

Raising Money in December: *Some Myths & Some Methods*

BY KIM KLEIN



There is a popular myth in fundraising circles that December is a great time to raise money and that people give away more, if not most, of the money they are going to donate in a year during this last month. Grassroots groups will meet in October or November to discuss how to "take advantage" of the winter holidays, often emerging frustrated because they haven't come up with anything brilliant.

Like most myths, the myth of December giving has some elements of truth. December is a great month to raise money. In this way, it is strikingly similar to the other eleven months of the year.

Some people do give away most of the money they will donate in a year in December. Sometimes these are very wealthy people who are waiting to see how the stock market has done and which stocks they should donate to get the best tax advantage. Self-employed people with incomes that vary widely from month to month may also wait until year's end to get a clear sense of their financial picture.

However, there are also some serious fallacies to the myth of December as the best fundraising month. To counter these fallacies, here are some facts:

December is actually a very competitive month to raise money, particularly among social service agencies, as the needs of the poor, homeless, and hungry tend to be highlighted at this time of year. December fundraising also competes with the consumer gift-buying frenzy for the religious and cultural holidays that fall during this month.

For every person who waits until the holidays to make their major giving decisions, including wealthy people, many more have already given away all that they are going to give. In fact, few people of any income bracket or level of giving make all their charitable gifts in any one time period. Many people give away money as they are asked for it and as they have it. People who are thoughtful and

systematic about giving often deliberately spread their donations over the whole year in order to be able to give away the amount they want without developing a cash flow problem.

In terms of the amount of fundraising work that can be accomplished, December is a short month. Very little actual work gets done between December 15 and January 6. Many nonprofits close during some of this time, and a good cross section of our vendors, printers, and IT consultants use this time for vacation. Volunteers are also hard to mobilize during this time.

Finally, this year, many people will have spent a good deal of their money on the presidential campaign or hotly contested local campaigns, so this December may be thinner than usual for charitable giving.

HOW TO RAISE MONEY THIS DECEMBER

If your organization wants to take advantage of December by selling calendars, cars, or running a year-end major gifts campaign, you should begin planning now for 2009. You have missed your chance for this year. The six suggestions in this article are for groups that either did not get around to such planning, didn't know what to plan, or would like to raise even more money than their plans yielded so far.

The following fundraising ideas can be carried out any time after the fourth week in November.

Last-Minute-Shopper Special

Either send a letter or use e-mail to suggest gifts to your organization instead of material presents to family and friends. If you are using a letter, send it out in the last week of November. E-mail can be sent in early December, with a reminder e-mail sent again around December 20. The content of both the e-mail and the letter can be similar to the following:

Dear Friend,

It's December again, and if you are like me, you are wishing you had started your holiday shopping earlier. Buying presents for friends at this time of year is not fun because I am short on both time and ideas. Some friends are particularly hard to give gifts to because they don't seem to want or need anything. I can't buy them a CD because they download everything from the Internet, I can't buy them another book because they have decided to only use the public library, and I can't make them anything by hand because I can barely boil water.

This year, I decided to give many people on my holiday list a glimpse into People For Good. I serve on the board and donate money and time to this group because I am convinced that the work we are doing is making our community a better place to live. Most of my friends also want a better world, so I am giving a gift to People for Good in their name.

Will you join me? Simply send us a donation in the name of a friend, family member, or co-worker. We will send them a lovely card (or e-card) telling them about your gift. We will also send them our quarterly newsletter (or monthly e-newsletter). Toward the end of next year, we will ask them if they want to make their own gift to People for Good. They will receive no other solicitations from us unless they make their own gift.

You can give any amount. I have given what I would have spent on a present for each of these friends. You can give as many or as few gifts as you wish.

A donation to People for Good in the name of a friend is perfect for:

- Someone who wants to make our community more livable for everyone
- Someone who "has everything" (or even most things)
- Someone who always mentions seeing our name in the media or forwards blogs with our work mentioned in them

To take advantage of this easy gift-giving idea, just fill out the enclosed form and return it with your check or credit card information (or, please fill out the online form and pay online).

Best wishes for the holiday season,
Sonia Navarro, Board Chair

P.S. This is the perfect gift for people who have birthdays or anniversaries in December also. Feel free to write in any celebration you want for each friend.

The card or letter to the recipient of the gift might read as follows:

Dear Mr. Huang,

Irene Chao has made a donation in your name to People for Good as her holiday season gift to you. Irene may have spoken to you about our group, but let me tell you a little more.

We believe (*Mission statement here*). Our current goals are (*three short sentences*).

In 2009, we will intensify our work on XYZ issue with the addition of a drop-in center/public policy analyst/letter-writing campaign. You will begin receiving our newsletter early next year, which will keep you up to date on our work. Please feel free to call or drop by our office. For a weekly update as well as more in-depth analysis, please visit our website at www.goodfight.org

On behalf of Irene and all of us at People for Good, we wish you happy holidays and a healthy and peaceful New Year.

About 5 percent of your donors will take advantage of this offer; some of them may donate a good deal of money. Some groups have had donors give 20 or more gifts and donate up to \$1,000. Many people will give one or two gifts and donate \$50. Further, long after December, people will call to see if they can use the form for birthdays, weddings, memorials, or anniversaries.

Make sure the names of the gift receivers are entered into your database and that they are solicited for renewal next year. Make sure they receive the newsletter during this first year, but do not send a solicitation for renewal until about ten months after this gift.

Hold an Open House

An open house during the holiday season can be a nice benefit for all donors or just for long-time donors or major donors. If you do invite all

SAMPLE GIFT FORM

I would like to make a gift to the following people in the form of a contribution to People for Good:

1. NAME _____ E-MAIL _____
ADDRESS _____ CITY _____ STATE _____ ZIP _____

PLEASE CHECK WHICH HOLIDAY IS BEING CELEBRATED: CHANUKAH CHRISTMAS
 KAWNZAA WINTER SOLSTICE OTHER _____

If you don't specify, we will use the generic "Holiday Season."

2. NAME _____ E-MAIL _____
ADDRESS _____ CITY _____ STATE _____ ZIP _____

PLEASE CHECK WHICH HOLIDAY IS BEING CELEBRATED: CHANUKAH CHRISTMAS
 KAWNZAA WINTER SOLSTICE OTHER _____

If you don't specify, we will use the generic "Holiday Season."

3. NAME _____ E-MAIL _____
ADDRESS _____ CITY _____ STATE _____ ZIP _____

PLEASE CHECK WHICH HOLIDAY IS BEING CELEBRATED: CHANUKAH CHRISTMAS
 KAWNZAA WINTER SOLSTICE OTHER _____

If you don't specify, we will use the generic "Holiday Season."

your donors, also invite funders, press, volunteers, and anyone else who has helped you during the year. Make a simple and inexpensive flier for an invitation that people can hang on their refrigerator or office bulletin board. Hold the open house on a weeknight from 5:30–8:00 PM so people can come right from work.

Be sure that volunteers from your board or staff are assigned to circulate and talk with people during the open house. No one should come to this event and stand alone. There should be someone to welcome everyone at the door, a volunteer stationed at the food table to strike up conversations, and “roving greeters” who go up to people and introduce themselves. These volunteers should meet as many people as they can and learn their names.

Have volunteers carry a small notebook or index cards in their pockets. If someone expresses an interest in something related to the group, the volunteer should make a note of their name and e-mail and offer to send them more information or to invite them to the next meeting, or whatever action would be appropriate.

If you have T-shirts, books, calendars, or other products that you normally sell, you can display them for sale as holiday gifts. Have wrapping paper and ribbon available so that people can get their purchases wrapped on the spot. Also, use this time to create and display a “wish list” of things you need for your office. (In an informal and not very thorough survey last year of open house “Wish lists,” I found out the following had been donated: a meeting table and four chairs, a security system, two desks, a bulletin board, three easels, ten pounds of coffee and a new coffee maker, and a small refrigerator.)

It is not necessary to have a formal program during the open house, but if you wish to do so, make sure it is not more than 20 minutes long. During the program, take the opportunity to thank donors, to introduce new staff and board members, and to discuss exciting plans for next year. Tell people how they can get involved, if appropriate.

After the open house, everyone who greeted people should get together and make a list of all the people they met and any interesting or useful things they learned from those who attended. If anyone was promised something, it should be sent right away.

The purpose of an open house is not to raise money but to thank people and build community among your supporters. It also provides good practice for board

members to talk to donors without having to ask them for money.

You may also get some interesting offers from the people who attend your open house. One organization whose offices have lots of windows find that at certain times of sunny days, the sun shines in fiercely. People had hung sheets and mounted pieces of cardboard to keep the sun off their computer screens. Seeing this, a guest at the group’s open house bought the group custom-fitting window shades that can be opened from the bottom or the top and thus be adjusted to ward off the sun without dimming all the light.

At another organization, a guest who managed a day-care center said that she felt they would get greater turnout to their evening meetings if they offered childcare. She offered to provide it for free during a couple of meetings to test out the idea. As it turned out, attendance did go up at meetings and now the organization provides childcare for all its meetings.

Send Holiday Cards

The chair of the board or the executive director should send holiday cards to board members, volunteers, staff, and anyone else who has been closely involved and helpful to your work this year. The cards should thank them for what they have done — a foundation program officer who went out of her way to help strengthen your proposal, a computer technician who didn’t charge for repairing your printer when you jammed it by using cheap labels, the people at the Senior Center who get your newsletter ready for bulk mailing, and so on. Handwrite these cards. Your thank you does not have to be long. Two scribbled sentences that are personal are vastly preferable to a flowery computer-generated letter. Always send these cards by snail mail. For donors concerned about paper, use either 100% PCW (post-consumer waste) or explore using straw, hemp, or kenaf paper as card stock.

Check for Renewals and Pledges

Scroll through your database and make sure all your major donors (people giving \$250 and up) have been asked to renew their gift sometime during the past 11 months. If anyone hasn’t been contacted, figure out why and figure out who can contact them by the 15th of December. Particularly be sure to contact anyone who pledged a gift and hasn’t paid it. Our instinct is to think that people don’t

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want to pay their pledge or will feel offended if we remind them, but the contrary is true. You will look like you value their commitment and need their money, and they may well have forgotten the pledge or lost the return envelope.

If you have time, you may even want to conduct a "renew-a-thon" phone campaign in the last two weeks of December, phoning all the people who have not given at all in 2008. You will mostly be leaving messages, but you may have some great conversations with donors who have moved, or just got behind in all their giving, or who have a problem with some aspect of your program that you can sort out with them.

Finally, be sure to e-mail anyone you haven't received a gift from in the last 11 months or so, with a short message: "You can help us start 2009 strong and vital with a year-end gift. Take a moment right now and click onto our website to make your gift today. Thanks!" You can add one short paragraph about what you will be doing in 2009, but be brief and upbeat. You are just trying to capture all gifts from people who have been too busy to read much of what you have written the rest of the year.

Be Sure Someone Is in Your Office December 30 & 31

Even though I said earlier that it is a myth that most people do all their giving in December, it is not a myth that some people do all their giving the last two days of December. They call and e-mail needing to know how to give you stock (which must be recorded as received in the tax year for which the person wants to claim the deduction) or to ask if they put a check in the mail "today" can they claim the deduction for 2008, even though you

will get it in 2009 (answer: Yes, as long as you get the check on or before January 15), or wondering if you would like some frequent flier miles that are expiring (answer: maybe, if they are transferable), or.... I know an organization that

received a \$50,000 gift of stock because the executive director was still in her office at 4:30 on New Year's Eve. The donor said, "I would prefer to give to another group, but you are open and I need to make this gift."

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Treat Yourself to a Clean and Neat Working Environment

This, too, will help your fundraising: Clean up your office, clean out your desk, get caught up on filing, data entry, and prospect research. Start the new year with only the paper and computer files that you need and use. Also, if you really need some piece of equipment that will make your life much easier, buy it for yourself (or plan to buy it on sale right after the new year). So many small organizations lose valuable work time because they are too cheap to buy ergonomic chairs or one more printer or a heater or fan.

A FINAL SUGGESTION

These six suggestions will help you with fundraising during the holiday season. My final suggestion will help you stay in fundraising for the long haul: Take some time off. Do some things you like to do — read a mystery novel, go to the planetarium, see an old movie. Spend time with family, friends, and pets. Forget about work for a few days. Come back after New Year's rested, refreshed, and ready to raise money in January. **GFJ**

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