

Donor communications in the time of Coronavirus

5 principles to guide you as you reach out to your communities

By Melinda Church

At this moment of uncertainty, we're pulling family members close, bringing children home from school, connecting with aging parents more frequently. As we're driven to work in isolation with meetings, events, and cultivation visits cancelled, the inclination for our work might be to hunker down and wait for the storm to pass. That is precisely the wrong approach.

Our responses with our own families—generous and instinctive—are also right for the extended families that engage with and support our nonprofits. Alumni, families, grateful patients, patrons, season ticketholders, volunteers—all of them need to know, now more than ever, that you care, that they matter, and that they are valued members of the larger community.

It's time to reach out to your stakeholders—early and often. Below are five principles to consider when communicating in writing with your organization's friends and donors.

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1. Start with mission.

Without exception, nonprofits exist to create good. Difficult days call for anchoring back explicitly to the heart of your organization's work and linking all messaging to why you do what you do. Most often, safety is a foundation of nonprofits' work. It's an obvious point for hospitals and schools, but equally true for orchestras and museums: enrichment is impossible without personal safety and security. Beginning and ending all messages with clear, concise statements about your commitment to your mission—and linking it to personal well-being—ensures that your actions are framed appropriately about your care and concern for others.

2. Let's hear it from the top.

In times of crisis or challenge, reassurance needs to come from an organization's CEO or president. It's where we look for direction and vision. This is not the moment to send unsigned messages or to delegate them down into the organization. One way to treat your closest constituents as the insiders they are is to reach out to them in advance. For example, an email from a university president to all alumni could be sent from a gift officer to key volunteers an hour or two earlier, with a quick note saying, “I'm thinking of you and trusting you're well. I wanted to make sure you see what President Brown is sending out more broadly later today.” If the institution is complex, close coordination is key.

3. Keep it short and sweet.

Unfortunately, this international crisis won't fade away in the next few days. You'll have many opportunities to write to donors—no need to overwhelm them by loading down a single email with everything your organization is doing. Messages that are too long risk diluting your point or losing it entirely. The usual rules of contemporary communications apply: Segmented approaches are most effective. University alumni are hearing news about campus closures and likely are interested in your plans, but they don't need every detail about moving students out of the residence halls. Promising and delivering regular updates—perhaps aim for weekly—underscores trust.

4. Highlight how you're helping.

While some nonprofits are unable to pursue their missions fully at this moment, many are directly addressing what they do can do to save, improve, and enrich lives. Universities with schools of public health have faculty experts advising governments and corporations. Some academic medical centers are working to develop a vaccine or are hosting drive-up rapid testing in their parking lots. Faced with new restrictions on large gatherings, the Philadelphia Orchestra livestreamed a full concert, performed last week to an empty hall, and then linked the recording on its homepage. The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York has closed its doors, but moved rich digital features to the fore—linking to videos and audio guides directly under its closure notice. The Rodale Institute sent a note to donors and subscribers, alerting them to a new “Stories of Hope” series offered to uplift and inspire. Talking about what your institution is doing to help during this crisis is not chest-thumping; it's showing your mission in action.

5. Invite engagement.

It's unquestionable, but true: Advancement relationships are built on trust. They're not one-way propositions in which information flows only in one direction. Unless you're sending an especially large email update that encompasses several audiences, consider whether you can invite feedback, solicit concerns and ideas. All of us—and particularly those most isolated—surely will welcome that outreach and engagement. Sometimes, just having others solicit our thoughts is enough to underscore true reciprocity in our relationships with institutions and communities.

Finally, as you consider how best to communicate with donors and friends, the most important thing is this: that you reach out. It's the human connection that ultimately resonates in times of crisis. Make sure your community knows that they matter to you by expressing your care, compassion and concern in these unprecedented times.

About the author

Melinda Church is a Senior Vice President at GG+A, leading our Strategic Communications Practice Area. Her clients span higher education, academic medicine and healthcare, arts and culture, independent schools, and the social sector. Since joining GG+A in 2016, she has partnered with more than five dozen clients to help accelerate their mission-driven goals, grow their philanthropic support, and elevate their reputation. Before joining the firm, Melinda's 25 years of experience in communications and marketing included senior leadership roles at the University of Virginia and The Ohio State University.