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Reality Check

**How Grassroots Environmental
Organizations Are (or Are Not)
Raising Money Online**



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Foreword



As the Institute for Conservation Leadership works with leaders - from organizations working on a wide range of conservation, environmental justice, and environmental health issues - the same questions come up over and over. Two of our favorites: “How can we raise more money?” and “We’re overwhelmed - how do we get everything done?”

Lately, with the emergence of online fundraising, we’ve been hearing a third question that combines the first two: “Is it worth it?” Or more specifically, “If we invest the time and money to do this well, will we spend less time and money sending fundraising letters, or organizing our annual benefit event, or...”

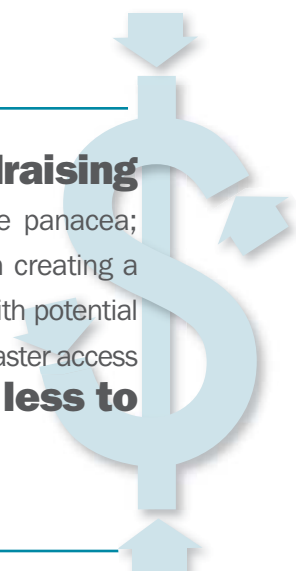
We asked author and fundraising trainer Andy Robinson, a member of the ICL consultant network, to investigate and share what he learned. This report provides our best answers, including:

- 1) A review of four common online fundraising strategies used by grassroots organizations
- 2) Case studies, stories, and analysis of the results
- 3) Several lessons summarized from our research

As we consider this reality check, we hope this information will support your most creative, productive approaches to raising money and engaging your community.

“Much of what is true for successful offline fundraising is also true for online methods. The method is not the panacea; it’s all about the time and attention invested in creating a compelling message and a well-thought out plan; frequent and regular contact with potential donors; and tracking results and adapting accordingly. In the online world, there is faster access to data and greater opportunity to adapt, so over time it will cost less to deeply engage potential donors.”

— Meredith Emmett, Third Space Studio and Institute for Conservation Leadership consultant





Introduction

I have the good fortune of serving on the editorial board of the *Grassroots Fundraising Journal*, the only fundraising publication dedicated to the needs of grassroots organizations working for social and racial justice, human rights, and environmental conservation. At the age of 53, I am perhaps the oldest member of the group — I’m surrounded by fundraisers and consultants in their 20s and 30s, all of whom are sharp, articulate, and wise.

At our November meeting, one person mentioned that he had just written personal notes on 300 year-end appeal letters. Everyone groaned in empathy: 150 personal notes here, 200 there, around the circle we went discussing our ink-stained fingers.

Halfway through, I started laughing. In this tech-savvy group of emerging leaders, I wondered, why is everyone so devoted to a fundraising technique that’s even older than I am?

“Given all the online fundraising and social networking opportunities available to us,” I asked, “is anyone *spending less time and money* on their mailings or events or outreach to major donors? Are you writing fewer grant proposals? Are you doing fewer donor visits? Do you know any organizations that have actually *replaced* the old traditional strategies with new ones?”

Silence. Nobody said a thing.

We learn about millions of dollars raised for Haiti via text messages. We study how Obama for America electronically engaged a new generation of voters and activists and convinced them to give. We hear rumors of viral fundraising campaigns started by teenagers that spread across Facebook and raise thousands for villages in Africa. We ask, “How do I get some of that?”

This report is less about the nuts-and-bolts and more about the costs, benefits, opportunities, and challenges of embracing online fundraising. What are your peers doing? What’s working and what

→ **The sweet spot is the place where old techniques and new technologies come together.** ←

isn’t? Rather than a comprehensive survey, this is a snapshot of how a handful of mostly local and regional organizations are trying to take advantage of online fundraising opportunities, and what they are learning along the way.

Warning: not every cost is financial, and not every benefit can be tallied in cash. While each new technology adds another tool to the fundraiser’s toolkit, it also adds to her workload — a huge challenge for the chronically understaffed. Of the fifteen organizations featured in this report, *most are raising only 1-2% of their annual budgets from online giving*, so this is unlikely to be a replacement strategy any time soon. However, this percentage is likely to grow as nonprofits and donors become more comfortable with online fundraising, so we need to pay attention and begin adapting now.

The best news is that emerging technologies create great opportunities to engage donors, which can result in deeper commitment, a new pool of volunteers, greater board involvement, and more generous *offline giving*.

The sweet spot is the place where old techniques and new technologies come together.

Online strategies and opportunities



Broadly speaking, the nonprofits profiled in the report have focused on four approaches:

- Email campaigns
- Team fundraising with personal fundraising pages
- Competing in online contests
- Integrated campaigns: Using email and social networking tools to increase offline (and online) giving

This report also touches on earned income, including e-commerce and the use of online advertising. What follows is not a “greatest hits” collection; rather, it details both hits and misses, and how organizations are adapting based on their experiences.

Email campaigns

The classic email fundraising strategy follows a few basic rules:

- It's time-limited: the campaign has a deadline
- It's usually built around a specific theme or program goal
- A challenge gift is often used, and the challenge must be met by the campaign deadline
- During the campaign, prospects receive lots of email - as many as one message per day

The **New Mexico Wilderness Alliance** organized their first email campaign in 2007, beginning with a list of 5,000 email addresses and a challenge gift of \$5,000 from the board. Using daily emails with a graph showing campaign progress, they recruited 200 donors and met the match in three days. In 2008, they began with a \$10,000 challenge, sent a series of “teaser” emails before the campaign, and raised \$12,000 in a week. In both cases, the pitch focused on general support gifts for wilderness protection. “It was easy,” says development director Tisha Broska. “Maybe too easy.”

In 2009, they linked their campaign to a pending Congressional wilderness bill for southern New Mexico. This turned out to be a much harder slog. It was more difficult to line up a challenge gift (probably due to the economy) and once they launched, the campaign lagged. After five days of limited returns — an average of 12 gifts and \$705 per day — they analyzed their list and realized that only 20% of their contacts were located near the proposed wilderness. The much larger population in the northern part of the state was less familiar with the area and consequently didn't care as much. So they switched to a more general pitch, extended the campaign for five more days, and got immediate results. Daily averages jumped to 22 gifts and \$1,613. By the end of the second week, they had met their goal.

←
“If you are running a campaign and you push it from 18 different places, it's going to be better. But if you have to pick one, growing your email list is going to be a better use of your time.”

— Judith Freeman, New Media Field Manager, Obama for America, quoted in “Online Tactics and Success: An Examination of the Obama for America New Media Campaign”
→

Grist is an online source for environmental news, known for both its thoughtful content and cheeky attitude — their current motto is, “A beacon in the smog.” With a budget of \$3 million and an email list of more than 280,000 addresses, the organization is the largest nonprofit included in our survey.

Their twice-annual email campaigns are tied to specific themes that may have little to do with the environment. For example, “Operation Fundraising Lockdown” was based on the fictional premise that no staff member could leave the office until readers contributed \$50,000. Several emails sent over two weeks detailed life in the office, 24-7: bad food, bad smells, bad attitude. The emails included links to a series of videos showing employees sleeping on the floor, lining up for the bathroom, having pillow fights, etc. Everything was delivered with an electronic wink and nod befitting Grist’s identity and sly sense of humor.

This sort of theme — “save us from ourselves” — subverts one of the basic rules of fundraising, because it focuses on internal operations rather than delivery of the mission. However, this approach works well for Grist because it fits the organizational culture and brand. Their readers want the inside story and expect something subversive.

Their two-week campaigns typically raise \$30,000 to \$85,000, engaging 2,400 to 3,000 donors per year. Email open rates are 6% to 9%, with average gifts of \$41 to \$73 per campaign.

The **New England Grassroots Environment Fund** is a funder/activist collaborative that raises money from regional foundations and distributes it as small grants. When they say “grassroots,” they mean it: almost half the grantees are informal groups without 501(c)(3) status from the IRS. Founded in 1996, the fund has supported more 1,000 groups across six New England states.

Under the motto, “Please give back to give forward,” the staff launched a program encouraging grantees to show their thanks by making online donations. Called *root\$hare*, the campaign was rolled out over six weeks with a series of 3,000 individualized emails. More than 200 donors responded with a total of \$15,000 - including one group that returned their grant because they had won their issue and no longer needed the money.

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Despite some nervousness about asking grantees for money, “We’ve had lots of compliments and zero complaints.”

—Ginny Callan, Program Officer,
New England Grassroots
Environment Fund

Despite some nervousness about asking grantees for money, “We’ve had lots of compliments and zero complaints,” says program officer Ginny Callan. “In fact, a few folks called and wanted to know if we were hurting, if we’d lost *our* grant.” Callan and her colleagues hope to grow the program to \$100,000 annually, with the money returned to the community in the form of grants. Since they have only one email contact per grantee organization, their biggest challenge is getting email solicitations forwarded to fellow activists. “If we can find a way to go viral,” says Callan’s colleague Bart Westdijk, “eventually we’ll reach our goal.”

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Team fundraising with personal fundraising pages

Like the New England fund, **Freshwater Future** is a re-grantor: the nonprofit raises money from major regional foundations and uses it to support grassroots water protection in the Great Lakes region. The staff also provides training and consulting assistance to help grantees become more effective.

In 2008, facing a big reduction from a primary funder, Freshwater Future began developing strategies to diversify income. Step 1: engaging more askers by recruiting board and staff participation. With trustees spread across several US states and Canadian provinces, they decided to combine their efforts in a virtual event: each participant would do his or her own personal hike-, bike- or paddle-a-thon in a favorite local landscape. One board member rode his bike 16 miles, a staff member walked and ran 26 miles, a third person took a three-day paddle on Lake Superior.

“My board was resistant at first, but they all said it was the easiest ask they had ever done.”

— Jill Ryan, Executive Director,
Freshwater Future

Freshwater Future used FirstGiving, an online portal that allows each participant to create an individualized fundraising page with photos and a pitch, then email the link to their personal lists. The results exceeded expectations: they netted more than \$7,000 with nine solicitors bringing in between \$300 and \$1,300 each. A total of 161 people — nearly all of them new donors — gave an average of \$48.

They following year they opened the program to grantees. To add a competitive flavor, Freshwater Future offered splits ranging from 50/50 to 25/75, with the groups bringing in the most money keeping a higher percentage. Out of 150 grantees, five groups chose to participate — “The ones we were working with most closely” says Ryan. Five sponsors, including a large regional nonprofit, paid fees of \$100 to \$1,000 to support the virtual event. After expenses and splits were paid, Freshwater Future netted about the same amount as the first year. In 2010 they hope to expand the program to include ten partner organizations and \$15,000 in net income.

As recently as four years ago, Freshwater Future received 100% of its revenue from one foundation grant. Today, foundation income (from several funders) is only 39% of the budget.

Other organizations have used a similar tools and tactics:

- Beginning in 2009, **Georgia River Network** used FirstGiving to double income from the Paddle Georgia canoe-a-thon as follows.

Online giving engaged a lot more donors and doubled total income, but it’s useful to note that the largest gifts were solicited through offline strategies. This includes a \$3,500 contribution, essentially an annual major gift designated to the canoe-a-thon.

	2008	2009
Number of solicitors	15	37
Raised online	\$450	\$9,750
Number of gifts online	8	229
Largest gift online	\$100	\$500
Raised offline	\$8,870	\$7,843
Number of gifts offline	92	65
Largest gift offline	\$1,000	\$3,500
Total raised	\$9,320	\$17,593

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“This is an almost
bulletproof way to raise
a lot of money fast.”
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—Amy O’Connor, Wild Utah Project
and ICL consultant

■ Seven solicitors from the **Wild Utah Project** used FirstGiving to net more than \$6,500 over three months. Noting that most gifts were received promptly once solicitors contacted their email lists, development director (and ICL consultant) Amy O’Connor says, “This is an almost bulletproof way to raise a lot of money fast.” According to O’Connor, FirstGiving projects that if each solicitor sends an email link to 50-100 prospects, that action should yield ten gifts of \$45 each, “though we showed you can actually do better than that.”

■ **Student Action with Farmworkers** brings students and farmworkers together to learn about each other’s lives, share resources and skills, improve conditions for workers, and to build diverse coalitions for social change. A network of alumni, students, board, and community members participated in the Farmworker Awareness Campaign, their grassroots fundraising effort, which launched in 2009 with assistance from the Environmental Support Center. Participants used a combination of house parties and online fundraising via the organization’s NEON database, a general-purpose fundraising and contact management program that also allows individuals to create a personal fundraising page and send links to friends and family. Top fundraisers competed for prizes (iPods, Flip video cameras, gift cards) during this six-week campaign, which grossed nearly \$14,000 and brought in 211 new donors.

While FirstGiving seems to be the software of choice for these kinds of campaigns, former *Grassroots Fundraising Journal* editor Stephanie Roth points out that many database programs contain a personal fundraising page feature — including databases organizations may already be using.

Competing in online contests

In 2009, the national nonprofit River Network teamed up with MillerCoors to host an online contest promoting river protection. Local watershed organizations based in states where the company has breweries were invited to collect online votes during a four-week window, with the top four groups receiving grants of \$10,000 each. The **Little Tennessee Watershed Association** and **Milwaukee Riverkeeper** were among the winners with 1540 and 1987 votes, respectively.

→ In turning out the vote, both organizations relied primarily on three tools.

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Once our message got
into the school and
county email systems —
we work with them on
various projects —
it really took off.”
←

—Jenny Sanders, Executive Director
of the Little Tennessee Watershed
Associaton

■ **Email.** “We started with our own list, which includes 250 addresses,” says Jenny Sanders, executive director of the LTWA. “Then we went after family and friends. Once our message got into the school and county email systems — we work with them on various projects — it really took off.” Paul Schwarzkopf, outreach coordinator at Milwaukee Riverkeeper, concurs: “We tried to get on as many listserves as possible.”

■ **Website.** “We posted updates to our website every three or four days,” says Schwarzkopf. “When we were stuck in fifth place and needed to crack the top four, we did a big push.”

- **“Facebook** was big for us,” says Schwarzkopf, citing the number of website hits initiated through the social network. “We have 250 fans. Now we’re using social media as a turnout tool for our events, like the river cleanup.” Sanders had a different experience, however. “We posted weekly reminders to Facebook,” she said, but Sanders was unable to track the impact and is a bit dubious about the time they invested. “In principle, it was easy for our members to contact friends and get them to vote for us. In that way — and with their ‘birthday wish’ tool — Facebook was marginally helpful. But only marginally.”

← **“Facebook was big for us”**

— Paul Schwarzkopf, Outreach Coordinator at Milwaukee Riverkeeper

← **“Facebook was marginally helpful. But only marginally.”**

— Jenny Sanders, Executive Director of the Little Tennessee Watershed Association

Integrated campaigns:

Using email and social networking tools to increase offline (and online) giving

The **Sky Island Alliance** works to protect the unique habitats and species of the U.S. Southwest and northern Mexico. Their “Bring Back the Cats” campaign focused on restoring large felines - jaguars, mountain lions, ocelots, and other emblematic species — through the restoration of wildlife corridors and landscape connections.

With guidance from Training Resources for the Environmental Community, they rolled out the campaign over the last ten weeks of 2009. Components included:

1. Two challenge gifts of \$5,000 committed in advance.
2. A campaign kick-off event attended by 120 people.
3. One email per day for five days sent to their list of 3,500 addresses. “We used different photos and content for each one,” says executive director Melanie Emerson, “but the subject line was the same. People were calling us to say, ‘Stop sending the same email!’ Next time we’ll add a unique subject line to let people know it’s a series.”
4. Facebook postings for the organization’s 500 fans. “We had no reportable fundraising results from Facebook,” says Emerson, “though we can’t track the source of all our gifts.”
5. A personalized mailing to 150 to 200 major donors and prospects, seeking gifts of at least \$250. Several of these donors had attended the kick-off event.
6. Regular “Cat of the Week” updates on the website.
7. Follow-up emails with campaign updates.
8. Personalized thank you notes to all campaign donors from program staff.
9. Thank you phone calls to all donors giving \$200 or more.
10. A year-end mailing and email request to capture any last-minute donors.

← **“Email is one more touch, so do it — but snail mail gets better results.”**

— Stacey Kawakami, Regional Online Organizer, Sierra Club

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“Hand-written notes [on fundraising letters] from staff and board made the biggest difference. Donors told us that’s why they kept us on their list this year.”
←

—Melanie Emerson, Sky Island Alliance Executive Director

By the time the campaign ended, Sky Island Alliance met its goal of \$30,000, including \$5,000 contributed online. When the challenge gifts are subtracted from the total, the average campaign contribution was \$135 — a number that would make any grassroots organization proud.

“The big donors continue to give in traditional ways,” Emerson says. “Hand-written notes [on fundraising letters] from staff and board made the biggest difference. Donors told us that’s why they kept us on their list this year.”

Other organizations have successfully combined online and offline fundraising techniques.

- **Northwest Coalition for Alternatives to Pesticides**, uses their email newsletter, online petitions and action alerts to gather names and snail mail addresses. Membership mailings to these lists generated response rates of 1.2 - 1.9%, considerably higher than the .8% typical for direct mail acquisition. Follow-up telephone calls to segments of list also helped to boost result. As former membership coordinator Katie Schuessler wrote in the *Grassroots Fundraising Journal* (May-June 2009), “Our experience proves that a combination of strong email communication and a traditional direct mail program can result in new members.”

- Of all the organizations profiled in this report, the **Ohio Environmental Council** is one of the most diligent in tracking and analyzing its results. The organization been raising money online since 2003, with annual totals ranging from \$1,066 to \$8,122 and average gifts of \$34 to \$104. Staff is committed to social media, spending at least two hours per week creating content for Facebook (400+ friends) and Twitter (2,000+ followers). They post videos to YouTube two or three times each month. They invest two hours per week updating the website, which attracts 2,500 to 3,500 unique visitors each month. “We’re pretty efficient with our time,” says Jen Doron, the former marketing and communications director. “For other groups, it may take more time to post content, but it’s worth the effort.”

Despite overall fundraising success — annual budgets as large as \$1.5 million, with 67% to 75% from foundation and government grants and the balance from individuals, businesses, and other nonprofits — online fundraising continues to lag. “We’re really struggling to figure this out,” says development director Jodi Segal.

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Clearly, more contact equals deeper engagement equals more generous gifts — but nearly all these contributions arrived by postal mail.
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The OEC has been most successful using email to boost traditional giving. The organization has email addresses for 40% of its 2,500 members, who receive a monthly e-newsletter (with a 16-22% open rate), two action alerts per month, and up to six electronic invitations per year for community events. The comparison between email and no-email members is striking: those without an email address give \$45 per year in membership fees, while those who receive OEC emails give \$83 per year. Clearly, more contact equals deeper engagement equals more generous gifts — but nearly all these contributions arrived by postal mail.

Other online strategies

- **Green registry.** The **Sierra Club Rocky Mountain Chapter** launched a green registry that allows people celebrating weddings, births, and other life events to direct donations to the Sierra Club in their honor. In a little less than a year, the registry raised \$1,000 from one wedding party. Due to staff turnover and a pressing slate of legislative issues, “We’re not promoting it as well as we could be,” says vice chair Steve Welter, “but we’re hoping it will catch on the coming year.”
- **Online advertising.** **Five Valleys Land Trust** purchased online advertising to support its \$250,000 challenge campaign, which was successfully completed in December 2009. These banner ads, prepared for free by a local agency, were designed to drive traffic to the land trust’s website. They generated more than 800,000 impressions (the number of times people viewed the ads) and a click-through rate of .08%, a bit better than the industry average of .06%. “When the ads were running, we saw a big increase in traffic to our web site,” says Glenn Marangelo, the development director, “so they helped build awareness of our campaign. Unfortunately, we didn’t see a corresponding increase in online donations.”
- **E-commerce.** **Native Seeds/SEARCH** preserves and distributes the traditional crop seeds of the greater Southwest. In a typical year, 30% to 40% of the group’s revenue is earned from the sales of seeds, traditional foods, indigenous crafts, and other products. While the organization has a retail store and continues to publish paper catalogs, an increasing percentage of sales have moved online. In 2009, more than \$100,000 — nearly one-third of all sales income — came from website orders.

← “When the [online] ads were running, we saw a big increase in traffic to our web site, so they helped build awareness of our campaign. Unfortunately, we didn’t see a corresponding increase in online donations.”

— Glenn Marangelo, Five Valleys Land Trust Development Director
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What does this all mean?



The activists and fundraisers interviewed for this project are intrigued by the suite of emerging tools, but are also wary of unrealistic expectations and concerned about the time and discipline required

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“It’s so easy for the big groups to overwhelm the little ones like us. Things go out of vogue before you figure out how to use them.”

— Jenny Sanders, Executive Director, Little Tennessee Watershed Association
←

to master these tools. As author and fundraising expert Kim Klein has noted, the grassroots are always the last to benefit from each new technology. Is the problem self-inflicted, as Dean Ericksen suggests - or does it come from being perpetually under-resourced and overwhelmed? The answer, perhaps, is “Yes.”

We may be entering a brave new world, but we’re bringing a lot of the same old stress.

With the understanding that your experience or analysis may lead you to different conclusions, here is our distillation of the case studies and stories featured in this report.

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“Technology is a perceived barrier for grassroots groups. It’s a Luddite thing. People are more proficient than they realize.”

— Dean Ericksen, former IT manager of Grist and former Technical Director of ONE/Northwest, now known as Groundwire
←

1. Despite the proliferation of communications tools, **personal contact and relationship-building trumps everything**. As Jodi Segal at the Ohio Environmental Council notes, “I’ve noticed that colleagues in their 20s tend to text or email before picking up the phone or setting up face to face appointments. Over time, personal contact will become even more valuable because fewer people will be doing it.”

When personal contact is impractical, Dean Ericksen advises that “the perception of personalization” is the next best thing. “The reason handwritten notes work is they show a personal connection between people. The closer that online tools can aspire to that standard, the more successful they will be.” In all communications, he notes, including the electronic variety, “It matters who it’s from, and it matters who it’s to.”

“The next technological challenge,” says Elizabeth Hospodarsky of Training Resources for the Environmental Community, “is this: How do we move social media contacts up the ladder of engagement — how do we build that personal relationship online — so they become members or donors?”

2. **Collect all the email addresses you can, then use them**. Fill those inboxes with timely, compelling information and action opportunities. Email may not yield a lot of online gifts - an easy-to-use link to the donation page will improve your returns - but repeated contact with donors and prospects will boost offline giving.
3. **Websites are still essential for effective fundraising**. A November 2009 survey conducted by the software company Convio revealed that 61% of donors visit a nonprofit’s website before mailing in checks. This is another example of how your online presence supports offline contributions — so give some love to your website.

4. **Social networks like Facebook remain a lower-tier fundraising strategy — at least for now.** “From a fundraising perspective, external social networks are not a good use of time,” says Stephen Geer, who directed email and online fundraising for Obama for America. Quoted in the Online Tactics and Success report, he adds, “No one has really cracked that code.” Jill Ryan of Freshwater Future echoes his point: “We tried soliciting via Facebook and got no response.”
5. Several groups interviewed talked about plans to **use online appeals to build a monthly giving program**, also known as recurring gifts. Network for Good notes that 20% of the online donations they process are for recurring gifts. This is the future of fundraising: it’s easy for donors, it’s lucrative for nonprofits, and the renewal rates are extraordinary. If you have an online fundraising strategy — or even if you don’t — it’s time to prioritize monthly giving as part of the pitch.
6. **Perfect conditions never exist, so do what you can with what you’ve got — and do it now.** Ginny Callan of the New England Grassroots Environment Fund notes that the organization spent months developing the perfect appeal for their online fundraising program. In retrospect, a “pretty good pitch” would have worked just as well, she says.
7. **Many online strategies won’t pay off for awhile, but try them anyway as time and money are available.** The final word goes to Mal Warwick, one of the godfathers of direct mail fundraising. In his February 2010 newsletter he writes, “Nonprofit organizations must be ready to risk some hard-earned revenue in exploring new approaches to fundraising and marketing that may not yield substantial cash returns until many years in the future.”

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“...personal contact and relationship-building trumps everything. Over time, personal contact will become even more valuable because fewer people will be doing it.”
→

—Jodi Segal, development director
Ohio Environmental Council

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“Nonprofit organizations must be ready to risk some hard-earned revenue in exploring new approaches to fundraising and marketing that may not yield substantial cash returns until many years in the future.”
→

— Mal Warwick, Chairman,
Mal Warwick Associates

To which we would add: Be selective. Be smart. Be realistic. Be organized. And keep working the traditional techniques that still work.





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