

Campaign season is upon us, so we've asked direct response experts of the political persuasion to give their recommendations across a variety of topics!

Year-End Fundraising in a Presidential Election Year

By Frank O'Brien



Come November, just as the year-end giving period gets underway, donors will be reacting with strong emotions to the aftermath of a contentious, high-profile

presidential election. They will be thinking through how, if at all, the election's outcome impacts their philanthropic priorities.

It's a timing and messaging challenge nonprofits face every four years. The impact falls most heavily on nonprofits with politically adjacent missions. But it also has the potential to affect year-end giving to traditional (non-political) organizations.

Here's some practical advice on how political and non-political groups — for shorthand purposes — can best execute their 2024 end-of-year fundraising in this unique election year.

Planning Ahead

For non-political groups, don't overthink the impact of the elections and don't let worries about the elections drive you away from strategies and tactics that have worked over time. However, be alert to a few key timing, tone and channel issues that require your attention.

Meanwhile for political groups, start thinking through three scenarios now:

1. A Joe Biden win.
2. A Donald Trump win.
3. A contentious, inconclusive election aftermath.

Determine how each scenario will impact your audience's emotional energy and year-end priorities. Then, consider what your core message will be in each scenario, as well as what barriers to giving each election outcome will create. In particular, draft three variations of your November direct mail appeal matching the three scenarios well in advance of the election.

Timing

We will (hopefully) know the election results on Nov. 6. Thanksgiving week starts on Nov. 25 and Giving Tuesday is just five days after Thanksgiving on Dec. 3. That creates some pretty tight windows for the November portion of

your year-end giving strategies.

Non-political groups should avoid online or offline messages arriving Wednesday through Friday of election week when election results will consume media coverage and donor attention. Beyond that, there's every reason to stick to your typical year-end schedule.

Whether your organization's side wins or loses, political groups should immediately weigh in on the election results and their impact via email and social media. In addition, quickly tweak your direct mail draft that best matched the actual outcome and get it in the mail ASAP.

On all channels, prioritize getting your message out quickly over providing people with a comprehensive, detailed analysis of the elections.

Messaging

Whatever the outcome, donors across the board will be seriously alarmed or excited by the outcome. And they may be feeling tapped out both emotionally and financially.

Now that the bruising, negative election is over, donors will have a thirst for more uplifting content. Non-political groups should seize the chance to present what might be called "counter programming." Offer people clear opportunities to have a direct positive impact on something they really care about. For example, focus on specific "can't wait" projects as opposed to broad, thematic copy.

When it comes to political groups, tell supporters how they can best respond to the electoral outcome in language specific to your cause. If your organization is on the winning side, talk about seizing the moment to advance important work connected to your mission.

If on the losing side, strike a balance between respecting your audience's emotional response and confidently showing people a path forward. Between now and Election Day avoid painting yourself into a corner by presenting a negative electoral result as so devastating an outcome that all is lost.

Year-End Emails: A Special Post-Election Challenge

Effective year-end strategies are executed across direct mail, social media and email.

For a number of reasons, the latter may prove the most challenging for both non-political and political causes.

As the "2024 M+R Benchmarks" report puts it, "Email fundraising is hard ... and the data suggests it is not getting any easier." On average, email revenue declined by 7% from 2022 to 2023 and the average response rate for fundraising emails decreased by 16% in the same period.

Credit: cmanphoto, Getty Images



And now groups face the additional burden of trying to raise substantial email income at year-end in the aftermath of a campaign fundraising season, featuring an unprecedented volume of political emails with a heavily transactional focus conveying little content beyond pleas for additional gifts.

Given this context, how can both non-political and political groups protect their year-end email income? By not following the campaign's lead in either high volume or low content.

Both groups should rely on short, transactional emails at key points, like GivingTuesday and the final days of December. Consider sending expansive email messages to prime the pump in the lead up to those key giving days.

Hopefully these thoughts will help you plan and execute a successful year-end fundraising effort in an unprecedented electoral climate.

Frank O'Brien's latest project is OBrien On Message, an effort to help the nonprofit community create persuasive messaging. Frank authors the free Monday On Message Memo available on his obrienonmessage.com website. Reach Frank at fobdirect@gmail.com.