


The Great Give Online Giving Campaign Goes Viral: Florida State University

By Justin Ware | @JustinJWare

Justin Ware is director of interactive communication at Bentz Whaley Flessner. Ware and BWF worked with FSU's annual giving team during the planning of the Great Give.



In 36 hours, Florida State University's annual giving team led an online-only campaign to raise \$161,000. During those 36 hours, the Great Give campaign surpassed that goal, raising more than \$186,000 and introducing hundreds of new donors to philanthropy at FSU. They did it thanks to solid planning and understanding the nuances of communicating online and via social media.

Planning the Great Give

Three months is an awfully short period of time for planning a first-of-its-kind online giving campaign with a six-figure goal. In fact, when then-Director of Annual Giving Chad Warren announced the idea, I was concerned enough to kindly suggest moving the date back a few months to better establish an online and social media community for FSU's fundraising efforts. After all, it had only been a month since the FSU team had participated in an online and social media training workshop. They were, essentially, starting from scratch, and already they wanted to put the ideas in motion with the goal of producing real fundraising results.

"We didn't know. There was just a lot of uncertainty," said Warren in an interview shortly after the Great Give. "From the fundraising side, could we raise \$161,000 in 36 hours with what we felt was little promotion?"

Warren and his small staff of two fundraisers had been hearing a lot about what online giving can mean to an annual giving program. Warren had attended enough conferences that evangelized about the ability of social media to boost fundraising programs that he and his team decided it was time to put modern tools to work for FSU. In fall 2011, they got the wheels rolling on a plan not only to increase the online giving dollar amount, but also—perhaps even

more important—boost the number of new donors to the university.

The FSU Foundation received tens of thousands of gifts in 2011, but, Warren said, “only about 1 percent of them came in online. So we knew we had a great opportunity to secure gifts online and start to promote that as an accessible way for a donor to give.”

This desire to build a stronger online giving program for FSU was more than just faith in a new communication fad. In the months since the Great Give, data from multiple studies have demonstrated the need for connecting with donors online. According to donorCentrics’ *2011 Internet and Multichannel Giving Benchmarking Report*, gifts from online donors, on average, tend to be nearly twice the size of gifts made through other direct-response means, such as direct mail or phone, and online donors have higher average household incomes and apparently greater lifetime giving potential as well. In addition to those staggering numbers, the *2012 Nonprofit Social Network Benchmarking Report* says the value of a Facebook fan is more than \$214. That means every time someone “likes” your Facebook page, it’s worth \$214. Given the wide disparity between the number of well-run Facebook pages and those that appear to have been neglected, I would guess that the online-savvy organizations that participated in the study raise far more than \$214 per fan. Of course, a lot of nonprofits with a Facebook page earn far less.

With a strong sense that significant online giving numbers were possible, Warren and his team started planning the Great Give in late fall 2011. They kept things simple and announced a significant but obtainable goal: Raise \$161,000 to celebrate the school’s 161st anniversary.

The Great Give was set for Jan. 23 and 24, 2012, just a few short months from when the campaign was first discussed. And the three-person annual giving department had not yet developed any electronic resources for this campaign. Warren wasn’t sure how successful the campaign would be, so the decision was made to build the media—online giving sites and social network communities—entirely in-house with FSU staff.

“We wanted to keep this low-key; we didn’t want to spend any money,” said Warren. A small amount—less than \$10,000—was used for advertising and promotion, primarily through direct mail. Other than that, the online giving forms would be built by the FSU information technology staff. Creating, monitoring, and managing the online chatter would have to be done by the annual giving team members with the assistance of any volunteers they could tap.

In the weeks leading up to the campaign, Warren and team produced YouTube videos and used social media to engage supporters and build excitement. They also did a little old-fashioned fundraising, meeting with supporters in person and over

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The Great Give campaign website as it appeared in January 2012.

the phone to ask for their help in securing not just donations, but also the support of their friends during the Great Give. Some call them “influencers,” but a more forceful term that gives a better sense of this group’s importance and clout is “online ambassadors.”

Online Ambassadors

Going viral, something most online campaigns hope will happen in some form, is dependent on an organization’s relationship with its online ambassadors. The ambassadors are the internet users who have built strong followings on the web. They tend to use multiple social networks, maintain blogs, and create their own videos or photography. More important, ambassadors can influence the online behavior of other internet users. In many cases, it’s something as simple as convincing someone to watch a popular video. But it may also be convincing their followers to give to their favorite organizations and causes online.

The FSU annual giving team worked with volunteers and university staff to identify the online ambassadors and inform them of the Great Give and the role they might play in making the campaign a success. They also made a strong effort to engage students in the campaign. “The student volunteers, they are always looking for a way to get involved,” said Daniel Krueger, assistant director of annual giving. “We just said, ‘We have this event and we

want it to be great. And the only way it's going to be great is if we get student involvement,' and that's where they came in."

Krueger and his team identified student leaders who could enlist a larger group of students to help spread the word about the campaign. Working with individuals like the student body president, the FSU annual giving team provided students with the resources to start a guerrilla marketing campaign. "We actually gave them little cards with QR codes so that other students could scan them, and it would take them right to the site," said Krueger.

Students were also given brief training to teach them how to talk to potential donors about the impact of their gifts. Krueger said, "I think the most important thing is to tell them why they're making a gift. You know, not just make a \$10 gift to something, but tell them that they could do it to the college that they belong to, that we had specialized funds to meet the need of whoever was making that gift."

Heavily involved students are an annual fund director's dream. Not only do they enlist the support of other student donors, but they are being introduced to philanthropic support of the university before they even collect their diplomas. Plus, they can be influential in getting less-connected groups of donors—parents, for example—involved in fundraising. For those reasons and more, Krueger says the students they engaged and developed into online and offline ambassadors were a big reason the Great Give surpassed its goals.

"Without them driving student traffic there, this would have been just a normal alumni campaign," he said.

Campaign Kickoff

With a fresh round of emails and social updates, the Great Give was off to a strong start. In just the first few hours, the campaign raised \$25,000. The early fundraising boost was a perfect excuse for a quick email update to the various groups of online ambassadors.

Warren's team had prepared prepackaged updates for each social media network and delivered them to their online ambassadors via email. For example, for Twitter, each update was less than 140 characters, including any links. The team also prepared messages for online ambassadors to share on Facebook.

Warren said they would put these prepackaged social network updates in an email with text that read, for example, "If you are at your Facebook page in the next five to 10 minutes, here's a suggested Facebook message to put on your wall."

At first, Warren said, there was concern about the enthusiasm of their supporters. "Would they feel we're inundating them with emails, and would they not want to be engaged?" wondered Warren. "And it was actually the opposite. After about the second or third update, they were asking us, before we got to them, 'What's the next update?' 'Where are we at?' Everyone got really excited, and by the

second day, it was not *if* we were going to hit our goal, it was *when*, and that got everybody really excited.”

The prepackaged emails and the momentum they added to the campaign are another example of the role online ambassadors play in determining the success of an online campaign. In addition to connecting with students, Warren and the annual giving team met, in person and electronically, with FSU staff, alumni, and other supporters of the university’s mission. The ambassadors were told to expect emails from the annual giving team and were encouraged to help them spread the word online via any of the various social networks where the ambassadors were active.

“In order for this to be successful, we needed the support of everybody. And so I said, ‘If you can give us 10 minutes of your time, we will be successful.’ And I think we did that.”

Online ambassadors are the people who will get behind any well-planned effort and throw their full support behind that effort. They are also influential members of alumni groups, professional associations, church groups, and any number of other communities. When ambassadors ask members of their community to support something, they often will. For this reason, connecting with online ambassadors and enlisting their help in driving messages about a campaign will be an increasingly important component of all future online giving efforts.

Changing the Meaning of Word of Mouth

One of the more fascinating aspects of the Great Give might have been what the campaign illuminated about a shift in the meaning of a common phrase: word of mouth.

“What is word of mouth?” asked Warren. “Because we think of word of mouth as having a candid conversation, a personal conversation. A lot of times now, more than half the communication we have is electronic—Facebook, texting, that type of thing—so are we perceiving that now as word of mouth?”

During this campaign, the FSU annual giving team conducted a survey alongside the online giving process. After the gift was secured, they asked the donor, “How did you hear about the Great Give?” The largest response was word of mouth, with 57 percent of all donors saying that was how they learned about the Great Give. Second was email, with a 31 percent response. Considerably further down the list was Facebook and FSU websites, at just 2 percent each. That’s roughly equal to the response rate of direct mail. But Warren doesn’t see social media as ineffective; his hunch is that those numbers reflect a change in the definition of word of mouth.

“You’re communicating and promoting it, but is it through a chat or through a text message or through an email?” Warren thinks a large number of those who reported “word of mouth” were actually

thinking about conversations they had via text message or a post they saw on a friend's or family member's Facebook wall. Again, online ambassadors were a big factor in the success of the Great Give, and they weren't sharing their updates by going door-to-door to everyone they knew. They were sharing news of the campaign through social network status updates provided by the FSU annual giving team.

Final Results

At midnight on January 25, just 36 hours after the Great Give kicked off (and about three months after the idea was first introduced), the campaign had raised more than \$186,000 and introduced nearly 300 new donors to the university.

"From the successful completion of the Great Give campaign even until now, months later, it is a regularly heard conversation [at FSU]," said Perry Fulkerson, vice president for central development at the Florida State University Foundation.

The Great Give online-only campaign was a huge success for a small investment. FSU spent just under \$20,000 on direct mail promotion and fundraising counsel before the event, for a \$186,000 return. It worked so well because the fundraisers identified their influential online ambassadors, and then asked those ambassadors to spread awareness about the campaign. FSU's annual giving team manufactured a viral giving campaign.

"The best thing we could do was reach out to members where they were and how they were communicating," said Krueger. "That's really, I think, the difference-maker. If we only did direct mail, this would have been a failure. But we found out where people were and where they were communicating and how they wanted to be heard, and that's how we reached out to them."

Thanks to today's virtually unlimited entertainment and media options, we live and work in a highly segmented communications world. Some people are primarily Facebook users. Some rely on email as their main form of online communication. Others focus solely on Twitter, while a growing number have taken to the newer social networks like Pinterest and Instagram. Some don't use any social media but are heavy text message communicators. As a modern media specialist, you can't afford to ignore any of those communities and the users who converse in them—at least not those in the half dozen or so most highly trafficked sites. The best online and social media strategies include an integrated approach that involves not only multiple social networks but also traditional websites, plus offline tools like direct mail and earned media placement on TV and radio.

FSU's annual giving team understood this, and for that reason the Great Give was a tremendous fundraising success that is now being emulated by other leading higher education institutions.

Next Steps

There is little doubt FSU will be conducting another online campaign in the very near future. “Planning began almost immediately to do it again and to improve our marketing efforts on the front end to gain wider exposure,” said Fulkerson.

Given the low response rate to the direct mail component of the Great Give, it would be tempting for anyone considering something similar to drop the snail mail approach. Warren said eliminating direct mail was part of the post-campaign discussion. “We have learned that we can do this on a shoestring budget and not have it cost us anything,” said Warren. “So if we choose not to do any direct mail appeals, we can literally do this for zero dollars.”

However, a 2012 Convio and CARE USA study shows that donors who give the most give both online and off—they are dual-channel donors. Are those donors giving in both places because that’s how they want to give? Or, would they give even more if efforts were increased to steward online donors where they chose to give—online?

With the online gift comes a mailing address along with the credit card information. Sending new donors a piece of mail is a decades-old, proven practice in the fundraising world, but the fundraising world is drastically different today than it was even five years ago. It is a risk, but reallocating direct mail resources to an online-only approach for donors who gave their first gifts online might reduce waste and result in more efficient overall fundraising. It’s possible that approach is already working for some forward-thinking organizations. We just don’t know yet, because the practice of going online-only for online-acquired donors hasn’t been around long enough to be studied extensively.

Of course, organizations—especially those as large as FSU—have a diverse pool of donors with very diverse communications preferences. For that reason, Fulkerson says FSU will continue a broad approach with an array of communication tools.

“Our approach to fundraising has always been multifaceted, with the emphasis on relationship-oriented major gift fundraising,” said Fulkerson. “The success of the Great Give validated for us the strength of online giving. We have a significant number of new donors who will continue to be solicited through our various channels, including online efforts, direct mail, and our call center. The biggest success for us is broadening our base of support, which is good for the present and great for the future.”

One thing is for certain: FSU leaders will continue to put more focus and effort into developing their social media strategy for fundraising. “We have made a conscious decision even before the Great Give that we would invest in a social media strategy,” said Fulkerson. “The success of the Great Give confirmed our thinking that social media is important as part of our multichannel approach to fundraising.”



An email sent to supporters immediately following the Great Give campaign.

Online and social media communication is an emerging field. For any academic communications program to consider itself cutting-edge, it's important to have a new media component to its course offerings. Krueger says FSU's annual giving team is hoping to leverage that educational need to help development staff accomplish their fundraising communication goals.

"What if we made a project out of this to help us further break through that shell around our student body?" wondered Kruger. "We had success [with the Great Give], but I think there's still far more that we can do. So why don't we use [student coursework] to figure out what we can do to better market to other students? That's exciting to know that we'll have some people working with us to reach out to a body that's untapped."

"Exciting" is an excellent word to describe online fundraising's potential. It can work for any organization—large, medium, or small. The key is to provide a valuable online experience for your most influential supporters—your online ambassadors. Identify them, build a strategy around giving them what they want in the way they want it, and then work with them to build viral support for your campaigns.

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