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Pulling Out of the Nonprofit Nosedive

By Katya Andresen

To survive 2009, give your donors these five things.

It's ugly out there. And if you're the pilot of your fundraising endeavors, you're getting pretty sick of the turbulence. Many of us are nauseated by the sight of the goals on our development dashboards. Some nonprofits are in a fiscal nosedive. And as any financial pundit worth his market metaphors will tell you, falling is no fun, especially without a golden parachute.

In situations like this, some people panic. Others get inventive. Let's all pledge here and now to stay in the latter category. As a wise man once said: Worrying is not thinking, and complaining is not action.

Here are five keys to pulling yourself and your message together to survive 2009. They all are variations on an important theme: Give donors what they want.

Donors want to feel good

That's right. Donors want to feel good, especially right now. They want a helper's high. They want to have an impact, make a difference and attain an emotional ROI. You don't give that to them with a desperate, doom-and-gloom message about your dire need.

Even if you're feeling negative, there's no need to share that emotion unless there's a happy windup to your appeal. Who can your donors save? What can they make possible? How can they be superhuman life-changers for a small sum? Tell them. It's good stuff. It's motivating stuff. It works. **DO NOT LOSE SIGHT OF THIS.**

Donors want familiarity

Now is a good time to change up the messenger. People are going to be in a kind of mental fetal position this year, clinging to their nearest and dearest in this scary world. So if you put your cause in the mouths of their friends and families, you're going to get much further than you would messaging them alone. Ask your supporters to spread the word about you. The messenger will be key this year, and it's best if it's not you.

Donors want tangibility

People are pinching pennies and seeking value this year, whether while shopping at Wal-Mart or when giving money. You need to show you're going to be a very

trustworthy, efficient and effective steward of that money — and there's no better way to do that than to be very concrete. Where will the money go? What dollars buy what changes? What good is going to result from a gift? Answer these questions many times: when a donor gives, after she gives and the next time you contact her for help.

Donors want flexibility

Not everyone can give as they have in more prosperous times. Recognize that fact, and give donors flexibility in how they support you. How can they volunteer their time or talents? How can they assist you in spreading the word? How about monthly giving — modest amounts deducted from their credit cards? Make it easy for people to help, no matter how hard the times.

Donors want personalization

Don't forget to do everything you can to personalize your messages. Donors are going to be hit up for money left and right by desperate parties this year. If you show you see them as people and not walking wallets, you have a better chance of standing out. Ask them about their interests so you can cater to them.

One last point

I'll also add a bonus sixth point: If these things aren't working at all, that tells you something. One explanation is hard times, but that's not the whole story. If you can't prove your relevance to donors or supporters, you have more than the recession to blame. You need to call a few folks and find out why you're failing to connect. Or ask yourself if you're targeting the wrong audience. Or question if you need to join forces with an organization better positioned for outreach.

Keep looking until you know why you're failing — and then have the courage to fix the underlying problem. The more you think instead of panic, the greater your chances of pulling out of your nosedive and taking flight. *FS*

Katya Andresen is vice president of marketing at [Network for Good](#), a nonprofit organization that helps other nonprofits raise money online. Reach her at katya.andresen@networkforgood.org

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