IN A
LIGHTNING IN A
BOTTLE

Building Lasting Growth from Viral Moments

PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE: AN EXCERPT

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PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE: APPLYING THE IDEAS FROM THE CASE STUDIES TO YOUR WORK

PLANNING

» Balance thoughtful planning with agile adaptation. Annual planning can save you from panic. Having a clear work plan frees you up to seize unforeseen opportunities. Luck favors the prepared, but the nimble are rewarded, too.

» Integrate annual communications and development planning and connect them to advocacy and organizing plans. Collaborate with colleagues around policy priorities, campaigns and fundraising events. Consider a joint calendar to flag events that require coordination. Don’t forget “time limited” campaigns. For example, if your organization does an annual “end of year” giving appeal, put that on the communications workplan and calendar. “Giving Tuesday?” Add that. Fostering coordination between functions bolsters your campaigns and ensures efficiency, alignment and better communications with supporters.

» Create the conditions in advance so you don’t leave money and power on the table when lightning strikes. Setting clear fundraising and communications priorities in advance lays the groundwork for seizing unexpected opportunities. In the years before the Trump election, NILC made concrete decisions to prioritize raising more money from individuals, develop leaders as go-to spokespersons, and cultivate relationships with reporters. These steps were key to creating the conditions and container for leveraging “lightning in a bottle.”

STORYTELLING

» Let people at the heart of the work speak for themselves. Amplify their stories. For example, ICIJ’s social media not only featured “official” staff and coalition spokespersons, but also immigrant community members. While encouraging “multiple voices” can present risks (like people going “off message”), the authenticity of diverse voices is powerful.

» Spotlight compelling personal stories that humanize systemic problems. NILC created its “Thank You, Martin” campaign, and ICIJ lifted up the story of Alex and Wilson, the courageous brothers imprisoned under miserable conditions. By centering individuals, and framing how their stories have consequences to many more people, NILC and ICIJ spotlighted injustice against all immigrants in a way that wasn’t overwhelming to supporters and gave them ways to make a difference, even with smaller donations.

» Use multiple channels. Experiment with social media and digital fundraising platforms such as GoFundMe, as well as video, photos and social media posts, to keep stories in front of supporters, show what happened as a result of their actions or donations, and prompt how much more needs to be raised.

MESSAGING

» Messaging and framing are critical components of fundraising strategy. Your messaging should include donors as an audience focus, with an appeal to their generosity and their solidarity in taking action. Deepen their connection to your mission by inviting them to do more than writing a check. Engage them in organizing and advocacy efforts, for example, by offering them the opportunity to reach out to others in their community and beyond by writing a letter to a representative, signing a congratulations book, posting a story, tweet, or sharing on Facebook.

» When lightning strikes, let supporters know what they can do. After the Trump Muslim ban, with public outrage surging, NILC let supporters know what they could do and where they could give. And then they followed up to learn more about new donors and build relationships.
Data is your friend. NILC used data and testing to learn about new supporters. Open rates, click rates, donation rates and other metrics were analyzed to increase awareness about what messages worked best in reaching donors. Data and message testing are important tools for your fundraising efforts and help reap repeat donations.

Write clear appeals with offers such as matches, deadlines, shortfalls, what happens if you don’t give, you’ll love how you feel when you give, people like us give. Use action words and show what the impact will be of the donation: “Your donation will pay for busses to the state capitol.”

Anyone can be a donor. Give all your supporters—members, friends, allies and funders—opportunities to donate. NILC and ICIJ don’t assume all donors are English-speaking or wealthy. Example: ICIJ’s executive director, during an interview on Spanish-language radio, invited listeners to text “apoyo” (support) to a phone number to help out, eliciting small contributions from around the country that added up to meaningful amounts.

Remember it’s not just what you say but what they hear, so communicate in a way that excites, engages and compels donors to give, using easy-to-understand language. Example: NILC shifted from a lawyerly “explainer” communications mode in its member newsletter after open rates confirmed it was less effective than shorter emails and messages that offered people clear, meaningful action (See pages 10 and 11 for examples).

DONOR ENGAGEMENT AND APPRECIATION

Follow up and get to know new supporters. Engage and deepen relationships with donors and supporters acquired in a lighting moment so you don’t lose them and build and sustain a relationship over time.

Don’t forget to thank supporters and celebrate success. Congratulate your supporters and members on work well done and recognize their contributions. For example, ICIJ held a live video celebration when the brothers were finally released from detention. Keeping people hopeful and galvanized with moments of joy is crucial to building community and engaging members as change agents and donors, not victims.

ATTITUDE AND ORGANIZATIONAL COMMITMENT

Fundraising is an organization-wide endeavor, not one person’s responsibility. It takes commitment, trust and coordination at all levels, as well as institutional investment. Executive leadership helps set the tone and communicates trust in staff to take risks and innovate. At NILC, the executive director and board set a goal to diversify revenue. Senior communications and development staff created new systems to collaborate. At ICIJ, the executive director fostered a spirit of “radical inclusion” among staff and advocates, which meant all voices and authentic representation of ICIJ’s constituency were included. These approaches were core to NILC and ICIJ’s identities and integrated into their fundraising strategies.

Test and learn. You have to experiment to adapt to new opportunities. ICIJ and NILC took risks, but had a system to analyze and learn from them, including data analysis. ICIJ’s car rallies instead of traditional marches at a time of COVID social distancing is a good example of pivoting when one idea is no longer viable.

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It’s fun. It’s joyous. Believe it. Demonstrate it. Others will catch the vibe and follow you. You can find ways to raise money that are aligned with your mission and values. There isn’t a “bad time” to fundraise. Despite the COVID pandemic and a hostile environment of political attacks on immigrants, ICIJ and NILC have continued to ask donors for money—changing their tactics to respond to changing realities. Raising money can be empowering, and it gives you the resources to accomplish your goals.
1. Both NILC and ICIJ experienced unexpected opportunities created by political changes, in this case attacks by the Trump Administration on immigrants. Their challenge was to **seize the opportunity and leverage it for deeper, more sustainable gains.**

Identify at least one similar moment your organization has experienced—political, cultural, media—in the past year or two. Using the NILC and ICIJ experiences as models, how did or could you have leveraged the moment for raising money or taking action?

2. Central to the success of NILC and ICIJ is the **greater integration of communications, development, and organizing/advocacy efforts.** Every team member had a role, including the executive director and those directly affected by the issue. This coordination is not something all organizations do on a regular basis, and it’s not something that “just happens.” It requires trust.

   In your organization, how would you describe this level of coordination, and what would you do to strengthen it?

3. Experimentation is a consistent theme in both studies. **Taking risks, being curious and open to trying new things, and thinking outside the box.** The organizations tried a variety of approaches, including social media and giving platforms and technologies such as GoFundMe, Venmo and SMS; video; data and metrics analysis and even a drag-themed brunch. Often they juggled the need to raise money urgently with the need to take chances and learn. This often required a level of culture change within the organization.

   Discuss your own comfort level with experimentation. What would facilitate more outside-the-box thinking at your organization?

4. **Expand the role of your donors.** Both studies illustrate the importance of expanding messaging to supporters. This includes engaging with donors as more than check writers and inviting them to take other actions. It also can include inviting grassroots constituents to make small donations.

   In your experience, what messaging resonates with financial supporters and what communication tactics effectively transmit that message? How could you invite your donors to take other actions?
ABOUT THIS REPORT

This project was commissioned by the Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund and the LeadersTrust, in collaboration with NEO Philanthropy, to lift up insights on leadership and movement building and serve as a resource for leaders who are creating a world that is loving, sustainable and just.

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