

Best practices in disaster response fundraising

Don't let one camouflage the other.

By Lyric Murphy, Vice President, Group Director of Russ Reid

When a disaster strikes, securing the public's attention and support must happen quickly. However, this kind of readiness requires intentional pre-planning to maximize the brief window of time when the disaster has captured the nation's attention across multiple media channels. Ultimately, disaster response strategies will:

- Strengthen the organization's brand;
- Position the organization's ability to deliver benefits to those in need;
- Build advantage over the competition;
- Offer innovative opportunities for donor impact; and
- Set the stage for ongoing engagement.

There are six primary steps for designing an emergency response plan that will meet the needs of your organization. Those steps are:

- Assess internal realities and expectations;
- Develop strategy with corresponding goals and detailed implementation plans;
- Prepare key messages for audiences and media type;
- Train key players, communicators, and those who speak on behalf of the organization;
- Identify and inform partners (such as media outlets, print vendors, call centers); and
- Evaluate messages and performance and fine tune accordingly.

Potential media vehicles

- Text-2-give
- Television (paid & PSA)
- Radio
- Newspaper/space ads
- Insert media
- Social media
- Direct mail
- Search engine optimization
- Website
- E-Mail acquisition / cultivation
- Banner campaigns

Sample Outline of Strategic Action Plan

Preparation

- Identify key players / point person(s)
- Establish disaster response team and corresponding roles and responsibilities
- Provide contact information – 7 days a week, 24 hours a day
- Establish process milestones
- Set expectations for turnaround times of all major activities
- Determine overall budget levels based on the magnitude of the disaster
- Track the process during an emergency for future evaluation and improvement

Implementation

- Negotiate TV Spots / TV clips / video footage
- Submit space ads to predetermined national and local publications / newspapers
- Set up broadcast interviews with key staff and appropriate experts
- Mail all direct response materials
- Create specific “on hold” telephone message regarding the emergency response
- Provide script outlines for customer service and donor rep phone calls
- Solicit partnerships from broadcast outlets, local banks and businesses
- Determine what / if GIK will be accepted
- Prepare other collateral for awareness and involvement
- Supply partners video and/or speakers
- Seek government funding and matching opportunities when appropriate

Follow-up

- Send sincere and timely thank-you letters
- Provide timely and relevant disaster updates
- Secure email addresses for the purpose of sending cost-efficient disaster updates

Sample Overview of Immediate Action Plan

The objective of a Strategic Disaster Response Plan is twofold: (1) to maximize immediate revenue for disaster relief efforts; and (2) to convert newly acquired donors into ongoing supporters.

Day 1 – within the first 24 hours

Convene an immediate Emergency Response briefing. At this meeting you will:

- Categorize the size of emergency;
- Determine which media and what messages will be used;
- Create print acquisition and cultivation plans;
- Secure field and photo resource;
- Identify staff available for broadcast interviews;
- Review approved media schedules and cost estimates for placement;
- Create print advertisements;
- Contact publications regarding placement;
- Write and execute direct mail, email, Internet banners, and web copy;
- Notify suppliers regarding timeline for using the preprinted emergency envelopes, letterhead, et al.; and
- Create and submit key word list for approval along with the assignment of tracking links.

Day 2 – within the first 48 hours

- Reassess status of the disaster
- Review decisions made in light of most current information
- Determine what level of spend is an acceptable investment
- Review any additional avenues for response and exposure

Day 3 – within the first 72 hours

All avenues of donor acquisition and cultivation should be reviewed for the setting of appropriate and timely activities.

- Radio and TV spots begin airing
- If the need dictates, consider acquiring direct mail lists, creating bangtails and self-mailer inserts for inclusion in all donor communications
- Developing an email treatment stream for updating the donor with relevant information and building confidence that their partnership is making a difference

Day 10

- Phone call to \$100 + donors thanking them for gift
- Reporting and affirmation objective
- Soft ask

Day 20

- Welcome mailing (closed face OE)
- Thank you/affirmation
- Emergency-specific
- Intense focus on emergency work in progress plus continuing need
- Introductory brochure communicating organizational ethos, scope of work
- No cross-selling
- E-mail opt-in offered
- Opportunity to give again

Day 30

- In-depth report and disaster follow-up
- Report back on progress made, needs as yet unmet or newly arising
- Strong ask for additional support

Day 40

- Donor receives organization's magazine or newsletter acknowledging gift and providing update on how the money is benefiting those in need

Day 60

- Donors receive a combination of regular donor communications and special communications tailored to their commitment and giving capabilities

Day 90

- Ongoing cultivation appeals (best of)
- Updates on disasters included

Day 120

- Classic multi-touch campaign focused on continuing needs of disaster victims
- Strongly reinforces organization's position
- Appropriately large offer relating to providing support for victims in the area

Six months

- Mail: Report on what donations have accomplished. Includes newsletter, letter from a grateful recipient of help.
- On-line: E-Mail blast drives donor to special report highlighted what gifts have accomplished. Includes on-site video update.

One Year Later

- Anniversary mailing: “One year ago, you sent a gift to help save lives. Find out how you’ve helped make a difference.”
- Mail: Special one-year report/update
- E-Mail: links donor to site with special report and from-the-field video updates

Conclusion

This document provides a broad overview regarding the process necessary to be prepared for an effective disaster response. A comprehensive and tailored review and strategic plan would drill deep into crafting the key messages and determining delivery vehicles across all media types. The exercise of such intentional preparedness provides a solid foundation for an organizational emergency response that is timely, relevant, and effective in building brand, awareness and securing support.

About the author

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