

# Episode 1: Fundraising in Uncertain Times

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*This is a transcript of Nancy Bacon, Sarah Brooks, and JoAnn Crabtree talking about fundraising on the Nonprofit Radio Show podcast. You can listen [here](#) or however you prefer to listen to podcasts.*

## **Nancy Bacon**

Hello, and welcome to the nonprofit radio show, a podcast for small nonprofits. If you feel in the dark about how to run a nonprofit sunshine is on its way.

## **Sarah Brooks**

I'm Sarah Brooks, and I'm super excited today to be joined by my nonprofit friends Nancy Bacon and JoAnn Crabtree, and this week, we will be talking about how to fundraise in these very uncertain times. I'm going to be the first one to admit that though I've been fundraising for more than 20 years, I have never lived through anything quite like this coronavirus pandemic and the resulting economic crisis. And I have found myself over the last few days in a sort of panic fundraising mode, literally chasing ideas around and not feeling like I'm getting anything productive done. I've been trying to remind myself to breathe. And to get back to what I know are the basic fundraising fundamentals that I believe in and that have always guided my work. I'm inviting you today to spend a few minutes with us getting back to some of those fundraising basics.

## **Nancy**

Sarah, I'm really glad we're talking about this because I think it's... it's hard to know what to do. A friend of mine who is a fundraising person just she called me last week and said, I just don't know what I'm supposed to be doing-- that these are such uncertain times. So, I'm glad we're talking about this because I think it's what's on a lot of people's minds.

## **Sarah**

Absolutely, and you know, this reminds me of what I first felt like when I was first given the task to be a fundraiser. I think I had a similar path to a lot of people, which is I didn't ever think in the fourth grade that that would be my job. I fell into it by mistake. And I certainly did not know what to do when I started. I realized early on that my impressions of what fundraising was and is were based on things like used car salesman and arm twisting and bullying people into giving, tricking them into giving. I had some incredibly wise, early mentors who helped me reframe my thinking. And I've been going back to their voices in my head quite a bit these last couple of weeks. They really encouraged me to flip my thinking about fundraising. I started off being really focused on how awkward it felt to be the asker -- to ask someone for money, you know, is right up there with talking about religion and politics, we're not supposed to do that. My mentors encouraged me early on to think about it instead from the donor's perspective of, of how good it can feel to be invited to belong to a group of people addressing an issue that you hold close to your heart. And as soon as I sort of started thinking in my own head of giving as an invitation to help, and giving and asking as an attempt to belong to a solution, it totally changed the way I see everything. And it became one of the most basic fundraising fundamentals I know.

I've been going back to that a lot in the last two weeks. And I've come up with two key tips that I think grow from this idea of flipping your thinking about fundraising, to providing an invitation to a donor to belong. If you treat every donor like someone who belongs to your team, you see them a little differently, and you communicate with them differently. Remember, donors give to you because they share your values, and they want to change the game or your mission. They see themselves as being on your team, whether they give a little or a lot, and it's especially important to acknowledge right now whether they can give at this moment, or whether they cannot give at this moment. You have to respect and appreciate them for all they've already made possible for you mission. It is really important if you see donors as belonging to your team, that you recognize they want to know what your game plan is. They want to know how you're responding. They want to know what's challenging you, what's keeping you up at night, and they want to know about the innovative ways you're facing the

challenges you have head on. And that's true whether your mission is on the front lines of this current moment.

Whether you're a direct service provider in public health or social services or your mission is slightly removed from the direct lines-- perhaps you're an arts organization or an environmental group-- your donors belong to your team and want to know how you're responding. Now may or may not be the right time to ask those folks for money. But it is most definitely not the time to be silent with them. You must be communicating with the people on your team.

Second, when you start to think about giving as this way to belong to a bigger solution, you recognize that your donors are also there to help you solve problems, not just to give you funding. This is an excellent moment to ask donors for advice. I was called this week by a small nonprofit organization in Washington state who gets most of their funding from a gala fundraising auction that was supposed to happen sometime in mid-April. The timing is not at all right for that gathering. And they recognized right away that they need to cancel and postpone the event. What they weren't sure of is what do they do in the meantime. Do they try to raise the money that they would have raised at the event in some other way? Do they wait, hoping they can have the event later? Or do they wait and realize they need to do their asking sometime much later in the calendar year? To be totally honest, I don't know the right answer for what they should do. But I do know, the right thing they can do is to reach out to three, four or five of those donors who are faithful supporters of what they do and who love that event and come every year and ask them to be a part of thinking through the solution. Donors love an opportunity to help. That's why they give to you. And sometimes it is more powerful to ask them to help you think through something then to help you fund something.

### **Nancy**

I really like your focus on relationship because I think the hardest part of these times is not knowing how it's all going to turn out. And so I think we're all feeling a little lonely here working in our homes. And that idea of building that relationship when life is so uncertain.

**Sarah**

I think that's exactly the key point right now, Nancy, we are all feeling a little bit alone. And as a fundraiser, I think it's super important for you to realize that your donors are probably also feeling isolated and alone, too. There's nothing they would rather see right now than a little bit of sunshine from your mission. And you know, this is the perfect moment. If you're a theater organization, for example, send a small clip, if you have one from a show and remind them, hey, the theater might be dark right now, but it's going to come back. Remember these great times. You don't have to ask for money. You don't have to push anything, but you can remind them of what you do. And if you're on the front lines, helping people, sending a picture of your organization serving food, or providing food options for people and saying, "Wow, look at what you made possible. Thank you." That's little bit of hope and sunshine that I think your donors are also craving in the in the same way that you are right now.

**Nancy**

Yeah, there is a group I support that works someplace else in the world. And their Instagram feed is filled with pictures of beautiful children and happy times running through a beautiful part of the world. I have to say it does put a smile on my face. Sometimes I think, "Oh my gosh, what are we doing?" And then I see those pictures of those children and I can't help but smile.

So Sarah, what do you think about this idea that you know, nonprofits live in a tension. We live in that tension point between being a business and being a community. There are folks who are saying, you know, in these hard times, act more like a business. Lay off your staff, look at your finances, and be a smart business person to make some hard decisions. They're certainly hard decisions. But do what you need to do to protect your reserves, your funding. If you're not able to serve people right now, then you shouldn't be paying your staff to sit around and do nothing act like a business. How do you respond to those?

**Sarah**

So that's an excellent and deep question, Nancy. So I'm going to take it in a couple parts. And you can remind me when I forget a part. I think first of all, it's really important for you to think through how your staff can keep your mission going for people at this time. It is an essential function at this moment for every nonprofit organization to remind people why what you do matters, and why either you are so important right now to serve people, or you're going to be so important later to help us process what's going on in our world. So I think step one is to think through what you can do. It's not the same work as it has been in the past. But what can you do to be remain relevant and to help -- even providing those bright spots is helping at this point.

Second, I think with this question of how you handle the tension between a business and a nonprofit, you start with your board. Your board should be a representative group of people from your community. And you should be communicating with them virtually right now. Looking hard at your finances and thinking creatively about what you can do. And your board may end up having more questions than answers, and that becomes a beautiful opportunity to reach out to some of your faithful donors. Perhaps some who have experienced running businesses or are especially experienced with financial matters and ask them to dive in with you and to help give advice. It's really important to pick a couple of people who may have different opinions, so your board and you can hear different ideas, different approaches to it. And then it's incredibly important to get back in touch with those donors after you've made a decision or what's right for your organization. Let them know your thinking that got you there, this can be one of the best insights you could have into how your donors think. And it may be the most impressive thing you do with them, to show them how thoughtful and careful and analytical you've been about what you choose to do.

### **Nancy**

I love that focus on having really well thought out governance team, but then also building on those relationships.

### **Sarah**

Right. And you know, not every nonprofit has that strong leadership governance team built into them already. But an opportunity like this is when you can grow and make it. My organization, the environmental organization I work for in rural Eastern Washington has had in the last five years, numerous summers of absolutely devastating wildfires. And I will tell you that in 2014, when the first wildfire hit, our board functioned fine, but now functions at a completely different level, because we were forced to have virtual meetings talking about real issues where real decisions had to be made in real time. And that group has coalesced and come together in a really different way. So, I think if you're a nonprofit staff person, or the board chair, right now, this is an excellent time to think through how do we facilitate us growing in our skill as a leadership team? Because that's what your mission needs right now.

### **Nancy**

For sure. So, Sarah, our word of the week is “belonging.” Why did you choose “belonging?”

### **Sarah**

Hmm, well, I chose it because I've been thinking about it a lot. I have been feeling alone, a lot working at home, and I keep trying to find the right desk space in my house, that's going to make it all feel great. I think I've tried out four of them, none of which I like. And I think it's an isolating time for us. And when I start to get in that kind of dark, isolated space, in my head, I've tried to return to thinking about all the groups and causes that I believe in and that I feel like I belong to. So I think about the cross country team, I help coach and I think about the Montessori school my daughter went to years ago and the sense of belonging I have to that place. And it gives me comfort to realize that there are groups of people doing amazing, good things that I belong to, even though I can't be right there, physically with them. And then as I think about my work and fundraising this week, I finally feel like I got a little traction. And it was when I kind of came back to, hey, there are people in my world who helped make our work possible, some of whom are major donors, some are annual donors who've been giving for 15 or 16 years, they belong to us. And I should be reaching out to them and reminding them how

important they are, and how much they do belong to our team. So it's where I kind of found my grounding.

### **Nancy**

I love that. I love the word belonging because I think of that word a lot in the context of equity and inclusion. It's a word that reminds us of the lessons of survival and resilience. We can learn from so many other people from the Native experience that teaches us ways to go back to the earth and ways to think about community. I think about immigrants who have faced attacks on their way of life and come out the other end. And so we'll come out the other end of this as well. Belonging to me is a word of comfort, and we certainly need more comfort these days. Absolutely. We might be sitting around in our pajama bottoms all day, but for some reason, it's that psychological comfort.

### **JoAnn Crabtree**

For me, two thoughts come to mind related to belonging. One is how vulnerable it can feel to go to a funder and ask for their advice. You pointed out that funders want to help and they want to be part of our mission and our impact. By inviting them to weigh in on our organizational challenges, we're expanding possibilities and building trust with them. We open ourselves up to whole new realms that we may not have even considered all while building those important relationships. The second thing is I believe the ability to receive graciously enhances belonging. The act of being a gracious receiver results in us being even more excited about having given the gift and made us feel even closer to that recipient. Being a gracious receiver comes from a place of worthiness: worthiness of our mission worthiness of ourselves.

### **Sarah**

You know, JoAnn, it's such an important point. And I also know there are fundraisers out there who are a little panicked because if you're working remotely, you may be can't send the tax receipt thank you note that you know, you're supposed to send and what I just want to leave you with is this notion of being human right now. You know, it's okay to send the email that

says, "Wow, Nancy, I know you've made an online gift. I can't send you the thank you note, I want to send you so I'm just going to tell you made my day." I sent an email to one of our major donors that had more of an update on what we're able to do and some bright spots and things I want to thank them for making possible. And the donor wrote back and said, "Oh, thank you so much. It's so wonderful to hear of your thoughtful responses to things." And then they said something like, "We're hanging in there. I hope you're doing okay." And I wrote back and said, "I have to be honest, you know, there are days that I don't know. I'm sort of an extroverted person and working from home is hard. I find myself talking to the dog a lot." And they wrote back and said, "Well, that should be fine to talk to the dog, as long as you don't feel like the dog is talking back." What a really wonderful human exchange, right. And it was very authentic and very real. I appreciated it. I think they appreciated the exchange. And on some level, it's 10 times better, right, than the formal thank you note signed by all the right people. So while none of us wish this upon ourselves and our humanity, I think we can see, if you kind of let a little bit of a guard down and let yourself be human with people and acknowledge what you can and can't do, you'll find you are creating an even bigger sense of belonging.

### **Nancy**

So Sarah, we're coming up on the end of our time together, how would you sum up your guidance for folks on this topic of fundraising?

### **Sarah**

Well, I think it's ongoing. So we hope you'll continue to listen to us because we'll keep this conversation going as long as we need to. But hopefully we shined a little bit of sunlight to get you at least feeling like you can find your footing, to get started to think about fundraising in this uncertain time. It's easy to feel overwhelmed and to aimlessly hop from one fundraising tip to another. I think I must get 25 emails a day with experts telling me exactly what to do next. And I have learned to put those into a file and deal with them at a time when I feel like I can really read through them. Most importantly, though, I'm trying to go back to those basics of what I know. And if I could ask you to do anything this week. I hope everyone listening takes

some time and calls or emails or somehow reaches out to three or four of your donors and ask for their advice. Thank them for what they're making possible. Share with them how you're responding and be vulnerable enough to share with them what you're struggling with. See if they don't have some suggestions. And I think you'll find that created this bigger circle of giving and asking is a way into the money. We feel like you've totally got this.

**JoAnn**

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