03

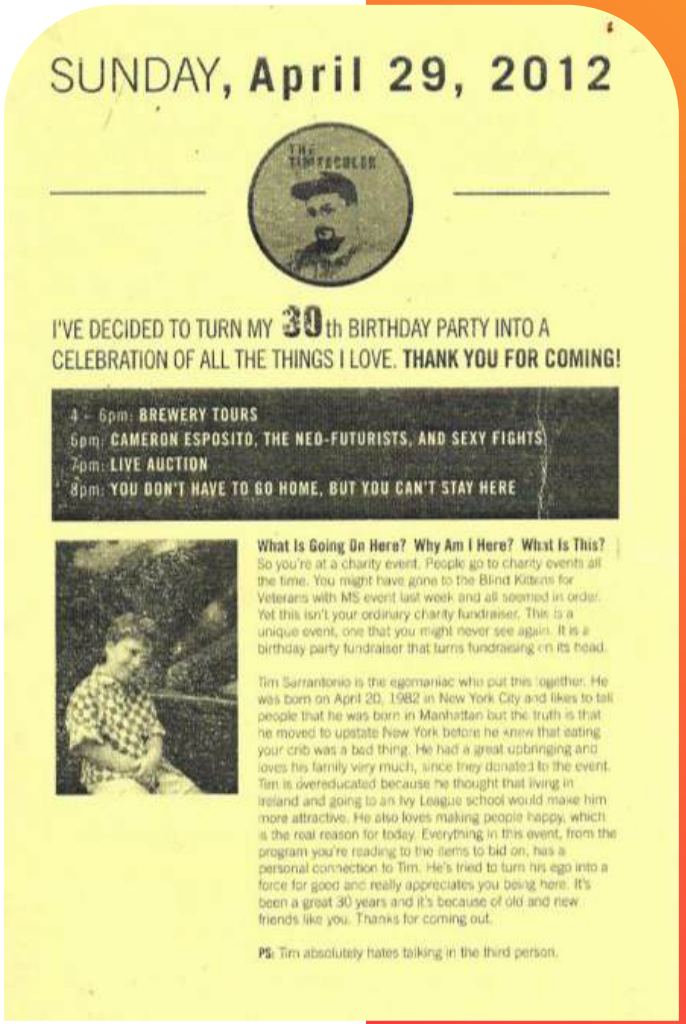
25

Confessions from Event Planners

Avoiding Fundraising Fails & Maximizing Success

Who Am I?

- 13+ years in the nonprofit tech industry
- Passionate about making generosity experiences magical for all communities
- Speaker, writing, and nonprofit technology theorist
- Chair of the Fundraising Effectiveness Project, the largest analysis of retention data in the world



SUNDAY, **April 29, 2012**

I'VE DECIDED TO TURN MY **30**th BIRTHDAY PARTY INTO A CELEBRATION OF ALL THE THINGS I LOVE. **THANK YOU FOR COMING!**

4 - 6pm: **BREWERY TOURS**
6pm: **CAMERON ESPOSITO, THE NEO-FUTURISTS, AND SEXY FIGHTS**
7pm: **LIVE AUCTION**
8pm: **YOU DON'T HAVE TO GO HOME, BUT YOU CAN'T STAY HERE**

What Is Going On Here? Why Am I Here? What Is This?
So you're at a charity event. People go to charity events all the time. You might have gone to the Blind Kittens for Veterans with MS event last week and all seemed in order. Yet this isn't your ordinary charity fundraiser. This is a unique event, one that you might never see again. It is a birthday party fundraiser that turns fundraising on its head.

Tim Serrantonio is the egomaniac who put this together. He was born on April 20, 1982 in New York City and likes to tell people that he was born in Manhattan but the truth is that he moved to upstate New York before he knew that eating your crib was a bad thing. He had a great upbringing and loves his family very much, since they donated to the event. Tim is overeducated because he thought that living in Ireland and going to an Ivy League school would make him more attractive. He also loves making people happy, which is the real reason for today. Everything in this event, from the program you're reading to the items to bid on, has a personal connection to Tim. He's tried to turn his ego into a force for good and really appreciates you being here. It's been a great 30 years and it's because of old and new friends like you. Thanks for coming out.

PS: Tim absolutely hates talking in the third person.

Don’t plan events,
plan generosity experiences

We need to change the way
we think about

GENEROSITY

Why This Report?

What problem are we solving?
Nonprofit leaders lack clear insights into the **97.3% of donors** who give under $5,000 annually, making it difficult to engage and retain them effectively.

Without a deeper understanding of how these supporters give—through **recurring gifts, memberships, events, volunteering, and P2P fundraising**—organizations risk missing opportunities to build lasting relationships and drive sustainable support.

Who's In This Data?

A panel of **99,522 individuals** who supported their favorite causes between January 1, 2020 and December 31, 2024.

70.25%
gave to one org

29.75%
gave to multiple orgs

15%
registered for events

3.75%
volunteered

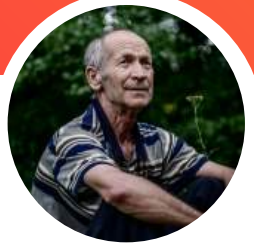
1.48%
ran P2P campaigns

$93 million
was donated

Meet Your Everyday Donors

To understand how people support their favorite causes, we built a panel of 99,522 “everyday donors” and looked at the different ways they supported their favorite causes between January 1, 2020 and December 31, 2024. Then we explored:

Multi-year donors



Multi-org donors

Planners

Members

Connectors

How did people behave when they…

- ★ Donated for multiple years?
- ★ Supported multiple nonprofits?
- ★ Set up recurring gifts?
- ★ Created pledges?
- ★ Purchased memberships?
- ★ Registered for events?
- ★ Volunteered?
- ★ Participated in peer-to-peer campaigns?

Meet your

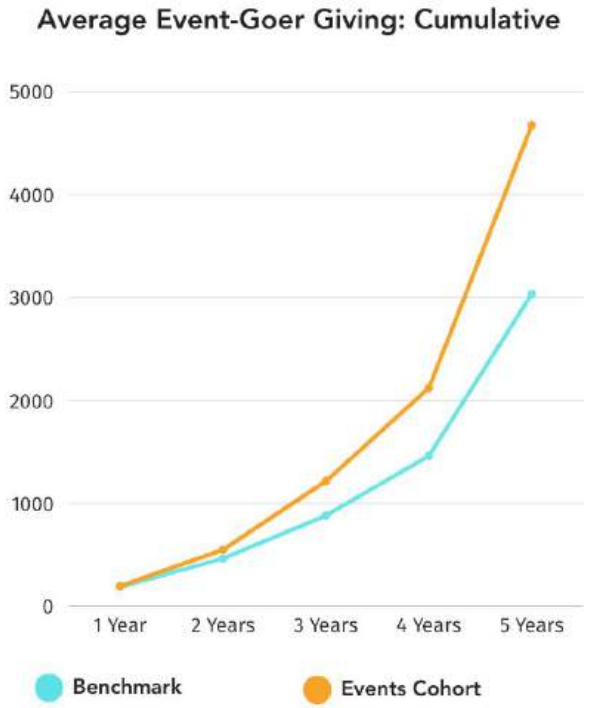
Connectors

Event Registrants

This was the largest group of supporters—18.20% of our panel had registered for an event.

Do generous people attend events, or does attending events make someone more generous?

We may never know—but there's a strong correlation between event participation and increased giving.



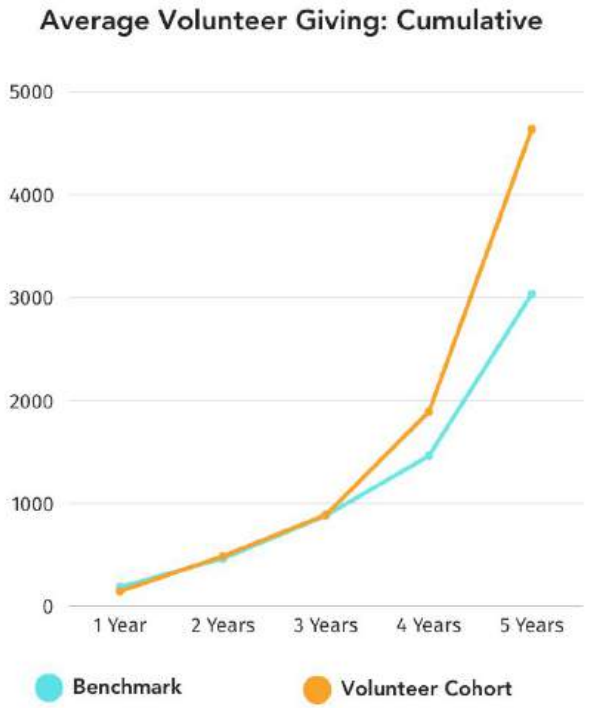
Volunteers

Our panel included 3,729 people who had a history of volunteering—that's 3.75% of our panel.

This group of supporters generally gave at benchmark levels for three(ish) years, then accelerated their financial gifts in years four and five.

If you're not intentionally building volunteer retention plans, now's the time to start!

Fun fact: there was a *lot* of overlap between this group and peer-to-peer participants!

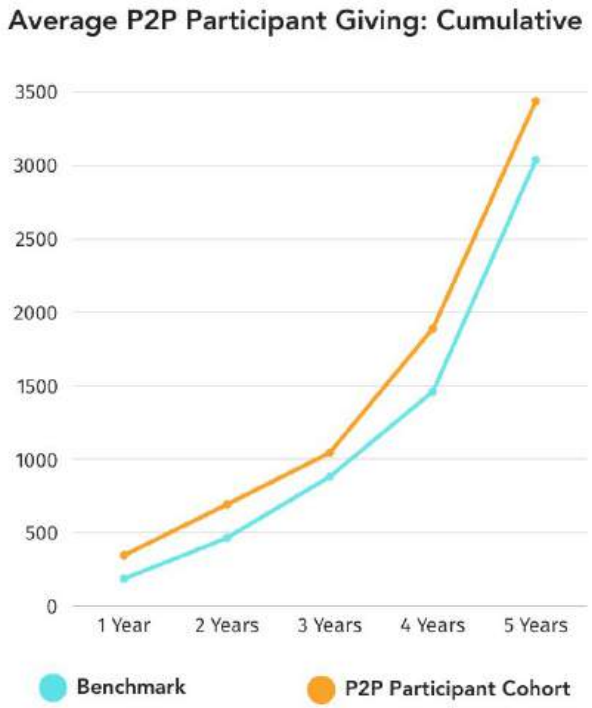


Peer-to-Peer Participants

This was the smallest cohort in the study. 1,477 people (1.48% of our panel) had participated in a peer-to-peer campaign.

Peer-to-peer participants tended to give above panel averages, but their annual giving remained pretty static for the first three years they were engaged.

This is a sign that there could be room to improve participant retention and stewardship. Especially if they're volunteering, too!



Don’t Neglect These Connectors

Generosity doesn’t only show up in transaction reports!

Getting a complete picture of how your community supports you can be hard, especially if fundraising, volunteer management, peer-to-peer campaigns, and other activities are all happening with different programs or teams.

What Does This Mean?

Do everything you can to get one complete picture of the people in your community.

Your event attendees, volunteers, and peer-to-peer participants (and plenty of others!) are willing to support you in overlapping ways.

If their generosity isn't seen or celebrated, they'll disengage from your work before they reach their true potential.

Want a sneak peak?

Join report author Abby Jarvis in a special session that goes over what we learned for *The Generosity Report: Data-Backed Insights for Resilient Fundraising*

Nonprofit

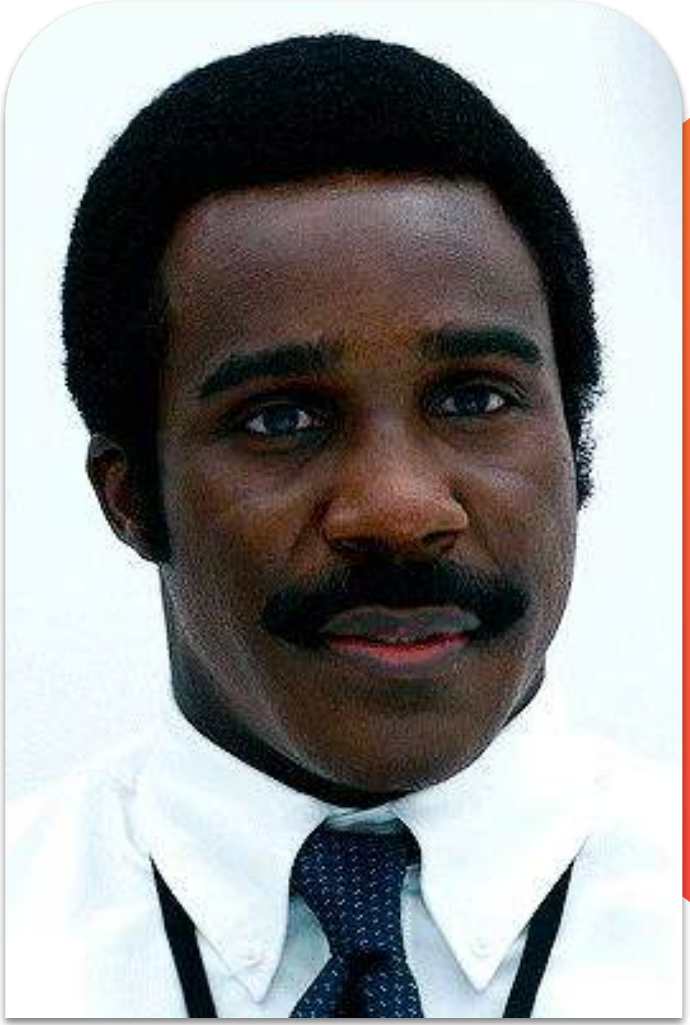
Real Talk

The Professional Mask

A survey by the American Psychological Association found that 59% of workers report experiencing stress at work due to emotional demands:

- ★ Suppressing emotions leads to higher anxiety and stress
- ★ Nonprofit employees are especially prone to higher burnout rates

The walls between our professional and personal lives blur when doing event planning, so set appropriate boundaries with your team and guests.

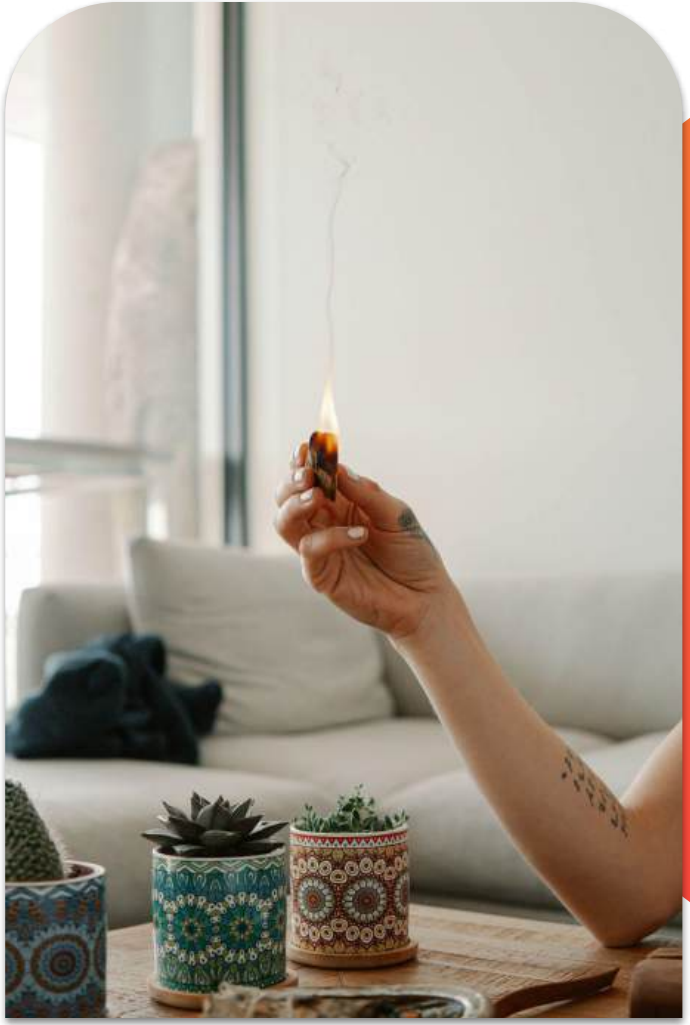


Emotional Labor

63% of event professionals report high levels of stress, and 11% have been diagnosed with a mental health condition as a direct result of their work.

- ★ Last-minute changes
- ★ Budgeting issues
- ★ Technical challenges
- ★ Guest management
- ★ Work-life balance

If you can’t take care of yourself, you can’t take care of your guests.



Invisible Networks

Virtual and hybrid events have seen a 300% increase in reported data attacks since the COVID-19 pandemic:

- ★ Data transfers can lead to inaccurate data or even unintentional exposures
- ★ Managing payment processing across multiple platforms can also lead to reconciliation and security issues

Focusing on ensuring your most sensitive information is well protected will give you piece of mind during events.

Tech Support

68.7% of event professionals agree that using technology to improve the attendee experience is a trend with staying power:

- ★ Yet many event planners struggle with how to integrate technology without taking away from the personal connections people can make
- ★ Incorrect data can influence your guests' perception of the event

Thinking through how technology can streamline the experience of you and guests is critical for the future success of your events

Confession time….

Know your

People

Mixed Messages

“Ok but what about the time you changed the price of raffle tickets midway through the event 🤣”

Segments = The Right People

You can't create a **truly unique email for each person in your mailing list**. But you can create different email variations based on:

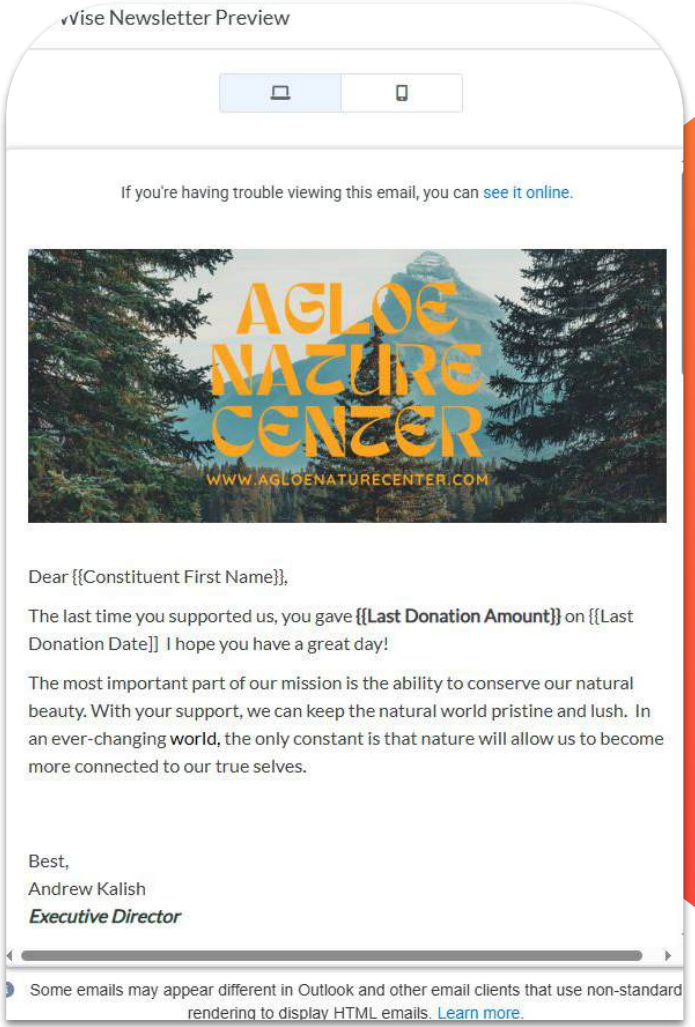
- ★ Your donor's giving history (potential donor, one-time donor, recurring donor)
- ★ The campaign(s) they've supported in the past
- ★ Their status (active donor, LYBUNT/SYBUNT, lapsed donor, membership status, etc.)

It also helps to keep a consistent message within each segment.

Tech Tip

Using tags or tokens can make or break someone's decision to read your message and react to it well.

- ★ 68% of people in the United States base their decision on whether to open an email based upon the "from" name
- ★ Formality tends to work less effectively in email, especially if you're looking for a reply or action
- ★ 65% of email marketers say dynamic content is their most effective personalization tactic



Save your

Time

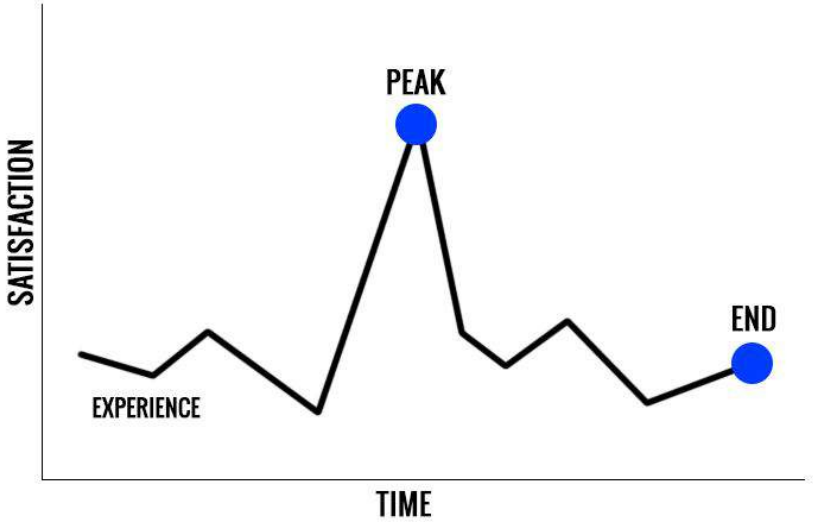
Timing and Flow Matters

“People were too scattered over too large an area, and you couldn't centralize a message. I love the idea of anchoring your energy at the right moment, and that's something I'm going to focus on as we plan our May event!”

Tap into the Peak-End Rule

The Peak-End Rule is a psychological principle that suggests people judge an experience based on how they felt at its most intense moment (the peak) and at its conclusion (the end), rather than the experience as a whole.

For event planning, this means creating a standout moment and ending on a high note can significantly shape how attendees remember—and talk about—their experience.



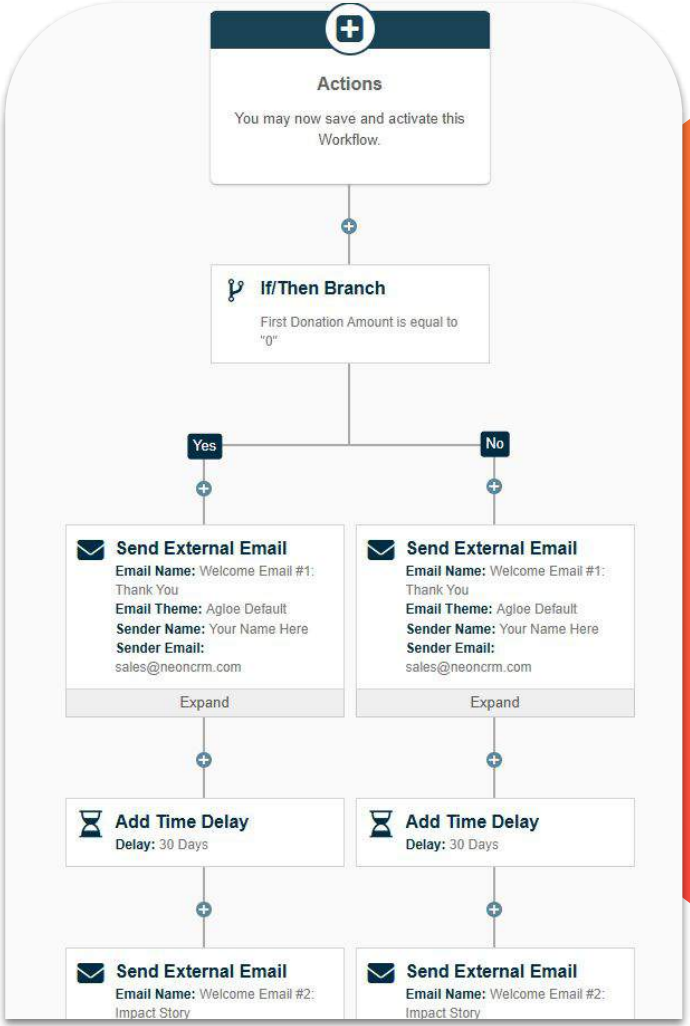
Tech Tip

Your time is valuable. Let tech take on some of the engagement you're looking for your guests.

Automated workflows are something every nonprofit should have at their fingertips:

- ★ 86% of nonprofit professionals are doing work they were not hired to do
- ★ 70% of donors expect a personalized experience

Automated workflows help implement pre- and post-event engagement specific to your segments - **helping end on a high note.**



Give them reasons to

Belong

Dinner Cruise Gone Wrong

“Evening dinner cruise canceled because tornadoes were touching down - boat company could not be reached, but they still ran the cruise for a few people who could get there because the storm passed their city (no staff were present!)”

People Choose Their Own Path

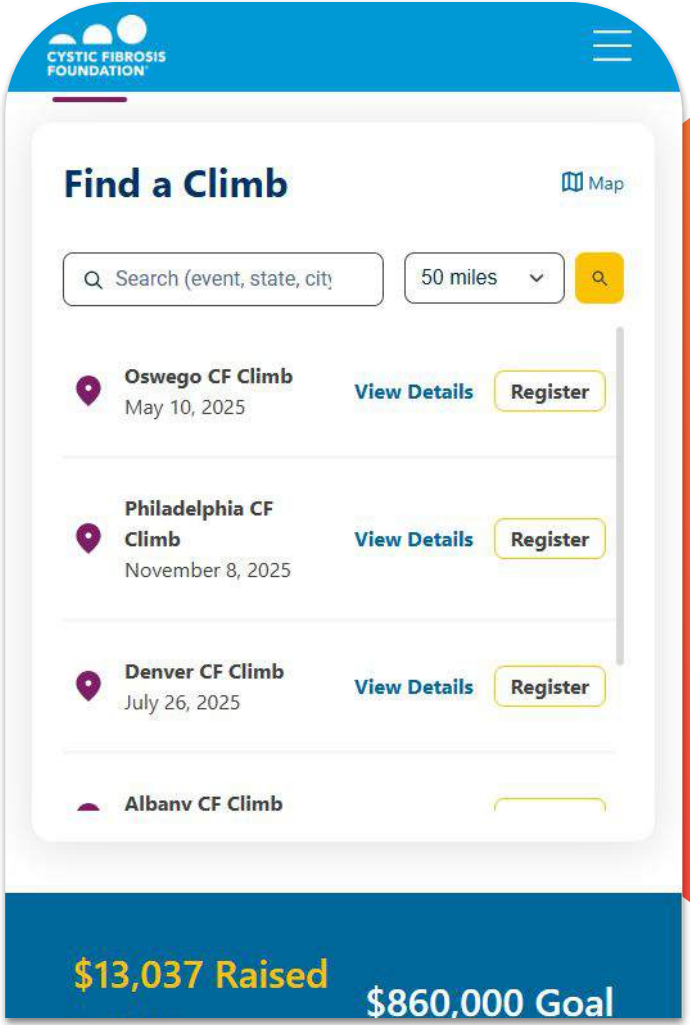
Today’s supporters are looking for experiences they can shape themselves. When we offer flexible, self-directed ways to engage—like starting their own fundraiser or choosing how to support a campaign—they're more likely to feel connected and invested.

That sense of choice builds stronger relationships and keeps people coming back.

Tech Tip

DIY fundraising tools—like the CF Foundation's "Find a Climb" experience—make it easy for people to jump in where they feel most inspired. Whether it's location, timing, or purpose, giving supporters a menu of options empowers them to choose how they show up.

The result? Higher engagement, stronger retention, and a generosity experience they feel ownership over. **Let the technology do the heavy lifting**—so your community can focus on what matters most.



Make it

Magical

Bring People Together

“That anchor moment tip is gold, bringing people together at the right time makes all the difference.”

Emotions matter

According to **The Nonprofit Email Report**, subject lines that evoked positive emotions—like relief, gratitude, pride, excitement, and optimism—were significantly more likely to be opened.

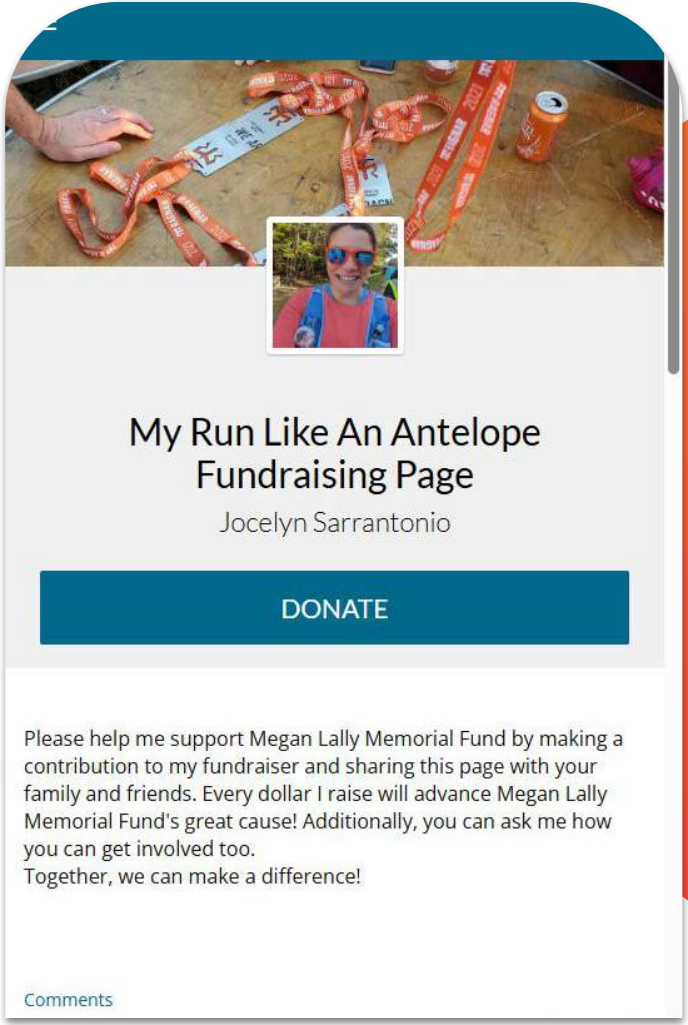
In fact, 47% of people decide to open an email based solely on the subject line, and negative emotions like fear or confusion drastically reduce engagement.

So what does this mean for events?

Tech Tip

Just like with emails, the emotional tone you set before, during, and after an event shapes how memorable and meaningful the experience will be. If you're aiming for magic, aim for emotionally rich experiences.

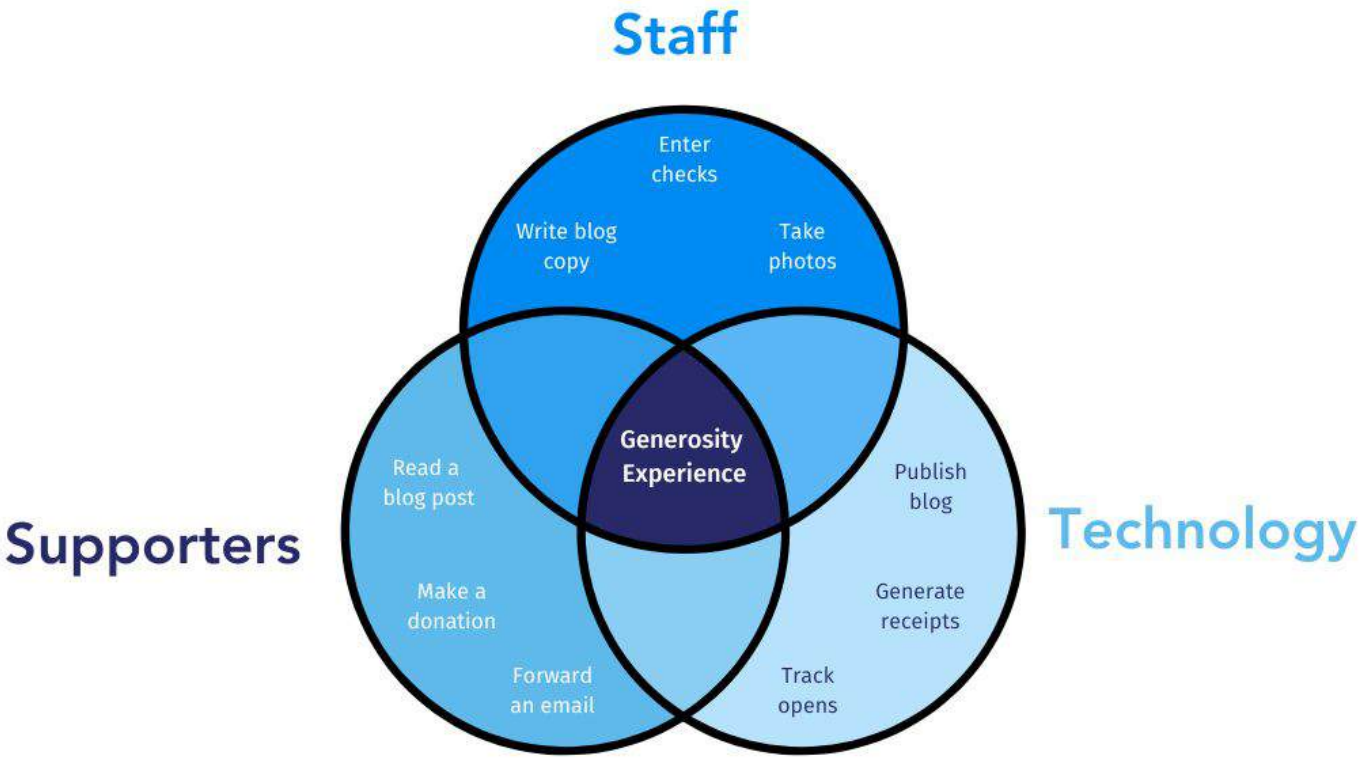
Empower your supporters to **tell their own stories** through the technology you offer; that’s when the real magic happens.



Build

One Team

Generosity Experience Design



People accelerate connections and experiences

From behavioral insights to tech tools, we showed how small shifts in planning can lead to big results.

- ★ Why automation frees up time to focus on connection, not coordination
- ★ Why letting supporters choose their own paths boosts long-term engagement
- ★ What makes an event emotionally resonant - and why that magic matters

Get The Planner

Get Neon One’s newest comprehensive resource on all things event related

No matter what happens, people are generous.

Let them show you.