

How to treat your direct mail donors during a disaster

By Steve Maggio

HURRICANE KATRINA slammed into the Gulf Coast last month with all the fury that was predicted. Entire communities, including most of New Orleans, were swallowed by the surging torrent. Along with the heartbreak of shattered families and horrible loss of life came dire long-term economic consequences.

Then, hot on the heels of Katrina, came Rita. The Category 3 storm did not cause the same massive loss of life, but left the region with billions of dollars of additional damage.

As always in time of disaster, Americans responded generously – and continue to respond – not only with

Unfortunately, those of us in fundraising have learned some hard lessons of late.

We experienced the effects of Hurricane Frances and the tsunami in South Asia last year. Prior to that the 9/11 terrorist attacks and anthrax contaminations kept average Americans in fear in their own communities – and wary of their own mailboxes.

So what have we learned from recent history?

Hurricane Frances hurt several “non-disaster relief” mailers. For some, the initial impact on fundraising performance seemed devastating. But by the end of

I had a couple of clients that added inserts to address 9/11 in their mailings. Each time we tested it, we found that the insert depressed response.

So if your organization has nothing to do with hurricane relief, don't dwell on it. However, in your year-end mailings, you may mention that, due to the outpouring of support for relief efforts, you are “coming up short of year-end goals, and need help from our most loyal friends to continue serving those who need us.”

CAUTION CAUTION CAUTION

money, but also by opening their hearts, homes and communities to those who had suddenly become homeless.

Our best hope is that communities can be rebuilt, individuals and families can recover in mind, body and spirit – and that some good can come of the shortcomings in disaster preparedness that were brought to light.

At the end of it all – indeed, in the midst it all – comes the inevitable question:

How will these massive national disasters affect my own fundraising program?

STAY THE COURSE

The advice we've given to our clients at DaVinci Direct is to keep doing what you do best. Focus on your core donors – and after all is said and done, they will be with you through the worst of it.

the year, many found their faithful donors stepping up to the plate. People still gave that year – but they did so later in the year.

Of course, many fundraising programs are still in recovery from Frances and the tsunami even as this new hurricane season takes its toll.

When Katrina hit, some decided to “wait out the storm” by delaying drops. In some cases this makes sense. But if you mail frequently, you cannot afford to wait long. If you miss a donor mailing, you are sure to lose revenue. And what happens if another disaster – like Rita – occurs?

TO THINE OWN SELF BE TRUE

One thing we learned in the aftermath of 9/11 is that donors resent the idea of a charity “capitalizing” on a disaster. We saw a great deal of “patriotic” offers after 9/11 from charities whose central missions had nothing to do with patriotism. In many cases, these approaches backfired.

If your organization does play a supporting role in disaster relief, mention it on your website and perhaps in a section of your newsletter. But don't drastically change your donor mail strategy in response to disaster. Of course, you won't mail into affected areas. But depending on how often you mail and where your donors are, it may not be wise to change anything, without running the risk of making a bad situation worse.

Sure, you may have to take your lumps. Better prepare staff and board members for the worst. But don't lose faith in the people who have been loyal to you, time and again. Communicate with them, nurture them, but stay true to your central mission – and they will stay with you.

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