

Are social giving contests right for your organization?

Pepsi Enterprise
Case Foundation
APX Microsoft
Big Lots Chase
Care2 Toyota Kohl's
Google NetSquare
Great American

Non profits should approach social giving contests with the same level of evaluation and planning as any fundraiser. Organizations often experience a negative ROI when they abandon sound business practices for the lure of 'easy money'.

What are social giving contests?

Each year corporations give more than \$15 billion to charity. However, a vast majority of charitable contributions have traditionally been given to the nation's largest charitable organizations. Cause Marketing or Social Giving Contests represent a new trend in corporate giving that makes it easier for the general public to decide where corporate dollars should go through online contests. The popularity of such contests, fueled by the rise in social media usage, presents a new opportunity for nonprofits to gain exposure and earn money for their organizations.

Large corporations like JPMorgan Chase, Kohl's, Pepsi and Microsoft have launched innovative programs that encourage them to vote online for their favorite charity. In turn, the corporation gives away hundreds of thousands of dollars to the winning organization.

Although many corporations have only allocated a relatively small portion of the total charitable donations to social giving contests, the viral publicity associated with these contests continues to drive more and more companies into launching their own social giving campaigns. But there is a price to pay for the opportunity to cash in on one of these social giving contests, and nonprofits should approach such contests with the same sound business practices that they would use to evaluate and plan any fundraising opportunity.

Understanding the negative impact?

The lure of a payoff of \$25,000 to \$1 million grants can be too hard to resist for many nonprofits. As a result, they fail to assess any potential Return on Investment and identify the potentially negative impacts upfront. Social giving contests require patience, resolve and most importantly a commitment of time.

Con #1 - Social giving contest do not foster long-term relationships. Someone may vote for a nonprofit once and they may never do anything for that organization ever again. However, nonprofits that develop up-front strategies to create residual contact can often convert a one-time vote into the foundation of a long-term relationship.

Con #2 - 'ROI is king'. Before you make the decision to enter a social giving contest, you should carefully consider the time and money you will invest in the project. Does the potential prize offer a return on investment?

Every organization that has ever won a social giving contest had one similarity: A 'bulldog' employee who invested a majority of their time to the project. If you don't have a employee driving home your message and building relationships 24/7, then how do you expect to win.

Once again, does the potential prize offer a high enough ROI to warrant participation?

Con #3 - Do you know when to give up? Some contests, such as the Pepsi Refresh Project, can continue in for months. Yet, each passing month lessens an organization's chance of winning. If you do not fare well during the first month or two, are you prepared to walk away forever?

Con #4 - Are you asking too much? The timing and longevity of social giving contests need to be considered. Could your "ask" for a vote actually conflict with another fundraising campaign you have under way? Have you turned into a nuisance for your facebook friends or fans by posting non-stop and hounding them on a daily basis? Consideration of potential conflicts in timing and policies such as your organizations Social Media Strategy must be considered.

Con #5 - Others will lose sight of you values and mission. Inevitably, every person will believe that their project is the most important. As a result, emotions often boil over, creating personal attacks, allegations of cheating, and the use of deceptive practices to win. Be prepared to protect and uphold you core values and to accept the meaningless attacks of others as nothing more than "meaningless" attacks.

Remember....there are more pluses than just winning!

It's a campaign, not a contest...

Instead of looking at social giving contests as an all-or-none opportunity, nonprofits should consider the intangibles. Social giving contests offer an opportunity to excite your donor and volunteer bases by elevating your nonprofit to a national or even international stage.

Structure your campaign, to not only excite your current base of supporters but to encourage them to share your story with their friends. In 2010, I used such a campaign to ask our facebook fans to suggest their friends and family "like" our page. As a result, our fan base grew by 25% in a single month and we gained the ability to maintain contact and build a relationship with our new fans. Likewise, encourage the public to sign-up for email reminders to both encourage ongoing voting and provide an opportunity to maintain contact.

Remember...

**All good things
are taken in
moderation.**

**Use best practice
in social media
posting and email
marketing.**

Structure your campaign to promote your mission. The last campaign I worked on resulted in more than 2 dozen television, radio and print stories including two national features reaching more than 54 million households.

Size does matter...

If you have ever monitored social giving contests, you have noticed that smaller nonprofits have a distinct advantage. Smaller organizations, without multiple levels of approval, are more adept to making quick decisions in a world in which you may only have days to evaluate a contest. In addition, smaller organizations tend to be willing to accept the risk of defeat, as opposed to a multinational nonprofit who cannot internally accept losing to another "smaller" organization.

Smaller organizations also have an added benefit of a more tight-knit community of supporters and volunteers. Whereas, a large organization may rely upon a single email to 30,000 supporters; a smaller organization might influence three times that number by willing to engage in a online guerrilla marketing campaign designed to attract votes.

Build partnerships...

Most social giving campaigns do not limit the public to a single vote, but rather allow them to vote for a number of organizations. Our natural reaction is to refuse to promote our competition, but smart organization's recognize the potential power of strong, trustworthy partnerships.

In 2010, I leveraged partnerships to help 22 projects earn more than \$750,000 in Pepsi Refresh Project grant funding. As a result of strong relationships formed in 2010, partners returned a year later to help several of those partners earn additional funding in other social givings campaigns, including a personal victory in the Toyota 100 Cars for Good Project.

Partnerships with both local and non-local organizations can pay dividends far beyond a single contest. Months after I completed a successful social giving contest, I found that one of my partners, 1,000 miles away, was promoting our organization's facebook fan drive.

Strong social giving partnerships can help to build a lasting relationship that be mutually tapped in future campaigns.

Take a guerrilla marketing approach...

- **Social Media**
- **Email Marketing**
- **Voting Teams - volunteers to drive the vote.**
- **Press Releases - follow up with calls to friendly media outlets.**
- **Be sure to use website widgets.**
- **Contact local business groups.**
- **Set up voting drives on-location.**
- **If text-messaging is enabled, contact sporting venues.**

Think outside the box... Social Media alone will not earn you that elusive grant. If you want to earn funding through a social giving campaign then be prepared to use every weapon in your marketing arsenal.

To Consider

- Do you have a realistic chance of being successful in the contest?
- Have you established any secondary objectives tied to the contest?
- Do you have the necessary time and resources to commit to the contest to maximize the chances of winning?
- Will the campaign help build a new set of donors?
- Will participating in the contest strengthen your current digital marketing strategy by integrating social media tools and networks into the overall strategy?
- What kind of publicity will be generated from the application?
- Is there strong alignment between the contest's brand and your own?
- Does the contest align with your values, mission and goals?
- Will participation add to or detract from current fundraising campaigns?
- What is the potential for donor/volunteer fatigue?
- Can your organization give up and share control?
- If your non-profit wins, can you implement any funding from the contest with your current infrastructure?

About the author

Jarid Brown is the owner of HCM Brown and the Director of Online Interactions for The Hope Institute for Children and Families. In the past 2 years, Jarid helped local nonprofit and educational organizations secure more than \$175,000 through five social giving campaigns, including \$135,000 in funding through the Pepsi Refresh Project and a new vehicle in the Toyota 100 Cars for Good Project.

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