often portrays are timeless.

When competing for donor attention, this type of marketing could help bring a charity into the limelight, he said.

"In the past 10 years, nonprofits have just exploded – everybody has a nonprofit," Reynolds said. "While it does cost something to do this, it takes

these already great nonprofits and puts them head and shoulders over everybody else."