

Strategies for Supporting Advancement and Development

Ideas *for* Advancement

Disaster Planning

Reactions to National and Global Disasters



www.SupportingAdvancement.com
services@supportingadvancement.com

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Reactions to National and Global Disasters

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Reactions to National and Global Disasters

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Particularly over the last several years, there have been natural disasters and terrorist activities with increasingly devastating human tolls. They have dominated the news and our collective psyches on a personal, national and global basis.

Unfortunately, these will not be the last cataclysmic events with which we will need to cope. Organizations can and should have plans in place for facilitating relief efforts through fundraising in addition to the way they manage all of their communication and outreach strategies when one of these events takes place.

In tandem with (and in many ways even beyond the scope of) the news media, the Internet has played a pivotal role in the way information is disseminated as well as in the way public opinion and assistance becomes quickly galvanized.

Never before in history has there been such a capacity for organizations and individuals to assist and communicate through the instantaneous, efficient and extremely proactive methods now available. Computers are now as common a household item as televisions were 20 years ago. Cell phones, PDA's and other portable communication devices are the means through which many people are now keeping abreast of current events.

What are some of the things upon which development staff members of nonprofit organizations need to be able to focus quickly during one of these catastrophic events?

Note that the following list is not necessarily exhaustive nor in any priority order, but we can think of these items as advance contingency planning. [Please send comments and additions to this list so they may be added as a means of assisting all of us in our planning.] The responses to these disasters have been significantly varied that a simple list will never suffice to cover all that has, or will, happen.

Now more than ever we need to be considered and proactive as well as have carefully tailored responses.

Items for Consideration

- Be prepared to extract lists with which to communicate to your affected constituents along with a clear determination of what communications absolutely must take place. Review your immediate and mid-term calendars and make sure events, mailings and other activities will still be appropriate. Establish coding and reporting structures to facilitate modification of lists expeditiously in consideration of a disaster.

If you are a non profit that does provide relief, build email lists as much in advance as possible. Create templates for "emergency" emails and newsletters.

- Depending on the magnitude (and possibly the location of) the catastrophic event, you may well need to cancel previously scheduled fundraising and/or stewardship events. This could be an extremely difficult and emotional process.

Your key staff members need to be well prepared with carefully chosen language to call

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people and make them aware of the situation.

Anticipate lots of questions you may not be able to answer, but at a minimum try to have information about where people can be directed to find out more as part of your basic scripts.

- Use your web sites to quickly create discussion lists, blogs or other interactive networking areas where your constituents can network to discuss – and also to find – friends and family most closely impacted by the disaster. Build mechanisms into your collaborative to collect email addresses so you can keep visitors informed.

Your web site can also be a conduit for fundraising by working in partnership with community relief organizations and placing links to their respective online giving sites on your institution's web site.

Watch for dramatic increases in traffic. You may want to create static pages in place of database driven ones to help performance.

Not so obvious, but think about immediately purchasing keywords to help drive traffic.

- You may need to consider how donations directed to a disaster will affect your organization's fundraising efforts and be ready to adjust your goals accordingly.

If you choose to partner with existing charities who provide disaster relief (or if you operate such an organization) and have opted to receive monetary donations directly for the emergency, take steps to ensure that your online giving sites can handle the volume. You will need to have the ability to expedite transfers of funds to the appropriate relief agencies as they are received.

You may wish to set up a separate giving form on your site to handle the relief donations separately from your regular donations.

- There will also need to be policies and procedures in place for donations that may be re-directed or transferred into special funds. You may need to consider special donor agreements and other legal aspects for larger gifts - including special tax incentives from various government revenue generating bodies.
- How will donors be recognized, and will donations received and transferred need to be integrated into your stewardship vehicles? Handle these cases with sensitivity.
- Sadly, yet unavoidably, such catastrophic events can lead to questions of stewardship relating to separate memorial or other events that will need to become part of your ongoing programs. Will there need to be any special stewardship reporting? Might there be need for endowment funding to establish and/or support honorary monuments?
- Endeavors to assist with disaster relief need to focus not merely on raising funds and/or collecting various items, but also having a plan in place to disburse those funds and distribute the supplies. Disbursing funds is the more comparatively easy function to facilitate.

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Collecting and distributing relief supplies demands that you have transportation. In times of crisis, those community relief organizations which might otherwise be able to pick up such supplies will have their resources taxed to the fullest and may not be able to retrieve what you collect. Carefully evaluate the efforts of collecting and managing these non-case donations.

- It is likely that you will consider placing your telemarketing and other fundraising efforts on hold and reschedule to a more appropriate time.

If not, you should be certain to make script and copy changes that will help integrate the disaster into your programs in a sensitive manner (i.e., “While we realize it’s important to consider the _____, your support of (our organization) is still important”; in the case of those declining to contribute due to the disaster, perhaps “We acknowledge the importance of supporting the relief effort. May we check back in ___? “).

Note: Be very careful of how you do this, since emotions will be running very high and a poorly crafted piece can quickly alienate prospects and potentially end up with negative publicity for your institution.

- Your organization will typically have experts; utilize them and pool their expertise to help craft the most effective responses. You may send experts to help with relief efforts.
- Unfortunately, disasters also illustrate the importance of good technology planning. Your organization can easily be a victim and – even as a normal course of business – you should make sure your important data is backed up and stored in a different physical location. [The subject of technology planning is obviously not the focus of this piece and there are numerous resources available.]
- Flexibility is now and will ever be a critical component to successfully responding to catastrophic events. Your constituents will be looking to your institution for stability of thought and dependability of tactical response. Be there.

Hospitals and other medical facilities have, as a matter of course, teams and training in place to handle elevated numbers of patients in times of crisis. If your institution has facilities which might be commandeered for use in the event of a disaster, develop staff teams who are ready and resourced and can prepare and manage facilities in the wake of a catastrophe.

- The aftermath of catastrophic events will frequently find a great many people of varying needs facing displacement – whether temporarily or permanently – from both their homes and their places of employment. Be prepared to consider how your institution might assist the personal recovery process for such displaced individuals from a peer organization in an affected area be they patients or staff of a medical institution, students or staff and faculty of an academic institution, members of a congregation, etc.
- The number of recent disastrous occurrences makes strategic planning for any scenarios a necessity. When orchestrating the design of plans, the degree of your response success will depend on how many variations you consider and contingency plans you are



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ready to implement immediately.

- If you have not yet done so, establish an internal committee to review these and similar items so a strategic response plan can be designed and ready to implement.

Committees should be structured to cross organizational boundaries and membership should not be limited to a just a specific group such as communications or marketing.

Summary

Though it may seem otherwise, disasters of the magnitude we have experienced in recent years do not historically occur with such regularity that planning is always much help; they seldom (if ever) follow neatly scripted scenarios.

Having said this, it still makes prudent sense to have advance plans, templates and strategies in place to at least be able to respond as quickly as possible. Institutions that are organized will have plans in place as part of their standard set of issues management policies and procedures.

Others who have not taken such steps towards preparation would be well advised to take note of the impact those organizations –which have already shown that they are ready to answer the call of need – have managed to convey to affected areas, and to their own constituents.



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About the Authors

Brian W. Dowling

Brian Dowling is a professional accountant, having worked more than 15 years in Advancement Services managing systems, gift processing, records, alumni and friends web sites, research, and operations. Brian joined the Division of University Advancement at the University of Toronto in January 2002 and is responsible for management of the processing of \$80-\$130 million annually in gifts and pledges. He also has responsibilities for technology management in a complex systems environment.

Prior to the University of Toronto, Brian worked in a number of institutions in both the United States and Canada, where he gained understanding, knowledge and perspectives of managing in small, medium and large shops. He holds a Management Certificate in Computer Systems from the British Columbia Institute of Technology, a Masters Degree in Business Administration from Simon Fraser University, and is a Certified General Accountant.

Amy J. Phillips

With experience in a variety of nonprofit environments, Amy appreciates sharing the ideas she has learned about advancement services as they apply to many different nonprofit profiles. Apart from more general administrative roles at hospitals in the Boston area, her recent experience in institutional advancement has included roles in a small college, a public theatre group, a museum, and more recently a database consulting role at a “think tank” in Washington, DC. Since relocating to Philadelphia, Amy is looking forward to working with the advancement services team at Temple University – the first advancement services division to win a CASE Grand Gold Circle of Excellence Award.

Amy has given presentations on both software utilization tricks and best office processes at annual user conferences held by Best Software (formerly JSI Fundraising Systems, Inc.) and the New England Millennium Users' Group [NEMUG]. She has also served as faculty at CASE's inaugural Gift Processing Workshop and is in her third year serving on CASE's Matching Gift Advisory Council. Most recently Amy participated as a faculty member at the premier Annual Advancement Academy hosted by the Burdenski & Taylor Consulting Group in Cedar Rapids, IA.