With the 2016 presidential election campaign in full swing, many Americans are now more focused on the issues that mean the most to them. Naturally, election years bring surges in donations for political candidates and causes. So if you’re a non-political organization, how should that affect your fundraising this year?

Charitable nonprofits have long viewed campaign years as challenging times for non-political fundraising. Many choose to invest less in their fundraising during a federal election year based on the assumption that donors who support political campaigns tend to turn away from non-political charitable causes during that time. But a recent study from Blackbaud reveals just the opposite.

The philanthropy software and services firm studied the effects of political campaigns on charitable giving during the 2012 election year. Its recent report, “Giving in an Election Year: How Political Giving Impacts Nonprofit Support,” tells us that political donors actually increased their giving to charities that year. And that’s not all.

Comparing Donation Data
In the study, researchers examined differences in charitable giving from 2011 to 2012. They looked for common donors between two national databases—one containing political donation records, and one housing charitable donation records. The 400,000 households that gave political gifts in 2012 and at least one charitable gift in 2011 and 2012 were labeled “political donors”. “Non-political donors” were those who gave at least one charitable gift in 2011 and 2012 but did not give to a political campaign. So what did this data uncover?

Who, When, and How Much?
According to the report, and contrary to conventional belief, political donors gave 0.9 percent more to charities in 2012 than they gave in 2011, with an especially notable increase of 10.8 percent among 25- to 34-year-olds. Interestingly, non-political donors gave 2.1 percent less to charities in the election year than they gave in 2011. Overall, political donors gave more to charity in 2012 than non-political donors, regardless of age range, household income, or gender. What does this tell us?

Takeaway and Recommendations
These results suggest that people who value engagement in one area of civic life are likely to value engagement in other areas. Giving to a campaign may indicate a stronger overall tendency to invest in public causes. Despite what many assume, nonprofit programs touched by key campaign issues could potentially benefit from the extra attention those issues receive during campaign season. And, the increase in charitable gifts from political donors ages 25-34 suggests that campaign years may actually be ideal target times for nonprofits to attract young donors.

Based on these discoveries, it might be time for some nonprofits to reconsider their approach to election-year fundraising. Blackbaud offers these recommendations:

- Decisions about new donor acquisition and reinstating intermediate- and long-term lapsed donors should be based on an assessment of the aggressiveness of 2016 campaign fundraising and the status of consumer confidence heading into the fall (as they impact overall competition for donations and likelihood of giving). While alignment of campaign issues, organization mission, and programs can be a good bet, risk should be weighed when making acquisition and reinstatement strategy decisions.
- Pay attention to the connection between passion for a cause and contributions. Use 2016 as an opportunity to align your advocacy and fundraising teams internally towards shared goals.
- Learn from political fundraising tactics. Political campaigns are fertile ground for fundraising innovation and are constantly developing best practices for rallying support. Look for opportunities to apply those methods to your own campaigns.
- Research the political engagement of your donors. Pay special attention to those who are engaged—especially if your mission is relevant to the elections.
- For general fundraising, continue to emphasize retention by cultivating existing donors and reinstating donors who have recently lapsed.

At Merkle Response, we advocate for the use of data-driven intelligence that helps our nonprofit clients succeed in their fundraising and serving their missions. We share this report as part of our aim to help clients adopt best practices based on the latest industry research and insights.
In our spring newsletter, I mentioned that while we have had a solid Account Management strategy over the years, it’s time to take a new look at that strategy. In this addition of our summer newsletter, I wanted to include thoughts from each of you.

I would like to ask that you answer the series of questions below and email them to me at your earliest convenience. In an effort to direct our strategic process with a future Client Services consulting firm, your responses to the questions below will also help me shape a more immediate direction of action in terms of customer service.

What is the one thing Merkle Response could do that would most improve our customer satisfaction? Your input is very important to me and the rest of Merkle Response. Please feel free to respond directly to me at kgrove@merkleinc.com at your earliest convenience.

Thank you - Kent

USPS News

Did you know that RMG tracks the deliverability of our USPS pick up locations by placing seeds in the mail for your organizations? Each month, my team selects clients and we mail from different drop off locations and then track the time it takes to receive the envelopes back at RMG. We not only track first class mail but BRE mail as well. We are compiling month’s worth of data on average deliverability time so we can help our clients make informed decisions about the postal facilities they should be working with. We believe as many of you do that the average length of deliverability absolutely has an effect on the donor experience. We want to get the acknowledgment in the mail as quickly as possible and having this type of data at your fingertips can allow us all to make USPS location decisions much easier and less time consuming than testing different locations. After collecting seventeen months of data, the average deliverability time from mail date to receipt date at RMG for the following USPS locations is below:

- Baltimore MD – 4.3 days
- Brentwood (DC) – 6.0 days
- Merrifield VA – 6.9 days
- Hagerstown MD – 4.1 days
- Greencastle PA – 3.0 days
Best Practice - Matchback and Source Code Files

A lot happens behind the scenes in the validation of data to ensure we are relaying quality content. Most organizations utilize our intelligent scan technology to read and verify ID numbers and mail/source codes from a scan line. Increasingly, there are times that we have new mailings at RMG but are unable to completely process until one or both of these items are received and uploaded into our system. Mail code tables are loaded to validate the characters either intelligently or manually keyed so that we do not pass inaccurate data. Matchback or Finder files are used to pull in name and address information from the mailing file without rekeying for output or for our archival search product arch-e. These files reduce costs and provide name and address information for database upload that we know, based on their return, is correct. It is critical that we receive the mail code and matchback files ahead of the mailing being dropped to ensure there is no delay in the service delivery of data. Our recommendation is to have these items sent to our team at the same time the information is being provided to the print vendor.

How Much Data do you Really Need?

Data breaches happen. It’s an unfortunate fact of life. Technology and security professionals do their best every day, but like many things in life the circumstances of how breaches can occur change constantly and the complexity of technology (and reliance on separate entities to provide integrated/overlapping solutions that play nicely with each other) can leave “gaps”. Like a snake in yard, if they find a tiny hole they’re going to try to get in and explore. As custodians of data, sometimes incredibly sensitive & private in nature, we all need to be vigil in making sure that we aren’t just relying on the tech/security teams & systems, and that we also routinely analyze the types of data we are storing and confirm that there is a definite need. In many breaches and data thefts, the findings include that there was ancillary data that was “unnecessary” but which potentially added value for the thieves.

As part of regular security review meetings, it’s necessary to include a discussion on what content is being captured, why it’s being captured, where it’s being stored and how long the retention period is. The attendance of the security review meeting needs to include individuals in marketing, sales, membership, operations and/or other areas (that may not be in a traditional security role but) who can speak about the business processes and data elements. The conversation should include spelling out the specific details about what’s being captured, speaking to (or better, providing a review document listing) every element, and it should include discussion about the purpose – how does having each individual element help the organization and what is the impact if it was decided to stop gathering that information. For every element defined as necessary – meaning there is a valid business justification, not “it’s nice to have” – ensure that there is a document that outlines where it is stored, where it is accessible, roles that have access to it, how long it needs to be retained and why that retention period is necessary.

Assuming there is a document outlining this detail (or that one has now been created), ensure that someone’s responsibility is to audit the document to confirm both the assumptions (such as “Who decided that we needed 8 years of historical data, or is that just a myth we all think we need to follow?”) and the business practices, and record those audit results. If not before, bring the document and audit results to the next security meeting and review the findings, reconfirming everything is correct and outlining any actions (such as “We found we are keeping the paper documents for 10 years, but stated we needed 7 and in reality discovered that we only needed 5. We need to shred/recycle 15 pallets of material.”). Action items need to stay on the agenda for each subsequent meeting until they are completed, and each subsequent meeting needs to include repeating the process, albeit (hopefully) with less and less effort needed – review the existing document, confirm any changes, perform an audit, report on the audit, report on actions...