



America's
Giving Challenge 2009

**ASSESSMENT
& REFLECTION
REPORT**

Research by Beth Kanter and Allison H. Fine of Zoetica

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About the AGC 2009 Assessment and Reflection Report

About America's Giving Challenge 2009



America's Giving Challenge, presented by the Case Foundation, [Causes](#) and [PARADE Publications](#) was a 30-day national online competition that enabled passionate individuals and nonprofit organizations to easily leverage their online and offline personal networks to increase

awareness, attract new donors, and encourage people to get and stay involved with causes they care about.

Participants in the Challenge competed for \$245,000 in daily and overall awards funded by the Case Foundation, along with contributions from the Aspen Institute and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, which were given to the causes that received the highest number of unique daily donations. The Challenge brought together thousands of people and encourage more than 105,000 donations which helped to raise \$2.1 million for nonprofit causes.

For more information, visit <http://www.casefoundation.org/projects/giving-challenge>

Organizing Partners

The Case Foundation



The Case Foundation, created by Steve and Jean Case in 1997, invests in people and ideas that can change the world.

The Foundation champions initiatives that connect people, increase giving, and catalyze civic action.

For more information, visit <http://www.casefoundation.org/>

Causes



Causes empowers anyone with a good idea or passion for change to impact the world. Using the platform, individuals mobilize their network of friends to grow lasting social and political movements. To date, over 115 million Facebook users have installed the application and created and joined

more than 400,000 grassroots causes that benefit more than 78,000 nonprofit organizations.

For more information, visit <http://exchange.causes.com/>

Parade



PARADE Publications produces PARADE magazine, the most widely read magazine in America, which is distributed in more than 510 of the nation's top newspapers. The magazine, which launched in 1941, now has a circulation of 32 million and a readership of 74 million. Each Sunday in PARADE and every day at Parade.com, the organization's mission is to entertain, inspire and inform Americans about the issues they care most about and move them to action.

For more information, visit <http://www.parade.com/>.

In addition to the Case Foundation's leading contribution towards cash awards, generous donations were also provided by:



Research Team

Allison Fine



Allison Fine is a writer and activist seeking to understand and enhance the utilization of new social media tools for social change. Co-author of the recently published *The Networked Nonprofit*, Allison also authored the award-winning *Momentum: Igniting Social Change in the Connected Age*. She is a Senior Fellow at Demos: A

Network of Ideas and Action and writes her own blog, A. Fine Blog. She is the host of a monthly podcast for the Chronicle of Philanthropy called Social Good. For more information, visit <http://www.allisonfine.com/>

Beth Kanter



Social media expert, author, and co-founder of Zoetica, Beth writes Beth's Blog: How Nonprofits Can Use Social Media, one of the most popular and longest running blogs for non-profits on the web. She is the co-author *The Networked Nonprofit*. She is the Visiting Scholar in Nonprofits and Social Media at the David and Lucile

Packard Foundation and in 2009 was named one of BusinessWeek's Voice of Innovation for Social Media.

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Zoetica



Zoetica provides communications services to non-profits and socially conscious companies. To help its clients affect social change, Zoetica provides communications consulting, training and strategy aimed at building relationships between clients and communities. As part of its mission, Zoetica's founders

donate 10 percent of the company's proceeds to choice non-profits.

For more information, visit <http://zoeticamedia.com/>

Opening Letter from the Research Team

July 15, 2010

It is our pleasure to submit this final report to the Case Foundation assessing the 2009 America's Giving Challenge. Over the course of two Challenges in three years, the Foundation and its partners at PARADE Publications and Causes have inspired many other corporations and foundations to launch contests of their own and enhanced the capacity of nonprofit organizations and their champions to utilize social media to raise funds, supporters and awareness. Nonprofit organizations, philanthropies of all types, government agencies and the corporate community will all find value in the best practices and lessons learned contained in this report and the related case studies.

We believe the Case Foundation's efforts as pioneers in charitable contests, challenges and open grant making have helped to catalyze the widespread proliferation of these approaches and associated best practices for promoting innovation and leveraging public participation. A number of survey respondents mentioned in the open-ended comments that Case Foundation played a significant leadership role in the prevalence of online giving contests. One respondent said, *"Thanks so much for being the innovators of online giving contests. Because of your effort there [are] many more opportunities that rally non profit teams across the country. That's a win."*

But it's not just a win for the Case Foundation and its partners. The general contest trend has contributed to the industry's adoption of online fundraising via social media. It's a testimony to the entire nonprofit sector's growth in social media adoption and capacity to effectively use these tools to raise money and awareness for social change work.

Thank you to the contest participants who made both America's Giving Challenges such successes. And thank you to the many individuals from multiple sectors who shared their insights and invested in online conversations about the report's findings.

Beth Kanter and Allison Fine
Zoetica

AGC 2009 Assessment & Reflection Report

Research by Beth Kanter and Allison Fine of Zoetica

The 2009 America's Giving Challenge, presented by the Case Foundation, Causes and PARADE Publications (with additional matching funds provided by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and the Aspen Institute) was a national online competition that enabled passionate individuals and nonprofit organizations to easily leverage their online and offline personal networks to increase awareness, attract new donors, and encourage people to get and stay involved with causes they care about. This was the second America's Giving Challenge; [the first Giving Challenge](#) ran from December 2007 through January 2008. Both Challenges were effective in helping the nonprofit sector become more skilled in its use of social media and inspiring other corporations and foundations to launch similar online contests.

The 2007 contest pioneered the million-dollar social media-driven philanthropic contest era. The 2009 contest rode the crest of the contest wave amidst other mega contests like the Chase Community Giving Contest and the Pepsi Refresh Project. There were two primary differences between the first and the second round of the Challenge. The first difference was a shortening of the total time of the contest from fifty to thirty days. The second was the change in the rules concerning donors. In the first round an individual could only donate to a Cause once. This was changed in the second round to allow donors to give as often as they wanted (limited to one donation per day), and some Champions did just that by asking their donors to give on a daily or weekly basis.

In total, \$1,990,805 was raised from individuals during the 2009 America's Giving Challenge. More than 82,000 individual donors made 105,000 donations to 7,876 causes with an average gift of \$17.73. By comparison, during the 2007 America's Giving Challenge \$1,764,710 was raised from almost 72,000 unique donors to 6,418 causes with an average gift of \$24.50 overall with the use of the PARADE Magazine site for giving and \$17.30 on Facebook¹. During the first Giving Challenge, the public was able to participate and donate through Causes on Facebook, GlobalGiving and Network for Good. In an attempt to simplify the process, [Causes.com](#) was the sole portal for participation and donation for the 2009 America's Giving Challenge, although a platform upgrade was made that allowed people to donate without having to be a member of Facebook. This change in platform, the economic downturn and the proliferation of online giving efforts all may have played a role in the difference in dollars raised and average gift size between the two challenges. However, there is not a enough data to draw specific conclusions.

“America's Giving Challenge was a 30-day national competition that encouraged people to leverage online and offline social networks to help recruit supporters.”

“In total, \$1,990,805 was raised from individuals during the 2009 America's Giving Challenge. More than 82,000 individual donors made 105,000 donations to 7,876 causes with an average gift of \$17.73.”

¹ The average gift size in 2007 via Network for Good and Global Giving was \$24.50 compared to \$17.30 from Facebook Causes.

Contests have evolved with awards given for a wide variety of criteria, from popular vote and best concept to tournaments and the America's Giving Challenge format, which rewards cause champions who raise the largest number of friends. Since the Case Foundation and its partners first pioneered the giving contest concept, nonprofits have made great strides to embrace social media and online fundraising. There are now so many contests that nonprofits need to vet these opportunities to make sure they are in line with their mission and fundraising goals.

The following report encapsulates the main lessons extrapolated from the 2009 America's Giving Challenge and the data collected to assess the Challenge including a [survey of cause champions](#), four Conversational Case Studies hosted on the Case Foundation's blog: "[Darius Goes West: Inspiring Fans to Share Their Stories with Pride and Joy](#)," "[Students for a Free Tibet: A Mindful Social Media Strategy for Campaigns and Contests](#)," "[A Special Sauce for Contest Success](#)," and "[Reflections](#)". The [survey data is available online](#) and the [Conversational Case Studies](#) are attached to this report for public analysis and discussion.

“Since the Case Foundation and its partners first pioneered the giving contest concept, nonprofits have made great strides to embrace social media and online fundraising.”

The screenshot shows the 'America's Giving Challenge' website interface. At the top, there are navigation links for 'Home', 'Find Causes', 'Your Causes', and 'Best of Causes', along with 'Account' and 'Help' options. The main content area features a 'Congrats to the winners!' message with a thank-you note and a 'Total Challenge Impact' summary: 105,420 donations, \$2,101,914 raised, and 7,875 causes entered. Below this, there are sections for 'Presented By' (causes, PARADE, THE CASE FOUNDATION, W.K. KELLOGG FOUNDATION) and lists of winners for different prize amounts: \$50,000 Winner (OCEF), \$25,000 Winners (TPRF, Save Chinese Children), \$10,000 Winners (Ride 2 Recovery, Atlas Corps, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka Floods Relief Fund, Tibet Freedom Movement, Make Abortion UNTHINKABLE!, GlobeMed, Darius Goes West, Homeward Trails Animal Rescue, Five Star Life), Nov 5 Winners (OCEF, TPRF, Save Chinese Children), Nov 4 Winners (OCEF, TPRF, Save Chinese Children), and Nov 3 Winners.

Contest Campaign Best Practices

The 2007 America's Giving Challenge analysis revealed several characteristics of winning campaigns. Those attributes included immersion in the effort, viral communications, the success of smaller and volunteer organizations, a general lack of fundraising experience, and the ability to create campaigns on the fly.

For more information please visit <http://www.casefoundation.org/case-studies/giving-challenge-2009>.

The 2009 contest highlighted new common characteristics for winners. These attributes can be replicated across contests and general nonprofit social media outreach.

Personal Appeals: Personal solicitations to pre-existing networks of donors and friends through multiple channels were rated as the most effective methods for fundraising. Thirty-five percent of contest participants rated messaging to friends through Facebook as most effective; 32 percent rated personal email to friends, family and colleagues as effective or most effective; and 25 percent rated email to an existing organizational donor base as effective or most effective.

Use of Distributed Networks: Social media enables on and offline grassroots activism, giving nonprofits the ability to coordinate large numbers of people across distributed networks. This type of grassroots activism can be enormously effective for contests or any type of cause-based movement.

Some like [Atlas Corps](#) recruited 150 “Campaign Captains” before the contest started. Other organizations broke their efforts down into bite-size pieces for their volunteers by creating templates to use to send messages to their friends, post and comment on blogs, and create their own videos.

Additional assets included:

- **Thankfulness:** Many of the winners cited the importance of thanking donors profusely throughout the contest.
- **Transparency:** Creating public spaces to share information about who is doing what is also a very effective strategy.
- **Videos:** Most of the 2009 winners, including Conversational Case Study subject [Darius Goes West](#), made good use of videos to chronicle their efforts.
- **Storytelling:** The ability to tell stories to compel people to act in short, funny and meaningful ways was an essential element of success.
- **Calls to Action:** From YouTube’s annotations program to requests to tell five additional friends, strong campaigns included great calls-to-action, blending social stories with hard marketing.

“Personal solicitations to pre-existing networks of donors and friends through multiple channels were rated as the most effective methods for fundraising.”

“The ability to tell stories to compel people to act in short, funny and meaningful ways was an essential element of success.”

Nonprofit Adoption of Online Media for Fundraising

Philanthropic contests and online media have become a source of fundraising for many small nonprofits. Our analysis revealed that 40 percent of the cause champions were staff people and only a quarter identified as volunteers. This is a shift from the first Challenge where two-thirds of the champions were volunteers. In addition, almost 80 percent of participants had a donation button on their website, and nearly half raised money through Network for Good. Eighty percent were already using Causes on Facebook to raise money prior to the second America's Giving Challenge. This is evidence of a shift by nonprofit organizations that now see fundraising through their websites or using Facebook and other online channels as a viable and necessary part of their efforts.

Further, nearly 40 percent of the beneficiary organizations were over 10 years old, again a reflection of the increased comfort level that all nonprofit organizations, even those born before the digital revolution, now have with social media. Social media-specific fundraising, while in its infancy, has become a real part of day-to-day nonprofit online fundraising.

Vetting Contests as Part of Nonprofit Fundraising

Online contests have become much more common since the first America's Giving Challenge. This is particularly true in the United States. According to [a Knight Foundation report](#), 79 percent of the giving contests they analyzed occurred in the United States.

It is important to note that with the rise of the contest – particularly [cause marketing contests](#) – come challenges for nonprofits. The greatest risk is fatigue by donors and supporters through repeated asks to participate in giving contests.

Some contests have a winner-take-all, or at least most, of the donations or prizes. This creates many more losers than winners. The America's Giving Challenge design ensured that all participants could raise friends and funds simply by participating without necessarily being one of the top winners eligible for matching grants from the Case Foundation and its partners.

Contests for change need to have an end goal in mind. In its online giving contest report, [And the Winner Is...](#), McKinsey & Company said, "Good prizes will start with a clearly-defined aspiration for societal benefit, which can be translated into [specific prize objectives](#) that are significant, motivational, actionable, results-focused, and time-bound." Without a theory of change, an online giving challenge becomes rudderless and without impact. We find that's not a good use of a nonprofit's time, nor of its donors or volunteers.

“Social media-specific fundraising, while in its infancy, has become a real part of day-to-day nonprofit online fundraising.”

“Without a theory of change, an online giving challenge becomes rudderless and without impact.”

All of these issues create a need for nonprofits to make the decision of whether and how to participate in funding contests of strategic importance. This is particularly true for smaller organizations with fewer resources to devote to fundraising.

In the second Conversational Case Study, Students for a Free Tibet's Melanie Raoul, a winner in both America's Giving Challenges, said: "[Online contests can take a lot out of your volunteers, members, and staff](#). We don't enter every contest that comes along. We pick one per year."

Several considerations have emerged for nonprofits to consider when [vetting contests for their fundraising effort](#):

- Does the organization have enough time and resources to invest in winning the campaign?
- Is there a strong enough pre-existing network to reach out to friends and family?
- Will the contest help grow the network of people?
- How does the contest fit in the overall fundraising plan for the year?
- Will the frequency of communication from the contest cause donor fatigue?
- What will the impact be if the organization does not win the contest?

Collectively these criteria represent a mechanism to vet some of the challenges a contest can present.

As nonprofits continue to engage in contests, and as foundations and corporations continue to support and underwrite them, we hope they do so with an eye towards all of the positive impact that any particular contest might offer.

Conclusion

The theory of change for the America's Giving Challenge was to significantly enhance the ability of nonprofit organizations and causes to smartly leverage social media to raise funds and new supporters, which they could then use to help support and sustain their efforts in the future. As the statistics have shown, online fundraising with social media tools has become an accepted practice in 80 percent of all nonprofits.

We believe the efforts of the Case Foundation and its partners as contest pioneers have led to the widespread proliferation of contests and associated best practices. In addition, we also believe the general contest trend has contributed to the industry's adoption of online fundraising via social media.

"Online contests can take a lot out of your volunteers, members, and staff. We don't enter every contest that comes along. We pick one per year." – Melanie Raoul of Students for a Free Tibet

"As nonprofits continue to engage in contests, and as foundations and corporations continue to support and underwrite them, we hope they do so with an eye towards all of the positive impact that any particular contest might offer."

As a number of survey respondents mentioned in the open-ended comments that America's Giving Challenge played a significant leadership role in the prevalence of online giving contests. One respondent said, *"Thanks so much for being the innovators of online giving contests. Because of your effort there [are] many more opportunities that rally nonprofit teams across the country. That's a win."*

But it's not just a win for the Case Foundation, PARADE and Causes. It's a testimony to the entire nonprofit sector's growth in social media adoption and capacity to effectively use these tools to raise money for social change work.

"Thanks so much for being the innovators of online giving contests. Because of your effort there [are] many more opportunities that rally nonprofit teams across the country. That's a win." - AGC 2009 Participant

AGC Conversational Case Studies Series

The following Conversational Case Studies were part of a Case Foundation blog series designed to share information and garner feedback on America's Giving Challenge while the research process was still underway. The posts were published in June of 2010.

Introduction

By Beth Kanter

[Allison Fine](#) and I have been engaged in the evaluation process for the second the [America's Giving Challenge](#). We used a combination of traditional research methods, including a survey of 720 Challenge Participants in combination with unconventional techniques. To get behind the numbers and leverage the power of social media to ignite conversations and share our findings, we facilitated "Conversational Case Studies" that explore best practices in integrating social media with fundraising campaigns by the America's Giving Challenge (AGC) winners.

We'll begin by exploring how a small organization, [Darius Goes West](#), was successful in AGC. We wanted to begin with a small group because one finding from the survey of participants was that people still think that being a small organization is a disadvantage in online contests. Rather than just tell folks it isn't true, we thought we'd show it with an example. We end with questions that we're still wrestling with. In fact, all of the winners from this past AGC were small organizations, meaning organizations with less than \$5m in annual revenues.

Case Study: Darius Goes West

Inspiring fans to share their story with pride and joy

By Beth Kanter



Logan Smalley is the founder and co-president of the Darius Goes West Foundation, a small nonprofit that raises money to support research of the fatal genetic disease, Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy (DMD). Logan's best friend since age 5 is Darius Weems, a young man living with DMD. Darius's older brother, Mario,

died of the very same disease five years ago. Mario asked Logan to watch over his brother and Logan has done so in a unique and caring way.

In 2005, Logan created a feature length documentary called "[Darius Goes West](#)" that followed Darius on a cross-country journey with his 11 best friends to convince MTV to customize Darius's wheelchair on the hit show, Pimp My Ride. Today, the documentary has become a movement. Darius, Logan, and the "film crew," friends and volunteers, are on the road visiting high schools, colleges, and groups of young people across America to tell the story of Darius and raise money for this fatal genetic disease. As Logan says, "The movie is its own story, but we continually update our web site, social networks, and YouTube with the story. That's what has transformed it from a documentary into a movement."

While Darius Goes West is a new and small nonprofit, they are no strangers to using social networks. They have been working on social networks for years. Says Smalley, "We're early adopters because our target audience is high school and college students. You have to go where your audience is and that's where our audience has been hanging out. Social networks are our home turf."

It's All Building Relationships: Both Online and Offline

Darius Goes West finished the America's Giving Challenge in the top ten, winning a \$10,000 prize and raising an additional \$24,459 from 1,633 donations. Logan and Darius were not aware of the America's Giving Challenge until a high school student entered them. Says Logan, "I received a direct message from him on Facebook that said, 'I entered us in this fundraising contest. Don't worry, we're going to win. Your crew has got your back.'"

Says Smalley:

"We've met a lot of people over the years both offline and online. We try to keep a personal connection with everyone we meet and who helps us along the way. Relationships are very important. That's how we ended up being entered into the contest and ultimately why we won."

It is also a secret to their success today, the constant relationship building both online and offline and the use of personal contacts and solicitations for activities like the Giving Challenge.

Use of Engaging Storytelling That Is Funny, Compelling, and Short

Darius Goes West has assembled a large collection of photos and video clips of almost every school site they've connected with over the past five years and drew from that rich repository to create custom fundraising solicitation videos. Smalley says, "For example, we reached out to folks in Oregon County asking for donations and support for the America's Giving Contest. We used photos and video clips we had taken on previous visits."

They took advantage of all the [YouTube Nonprofit Program's](#) special features like embedded pop up links for voting, but Smalley credits their use of "dramatic cliff hangers" about their progress in the contest as well as Darius's unique brand of humor as keys to inspiring their network to take action.

Darius created an alter ego on video especially for the Giving Challenge and shared it on YouTube. His alter ego was someone well known to Darius Goes West Fans – John Madden. Says Smalley, "Our target audience is wild about John Madden video game, so Darius's endearing imitation really resonated." They created a series of videos updating their networks where they were in the contest and what they needed to win.

Smalley says that engaging storytelling, humor, and brevity are the keys to success with YouTube. Says Smalley, "We used Facebook and email to promote the contest, but it gets dry unless you use video and our audience likes the drama of that medium." Smalley said that their team watched the leader board like hawks. This was important so they could put a specific call to action embedded in their video solicitations. "We asked for a specific number of donations and used an embedded link for people to go right to the donation page."

Say Thank You and Celebrate Success

Smalley says every point of contact with your followers can't be an ask for something. Thanking people is essential for keeping one's network engaged. Smalley said, "Not only that you appreciated your network for what they did for you during the contest, but it helps maintain the relationship so the next time around, your network will be there for you."

Smalley doesn't look at contests as a one-time ask, but part of a continuum of social networking activities that involves empowering people in their network who know and love their story to share it with others. Says Smalley, "You have to stimulate an emotional incentive for people – so they feel a sense of pride and joy when they forward your organization's story to their friends."

Darius Goes West went on to participate in several subsequent contests, perfecting the techniques they used in the America's Giving Challenge. For example, they were winner of the Chase Community Giving contest. Says Smalley, "The America's Giving Challenge helped us reach new people, expanding our network, and motivated us to reconnect with people we hadn't touched based with for a while." Smalley says one of the benefits of these contests to small nonprofits is that they can be great catalyst to build your supporters network and catalyze them to action.

Discussion Questions:

- Whether you're participating in an online contest or implementing a fundraising campaign using social networks, you've got to engage your fans and make it easy for them to share your organization's story with pride and joy. What techniques are you using?
- How have you used social media to personalize your interactions with potential supporters?
- If you are with a small organization, how have you used social media successfully without a big marketing budget?
- How can we put to rest the assumption that large organizations have an automatic advantage using social media?

Please visit <http://www.casefoundation.org/blog/AGC-Conversational-Case-Studies-Darius-Goes-West> to view all the comments associated with this post.

Case Study: Students for Free Tibet

A mindful social media strategy for campaigns or contests

By Beth Kanter



Allison Fine and I have been working on an evaluation of the second [America's Giving Challenge](#). As part of the process, we are facilitating "[Conversational Case Studies](#)" that explore some of the themes that have surfaced from surveys.

This post explores how a small nonprofit, [Students for a Free Tibet \(SFT\)](#), a contest winner in the first and second America's Giving Challenges, is using social media effectively. SFT carefully vets contest participation to ensure it will be worth their time and energy as well as ensuring that the contest strategically aligns with their goals. They also understand how to avoid donor fatigue, the potential downside to online contests.

Friendraising and Fundraising on Social Networks

Melanie Raoul is a passionate millennial who knows what it means to put her life on the line for a cause. In 2007, she was one of six activists detained by the Chinese government after [adding the words "Free Tibet 2008" to an Olympic banner](#) and unfurling it on the Great Wall of China. She was [freed several days later](#), but her personal act of protest was the official beginning of a [one-year countdown of protests to the 2008 Olympics](#) organized by her organization, Students for a Free Tibet.

It was the dramatic backdrop of this campaign that Melanie Raoul entered her organization in the first America's Giving Challenge in 2007-2008. It was also their first experiment with Facebook [Causes](#) for fundraising, and they [raised \\$89,914 from 3,672 donors](#) and captured \$25,000 in prize money.

Says Raoul, "The Olympics Campaign catalyzed our movement with an unstoppable sense of unity for a free Tibet. It empowered [us] to enter the first America's Giving [Challenge] using a pull-all-the-stops campaign, which also helped us grow our network."

Entering Contests is a Strategic Decision

When the Case Foundation announced a second America's Giving Challenge in 2009, Students for a Free Tibet carefully vetted the opportunity. Raoul says, "[Online contests can take a lot](#) out of your volunteers, members, and staff. We don't enter every contest that comes along. We pick one per year."

They determine whether the contest has value by asking:

- Do we have the bandwidth?
- Do we have enough members who will volunteer to reach out to their friends and family?
- Will our participation in the contest help us grow our network of people who we can educate and engage about political freedom in Tibet after the contest is over?
- How does the contest fit in our overall fundraising plan for the year?

A big concern for SFT was how the contest could fit into their annual fundraising calendar. The November timeline meant it was nestled in between two of their most intense fundraising campaigns. Says, Raoul, "We decided to run a smaller, shorter, and a more focused contest campaign with a goal of recruiting new people by engaging our most passionate volunteers."

They also consider the long-term value. Says Raoul, "Our participation in the first Challenge helped us attract 50,000 new members both during and after the contest. Raoul notes that during the six months following the second America's Giving Challenge, they added another 25,000 members to their Cause. Raoul says there has been an uptick of members using the Birthday Wish campaign bringing in almost \$1,000 per month. She notes, "This activity happens without any additional effort from us."

Avoiding Donor Fatigue

Students for a Free Tibet understood well that a successful social media campaign has a call to action to achieve its goals, but [not so much frequency to create donor fatigue](#). Based on their experience with their member recruitment and online activism campaigns, SFT knew they could not ask supporters to donate every day during the month-long America's Giving Challenge. She said, "While the contest rules permitted daily donations and there were opportunities for daily prizes, if we asked people everyday, their passion for our cause would evaporate."

Raoul says they entered the contest painfully aware of the recession and the impact it might have on people's giving - another reason why they limited the number of times they asked for donations. They also understood that every contact with their donors should not be an ask for money. Raoul says, "The long term benefits of adding new members to our cause are only worth if we are continually creating ways to engage these new members and bring them closer to our cause once the contest is over."

Meet Members At Their Interest Level With Compelling Content

Students for a Free Tibet understands that not everyone who joins their Facebook Cause has the same level of interest or knowledge about their work. Raoul says, "People join our Cause on Facebook for many different reasons, and we have different levels of interest in our movement. This means we have different calls to action from simply sharing information, get them to take action online, participate in events offline, or simply educate them."

Compelling calls to action work better than begging for money. "We avoided a 'give us money to win a contest' message," says Raoul. Similar to [Darius Goes West](#), gripping personal stories and creative approaches are must.

Conclusion

Raoul sums up their best practices:

"At the end of the day, if you meet people where they are at – educate them, move them to take action, and cultivate them as donors, the more likely it is they'll invest in your organization when you do ask for money."

With the explosion of online contests available to nonprofits, how does your nonprofit vet opportunities to participate?

If an online contest has brought you new members and supporters, how do you continue to build your connection to them once the contest is over?

Resources:

- [Eight Tips for A Successful Cause Campaign](#)
- [Can the Contest Craze Be Sustained?](#)
- Online Contests: [What do your donors think?](#)

Please visit <http://www.casefoundation.org/blog/agc-conversational-case-studies-students-for-a-free-tibet> to view all the comments associated with this post.

Case Study: A special sauce for contest success

By Allison Fine



For this third and final Conversational Case Study on America's Giving Challenge from [Beth Kanter](#) and I, we will pose a question rather than answer one: Is there a "special sauce" for successful participation in online fundraising contests?

Any good sauce is always a combination of ingredients, never just one thing. So is successful social fundraising. Based on our assessment and review of winning efforts in other contests, it seems clear that some of the key ingredients include:

Personal Appeals

People naturally respond more frequently to personal appeals from family and friends. Personal solicitations to existing donors and friends through multiple channels were rated as the most effective methods for fundraising by Challenge participants. Thirty-five percent rated messaging to friends through Facebook as most effective; 32 percent rated personal email to friends, family and colleagues as effective or most effective; and 25% rated email to existing organizational donor base as effective or most effective.

Thankfulness

Many of the winners cited the importance of thanking donors profusely throughout the contest. [Food for People](#) not only made personal appeals to their donors but also went to great effort thanking their donors knowing that a well-thanked donor is likely to help solicit their own friends for the cause.

Transparency

Creating public spaces to share information about who is doing what is also a very effective strategy. The [Overseas China Education Fund](#) maintained and shared a wiki about who was asked to do what.

Spreading Out the Work

One of the most powerful attributes of social media is the ability of large numbers of people to coordinate their actions as part of a larger event. This type of grassroots activism can be enormously effective for contests or any type of cause-based movement.

Some like [Atlas Corps](#) recruited 150 “Campaign Captains” before the contest started. These Captains agreed to get between 5-10 of their friends to give to Atlas Corps during the contest. One of the Captains was so excited about the contest that he made a challenge to his friends that if 100 of his friends donated to Atlas Corps he would go on a 30-mile bike ride in his underwear. His friends responded and he lived up to his promise. [Take a look and see for yourself!](#)

Other organizations broke their efforts down into bite size pieces for their volunteers by creating templates to use to send messages to their friends, post and comment on blogs, and create their own videos. Here is a [template page for the Challenge created by GlobeMed](#) for its supporters.

A Picture is Worth a 1,000 Donors

Most of the winners, including our first Conversational Case Study organization [Darius Goes West](#), chronicled their efforts by video. Students involved in GlobeMed made a series of videos and posted them on YouTube.

Face-to-Face Can't be Forgotten

Brick and mortar methods still reign as a highly important aspect of online giving campaigns. [Five Star](#) worked with their local Chamber of Commerce gathering to set up a laptop and how to give in-person donations.

Contests are important to this concoction because they provide a framework for engaging the community, an urgent deadline for action and, in best cases (such as the Giving Challenge), matching funds for the winners. But in the end, we wonder if there is some other unique quality or combination of these ingredients that makes each person or groups efforts “special” and successful, that turns some combination of activities into a community of energetic people actively engaged in supporting a friend or a cause.

Our questions to our readers, doers, champions and participants, are these:

- In your experience does a concoction, some blend of activities and tasks, exist, that makes some groups or people more successful than others in fundraising contests? And if so, what are they?
- Under what circumstances does some combination of activities work best?
- Is there a tool or action you think might work well in the future that you'd like to test next time (e.g. a geo-location service like Foursquare?)
- Are we trying too hard to be prescriptive in discussing sauces, and should we just let people create their own recipes?

Please visit <http://www.casefoundation.org/blog/agc-conversational-case-studies-special-sauce-contest-success> to view all the comments associated with this post.

For more information please visit <http://www.casefoundation.org/case-studies/giving-challenge-2009>.

Case Study: Reflections

By Allison Fine



The past several weeks, we shared what we had learned about the second round of [America's Giving Challenge](#), and in return you told us your thoughts about the findings and the Challenge. This is exactly what we envisioned for these “Conversational Case Studies.”

Thanks to everyone who participated! This last post summarizes some themes and insights we gleaned from the conversation.

The [first post](#) was about a small organization, [Darius Goes West](#), that was a Giving Challenge winner because of relationship building the organization had done prior to the Challenge - a great story combined with smart and funny storytelling, primarily by video, and heartfelt thanking of volunteers and celebrations of their success.

The [second post](#) focused on [Students for a Free Tibet](#). They ended up a winner in both the first and second rounds of the Challenge. That post explored their formula for success, which included a combination of social media savvy and careful vetting of their participation in this contest to assure the contest aligned with their strategic goals.

For the [third post](#), we asked a question: *Is there a special sauce for winning contests?* Based on our analysis of the survey data of participants and the two previous case studies, we proffered that the special sauce might include:

- personal appeals
- thankfulness
- transparency
- spreading out the work
- the use of video storytelling, and
- on-land activities.

The first post, Darius Goes West, had the liveliest conversation in the comments, twenty-four of them in total! Our summary of the conversation that ensued on this blog, on our own blogs, and on Twitter is outlined below. Those conversations clustered around five themes:

1. the advantages to small organizations in online contests
2. the need to have joyous funerals by understanding and appreciating failures
3. the importance of relationship building
4. the intersection of community organizing and online fundraising, and
5. how to decide whether to participate in a contest.

And we were also privileged to receive one great idea discussed below. So, what did we discuss and learn together?

The Advantages of Being Small

Commenters weighed in on the question of what made smaller organizations successful in online contests. Stacey Monk, the co-founder of [Epic Change](#), provided a comprehensive list of the reasons that smaller organizations are successful in online contests that we summarize here:

- **Proximity to Personality.** People connect to people much more easily than they connect to organizations.
- **Necessity.** What we do have is social media - so we focus our resources & creativity there. Since social media is our primary channel, we have no other option but to make it good.
- **Risk Tolerance.** Small, upstart organizations might be a bit more comfortable with experimentation than larger organizations. Large organizations may feel a misstep could tarnish their brand somehow. Small organizations know mistakes are just part of the learning process, and it's great to do them early & often.
- **Rapid Adaptation.** Small organizations don't have layers of bureaucracy and approvals. If we have a strategy that's not working, we move to another one in a matter of minutes. We don't have to raise it up the chain of command for approval.
- **Authenticity.** Large organizations have a tendency to over-polish their social media efforts & they lose their humanity. That's not the case in Darius' videos. You know he's a real guy. The mistakes are edited in - not out - which may be precisely the opposite of what a larger nonprofit might do. In social media, authenticity always wins. Authenticity requires imperfection.

[Holly Ross of NTEN](#) wrote that small organizations can ably use social media to their benefit, however it comes with a steep cost for some: time.

[Donna Arriaga](#) summed up the benefits of smallness with this thought:

"I think a factor which may give smaller organizations a foot forward in social media is their malleability and capacity for adjusting swiftly to change."

Joyful Funerals

[Mom's Rising](#), an organization that is an expert in social media for social change, once shared the secret to their success: failure. In the video at the end of this post, Ashley Boyd explains how they give ideas or tactics that didn't work "a joyful funeral" and from that much learning and insight comes.

[Brian Reich](#) pressed us to study failure as well as success to learn about how and why these contests work.

[Beth](#) responded in the comments (the reason that we called these posts Conversational!) that the issue of why groups didn't do well had come up during the two assessments we've done of the Giving Challenge. She boiled them down into three categories: capacity to devote planning and implementation time to the contest, the lack of an existing and engaged network on Facebook coupled with a lack of personalized or compelling conversation starters, and a good vetting process for choosing which contests suit particular organizations.

Importance of Relationship Building Early

A pattern evident among the winners was the importance of relationship building prior to the contest. [Allison Jones](#) wrote:

"Something else that stands out to me is the amount of work put in long before the American Giving Challenge started. They seemed to have built up quite a following on and offline beforehand which makes me wonder if these online contests are only good for organizations that already have an online presence (I've heard the argument that these competitions can get nonprofits more interested in social media and refining their online strategy, but I'm not so sure this is the case for truly beginners)."

Regarding Darius specifically, [Debra Askanase](#) observed:

"What struck me as critical was the year of cross-country relationship-building that gave the organization the broad base of support to call upon to win an online challenge. AND that they understand how to capitalize on those relationships through meaningful, continuous engagements."

Grassroots Organizing is Key

At the heart of all of these contests is the need for participants to act like grassroots organizers. An irony of life in the connected age is that success involves the same skill set that have made neighborhood organizers successful for years. Debra Askanase has a great post [here](#) on the intersection between social media fundraising and community organizing.

[Maria Baldauf](#) wrote:

“The key in all of this is that people don't want to feel like their money just disappears somewhere in cyber space. They want to feel like whatever amount they are able to give has meaning, makes an impact or improves the world in some way.”

Susan Gordon of [Causes](#) wrote:

“My advice is to think about who your hard-core supporters are, think about what campaigns or stories they would most want to spread to their friends, and produce a grassroots campaign strategy that empowers those people to spread those stories. These lessons are true for challenges/contests but they are also true for any fundraising campaign, petition, or membership drive you're doing on any social media platform.”

Strategic Contest Decision Making

The second blog post on Students for a Free Tibet focused on their strategic decision making in regards to participating in the contest. Beth rolled comments about that story into a post about the [potential return on investment](#) for contests. To summarize, contest participants need to think about:

- Whether and how the contest aligns with their values, mission and goals.
- Are there benefits beyond money for the participant? Specifically, will participation be meaningful, fun or engaging for their community?
- Whether one has a realistic change of being successful in the contest.
- Will the contest provide any long term benefits?
- Will participation add to or detract from potential donor fatigue?
- Will the contest build our social capital with our network or expend it?

And One Great Idea!

Great ideas generally come when they're least expected. Logan Smalley of Darius Goes West shared a really terrific one:

"For any app developers out there. Our organization, many more organizations, and even for-profit companies would find a cross-platform metric system extremely useful."

Again, our appreciation and gratitude for the people who participated in this conversation. The comments and insights were enormously helpful. We look forward to sharing our final thoughts on the second round of the Giving Challenge in a few week.

Please visit <http://www.casefoundation.org/blog/agc-conversational-case-studies-reflections> to view all the comments associated with this post.