

# THE CHRONICLE OF PHILANTHROPY

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FUNDRAISING

## How to Raise Money if Your Nonprofit Isn't Responding Directly to the Pandemic

By *Maria Di Mento*

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Most nonprofits are being touched in some way by the coronavirus pandemic, and many can raise money for the work they are doing to help others affected by the spread of Covid-19.

But officials at organizations that are not directly focused on the urgent needs of people directly impacted by the public-health crisis worry their appeals will fall on deaf ears. Some wonder if they should suspend fundraising for the next few months but don't know how they would cobble together enough money to carry out their work.

But fundraising experts say this is no time to stop communicating with donors — and that it's important to be specific.

Nonprofits need to go beyond simply telling donors their charity has an unprecedented need. They already know that, says Rob Cummings, a fundraiser and consultant in Chicago

who writes extensively about fundraising. Instead, gift officers and nonprofit leaders should tell donors what they can do to help.

“Donors want to hear how they can make an impact now on the people you serve, and, oh my gosh, they do not want to hear silence,” says Cummings. “If they go on your website and don’t see anything different? They don’t want to see that. They want to see, front and center, ‘Here’s what we’re doing and here’s what you can do to make an impact.’ ”

Because people are primarily thinking about hospitals and basic needs, it is up to fundraisers to show donors that other types of nonprofits are also being affected by the pandemic, often in ways that are at first not obvious, says Sunil Oommen, a former fundraiser who founded a New York consultancy that works with human-rights, social-justice and education groups.

Rather than retreat, Oommen and other fundraising experts say, gift officers should try to connect the dots for donors and communicate clearly about how the work their group is doing can serve people during this crisis.

For example, one nonprofit Oommen works with is a group that advocates for a broad range of issues that touch Asian Americans. While Asian Americans are not affected by the pandemic any more or less than other groups, the nonprofit was able to highlight the importance of its advocacy work by raising awareness about the increase in racist attacks on Asian Americans as the pandemic has spread. (The coronavirus was first reported to the World Health Organization by officials in China in late December, and that has led some people to wrongfully connect the outbreak to anyone of Asian descent.)

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## RECOMMENDED READING



DIVERSIFYING  
FUNDRAISING  
**How to Create a  
Culture of Inclusive  
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ASK AN EXPERT  
**How to Connect  
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Now**

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“They’re generating more awareness for their advocacy efforts by using [the pandemic] to highlight their issue and how it’s impacting the people they serve at this time in ways others may not have realized,” says Oommen.

## **What-If Scenarios**

Knowing how to connect to the current moment is crucial. To that end, Oommen says he asks his clients two important questions to help them clarify their thinking and messaging for what is happening right now.

The first is what are all of the predictable things that would happen to the people the nonprofit serves if its programs had to suddenly shutter for any reason.

“Whatever their answers are, that’s the content they need to be bringing forward to their donors and the funding community,” says Oommen. “These nonprofits are serving a need that’s out there so they need to get crystal clear about what would happen if they weren’t there and then make that clear to their funders.”

The second question is what are the unpredictable effects? How might the unpredictable nature of the pandemic affect the nonprofit’s beneficiaries three weeks from now and six months out. The answers can be fear-inducing, says Oommen, but his questions are designed to force nonprofit fundraisers and leaders to think about how things will look over different timelines so they can develop plans accordingly.

“There is a lot of pessimism and despair out there right now. They should do this planning work no matter how scary it looks,” Oommen says. “I know some organizations are feeling overwhelmed and don’t know how to communicate, but now is not the time to hold back communications with funders.”

Fundraisers for groups whose missions are not directly tied to the pandemic should let their guard down, he says, and talk to donors on a regular basis about how the pandemic is affecting them, their board, and the people the nonprofit serves, and what the nonprofit is doing from week to week.

## 'Meaningful Conversations'

Sometimes letting down your guard means not worrying so much about oversharing with donors, says Barbara Maduell, a former development official who co-founded the Breakthrough Fundraising Group, in Seattle. A nonprofit's top donors and most loyal supporters might be able to add important and fresh perspectives on the challenges ahead, she says. Nonprofits should take this opportunity to use their inner circle of close donors as a "brain trust" and be open to their advice.

"Wherever organizations are in their fundraising, they should be communicating with their donors in the highest-touch way possible," says Maduell. "Many people are unsure and afraid, but many want to help, and if there is a silver lining to all of this, it's that nonprofits have the opportunity right now to have more meaningful conversations with their donors."

If gift officers are wary of asking for money right now, they should consider asking donors' permission to discuss a gift, Oommen says.

"Tell them that in normal times you would be approaching them for a gift, but you don't know how they're feeling," he says. "Ask them if they want to have that conversation now or would they rather wait until another time. It takes the edge and the pressure off of the conversation."

*Read other items in this [Covid-19 Coverage: Connecting With Big Donors](#) package.*

*We welcome your thoughts and questions about this article. Please [email the editors](#) or [submit a letter](#) for publication.*

GRANT SEEKING

FUNDRAISING FROM INDIVIDUALS

### Maria Di Mento

Maria directs the annual Philanthropy 50, a comprehensive report on America's most generous donors. She writes about wealthy philanthropists, arts organizations, key trends and insights related to high-net-worth donors, and other topics.

## RECOMMENDED WEBINAR FOR YOU



Many nonprofits seek corporate grants to lift their profiles and boost revenue. How should you adapt to find companies interested in your cause and forge long-term donor ties?

**Thursday, April 15, 2021**

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