Digital Fundraising Playbook Series:
Email Marketing Basics

Introduction and Program Overview

Email is a huge fundraising revenue driver for organizations, and it is not a difficult channel for municipal shelters or nonprofits to implement. In 2020, email drove 19% of online revenue for nonprofits of all types and sizes, and that share grew to 20% for small to medium nonprofits.

While no statistics currently exist for municipal shelters that are thinking about implementing an email program or growing an existing email program, these shelters should focus on the same key areas to ensure optimal marketing and fundraising performance, ease of deployment and data quality. These key areas are:

- Email platform
- Email list
- Email templates
- Email proven practices
- Email strategy
- Email tracking and measurement

Program Composition

Email platform

A wide range of email marketing platforms are available for organizations, and it can be daunting to choose one. If you are just getting started, consider a tool like [MailChimp](#) or [Constant Contact](#). Both offer impressive functionality, user-friendly drag-and-drop templates optimized for mobile devices, and nonprofit pricing. You'll also want to choose a tool that will allow your program to grow beyond where it is today. Consider how the cost will change as the size of your list grows, and whether you want functionality like [automated](#) or triggered email, and the ability to label or tag your list for greater segmentation.

Email list

As you grow your email program, make sure you are managing your email list properly.

Email opt-in: Make sure that each person on your list has said (in writing, verbally or by checking a box) "Yes, I want to receive email from your organization." This requirement is imposed by the CAN-SPAM legislation; it will keep you out of potential legal trouble and protect your email deliverability. Most email platforms will enforce this rule and remind you every time you try to add people to your list. You cannot grab email addresses from websites or any other third-party source where the person is not able to provide opt-in.

Where you store your list: You may have been keeping your email list in a spreadsheet or some other offline tool, but once you have a platform in place, you need to manage your list within that tool. There are a few reasons for this: (1) It is a centralized, backed-up location that any authorized personnel can access; (2) this system will track opt-in and unsubscribes for you; and (3) this system will also track bounces and response to help you understand who you should email more or less.

Collecting email addresses: Now that you understand email opt-in and have a central storage location, you should create an email signup form that is connected to your email platform. The goal is to reduce the need to manually import email addresses as much as possible. Link to this form from your website, Facebook page and print promotional materials.

You may also need to collect email addresses in places where you cannot use an online form (e.g., at in-person events), in which case you should use a paper form that has very clear "Yes, please send me email updates" language. You can find online templates on which you can model your paper form [here](). Add these email addresses to your system as soon as possible; 48 hours is the rule of thumb.

Email templates

Email templates allow you to minimize the work it takes to build a single email without sacrificing design, branding or functionality. Your template should be:

- Mobile-responsive: Images should scale and font size should adjust on smaller screens.

- Accessible: Fonts are clear and legible; images have [alt-text]() links and buttons are clearly [styled.]()

- Branded: Put your logo at the top and your physical address and contact information in the footer.

Beyond these items, your template can take many forms — whatever best fits your organization and your content. You may choose to have a few templates for different types of emails (e.g., a standard template, a newsletter template and an event invitation template). Some basic [HTML]() knowledge (which you can acquire through a standard online course) can be very helpful, even when using a drag-and-drop tool.

Email proven practices

These additional proven practices will improve the performance of your emails:

- **Subject lines**: Keep them short (around 40 characters) for mobile and make it clear what your email is about. Action-focused subject lines will drive the most opens (for example, "Act now to help homeless pets").

- **Body copy:** Use concise copy that clearly tells readers what you want them to do. Skimmers use text links and bolded text to get the gist of the email, so make sure they align with your main call to action. Limit each email to one call to action, if possible.

- **Formatting and tone**: Personalize your email with a salutation ("Dear Fred"). Put a specific name at the end of the email (just as you would have someone sign a letter). Both practices help the email to sound like one person writing to one person, which supports personalization. Keep the copy focused on your supporters and their impact, rather than the organization. Use "you" more than "we" or "I."

Email strategy

You'll need a strategy for how and when you are going to email your supporters. Keep in mind that email is an important donor care (also called stewardship) channel for donors who give through all channels. Donor stewardship includes everything from the initial thank-you to ongoing communications about the impact of the donor's gift. Be sure you are planning for a balance of stewardship, fundraising and other ways to get involved with your organization. Considerations include:

- What kind of information and opportunities will be interesting and engaging to your supporters? Don't send an email unless you have something compelling to say or ask.

- How much bandwidth do you have for preparing and sending emails? Be realistic about what is manageable.

- How much content is already being produced or could easily be produced and used for email?

The types of emails to consider include newsletters, fundraising appeals, adoption promotions, event announcements, stewardship and other "just for fun" content (e.g., videos, quizzes).

Email tracking and measurement

It is important to track basic email metrics (provided by any email platform) over time to understand the health of your program. Here are the key metrics to track:

- Email list size
- Open rate
- Click rate
- Unsubscribe rate
- Response rate (number of people who took action and emails delivered)

Once you have established your own baseline metrics, you can start to compare them to the M + R Benchmarks or start testing. For definitions and more information, see our playbook *Top Six Metrics That Matter in Digital Fundraising.*

Conclusion

The notions that email is an "old school" channel and is difficult to implement are simply not true. In fact, email is a critical part of your entire digital fundraising strategy and it can be used for many purposes in addition to fundraising. By paying attention to the fundamentals described above, you can launch, sustain and grow a powerful revenue generator, increase your adoptions, promote and manage events, and build multi-faceted relationships with all your audiences through consistent, meaningful communication.

Resources

- Check out pricing and discounts for affordable options based on the size of your current and future audiences.

- M+R Benchmarks for Email: 2020 offers you comparative standards on a national basis.

- Code Academy's online course for learning HTML will help you jump-start your knowledge.