

ACLU Tests Strategies to Keep Wave of New Donors

By Timothy Sandoval



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Some 1,500 people attended the launch of the ACLU's People Power program in Miami last month. The organization is ramping up both fundraising tactics and grass-roots mobilization to lock in new supporters drawn by its opposition to President Trump's agenda.

Trump's victory.

The Chronicle spoke with Lexi Adams, deputy director of leadership gifts for the ACLU, and Geraldine Engel, deputy director of development, about the group's experience with its new donors and the tactics it is using to keep supporters giving.

Attracting monthly donors. The ACLU is pushing hard to convert one-time donors into monthly contributors, says Ms. Engel, who manages the nonprofit's program for donors under \$1,000. The recurring gifts are important because it is revenue the organization can count on. "It goes on until the credit card doesn't work anymore," Ms. Engel explains.

The ACLU is promoting its monthly giving program in emails to new supporters and through digital ads and promotion on its website, and it's seeing results: The number of monthly donors has quintupled to about 180,000 since the election.

It's also using a telemarketing company to call as many one-time donors as possible and ask them to contribute monthly. That effort has reached about 53,000 of the new donors since December, 10 percent of whom have started giving monthly.

Finding wealthy donors. The ACLU is regularly following up with big donors who gave after the election. For now, the organization is targeting those who donated \$10,000 or more for further research and meetings, says Ms. Adams, who probes the backgrounds of large donors for follow-up by major-gifts fundraisers.

There are a lot of new big-donor prospects to contact: "I'm a kid in a candy store," Ms. Adams says. Many have been quick to respond to invitations for meetings with one of the organization's four frontline fundraisers or its executive director, Anthony Romero — which shows that enthusiasm for the organization's work remains high, she says.

In the coming months, staffers will start to dig even deeper into the organization's database to find smaller donors who might be able to make a big gift in the future. The group has run wealth screenings on new donors to help in the process, she says.

Testing and surveys. This month, the ACLU sent two different direct-mail pieces to two segments of its pool of new supporters. One contained a lot of text and information updating donors about the group's work on civil-rights litigation, advocacy, and lobbying, much like the group's past mailers. The other had less detail but touted more heavily the importance of grass-roots activism and resisting President Trump's agenda. The results could be telling as to what messages reverberate with new donors, Ms. Engel says.

Since President Trump's election, perhaps no group has captured the support of liberal activists like the American Civil Liberties Union.

The venerable civil-rights organization saw a massive spike in donations in the months after the vote and last month launched an advocacy program called People Power that has already signed up tens of thousands of people. As part of that effort, the ACLU provides online tools for individuals who want to organize their own political actions.

Now the question looms: Can the organization keep those new supporters on board? One need look no further than the ALS Association's viral ice-bucket challenge and its aftermath for an example of how hard that is to do.

For now, the ACLU has projected that only a small amount of the small-dollar, one-time donors that have given since November 8 will do so again. Still, it is building a retention strategy — some tactics of which are already being implemented. And those early-stage moves could spark ideas for other groups that have seen fundraising windfalls since the Mr.

The organization has also conducted online surveys, called new supporters, and convened donor panels to ask why people are giving and what issues are top of mind for them. Data from the mailers and other outreach will help the ACLU determine which issues to emphasize in future messages, Ms. Engel says, adding that such testing of appeals will continue and shape communications strategies going forward.

Providing opportunities beyond giving. The ACLU is also promoting People Power by email to its new supporters and is sending a steady stream of petitions and updates related to 13 major causes, including immigrant rights and abortion access. Fundraisers expect that many new donors will be more interested in advocacy and direct action than in supporting the organization through philanthropy.

"We're anticipating these might not be people signing up as members and ready to send their annual check," Ms. Adams says.

But as long as the political climate is similar to what it is today, Ms. Engel expects that many people will renew their gifts. "People understand this is a long-term problem," she says. "This is four years."

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