

# Fundraising 101: 10 Things You Need to Know About Creating a Monthly Giving Program

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## NonProfitPRO

By Heather Fignar

There's the economy and the impact it's having on fundraising revenue, but that's not why monthly giving (or sustainer) programs should be an essential part of any successful fundraising plan.

Monthly giving programs meet donors where they live. Think about what you'll do today in terms of regularity. You get a cup of coffee daily — or, for some of you, hourly. You take the trash to the curb weekly. You might pay a monthly bill.

And when you sit down to review your personal budget, do you look at the full year, or do you look at the month or even the paycheck cycle? In this fast-paced, Internet-driven world, about the only things we do annually are holidays and birthdays.

So then, if you were to venture down this path, what are some of the strategies needed for success?

**1. Buy-in from leadership and staff.** A monthly giving program requires attention. There are all the technical issues of payment methods and reminder mailings. More importantly, these are loyal donors who might give a smaller average gift but are committed to your mission. They deserve your regular attention.

**2. A case worth supporting.** "What are you going to do with my \$20 or \$25 every month that you couldn't do without it?" A monthly giving case works best when it is a concrete outworking of your mission and also has an emotional impact on your donors.

Also, be sure to include images! Especially online, people want to see, not read. Choose images that support your message and demonstrate the need.

On the Médecins Sans Frontières Web site, there are several levels of giving mentioned that clearly demonstrate what type of work my gift will support without creating restricted gifts:

- \$15 provides a month of clean water for 40 refugees.
- \$60 provides a month of nursing care for refugees from war or natural disaster.

**3. Focus on the need, not a name.** Some organizations focus more on product names for monthly giving programs and forget that donors want to support the mission. Unless, of course, we're talking about the San Francisco Zoo, which has done a beautiful job naming and explaining its monthly giving program: "You can help us pay our monthly grocery bill! Each month, it costs us nearly \$22,000 to feed all the animals in the Zoo. By joining the San Francisco Zoo's Meat and Potatoes Monthly Giving Program, you can help us offset these costs."

Accompanying this simple explanatory text is a fantastic photo of a gorilla eating a head of lettuce. Doesn't that say it all?

**4. Break it down.** "For just 80 cents a day" or "for less than a dollar a day ..." We've all seen the commercials for child-sponsorship agencies, and having worked for one, I can assure you that the concept works. One gentleman took the statement so literally that he used the Web site to contribute a single dollar nearly every day. Take the tangible case you've made for monthly giving, and do some math. Can you break it down to a daily or weekly amount that is less than the price of a latte?

**5. Consider giving donors time off for good behavior.** In the analysis work Amergent has done for nonprofit organizations, we have found that while donors may commit to a 12-month program, they tend to end up one or two donations shy of that. Why not create options that accommodate this behavior? Many food banks have the perfect opportunity to do just this, as kids in federal lunch programs end up going hungry on the weekends. So, on Fridays throughout the school year, food banks load up kids' backpacks with ready-to-eat meals. Monthly donors could support this program September through June, taking July and August off.

**6. Make them feel like partners.** Monthly donors need to be treated differently, but that doesn't mean excluding them from everything else. Send them a different version of your e-mail newsletter that speaks to their ongoing commitment. Thank them frequently using stories that demonstrate the impact of their giving. Think of them first if you have giveaways for an event or raffle.

Create a communication stream that makes them champions of your mission. DO NOT leave them out of the mail. They might already give to you monthly, but that doesn't mean they're unwilling or unable to respond to special appeals: "Because you are one of our most loyal supporters, we wanted to tell you about this opportunity first ..."

**7. Ask often and early, especially online.** We worked with a nonprofit that had the ugliest donation form, but the form did feature a monthly giving option. During an audit, we identified this as a potential problem, but our fears were unfounded. While 20 percent of online givers committed to the monthly program (which we thought had to be a

mistake caused by the form), not one of them cancelled. Most of these donors joined the organization as monthly givers. Test an online donation form that includes a monthly giving option to measure the impact.

**8. UYTY — Use Your Thank-Yous.** We are huge fans of an interactive, online thank-you that encourages a second action. Someone has gone to all the trouble to find your site (it's not always easy), found the form to fill out (again, sometimes rather hidden), and given you an immense amount of personal data or, better yet, her credit card number. You have her undivided attention — a rare thing online! What are you going to do with this 10 seconds of time? Throw a couple of text lines and a lot of white space at her? NO! Instead, re-engage her right now while you have the opportunity.

Use your thank-you pages and e-mails for new e-mail list subscribers and petition signers to present your monthly giving program. Use a testimonial from someone who has been helped or a video that talks about the work you do.

**9. Segment.** Make sure you know who is giving to you monthly and who is most likely to say yes when you ask. Look for those who give frequent gifts; start with those who have given three or more times in the last 12 months, whose total giving for that period is more than \$50 and who have previously given using credit cards. Donors using electronic payment are less likely to cancel or stop giving.

**10. Upgrade.** A \$1 or \$2 upgrade can make a huge difference at the end of the year. Upgrade your donors when you ask them to become monthly givers, and create a regular upgrade cycle for your program so you occasionally ask your monthly givers to help just a bit more.

Most loyal donors understand that your expenses happen the same way theirs do — monthly. You have enabled them to support you in a way that fits their lifestyles. And, a monthly giving program enables regular income for your organization.

But it's more than that. It's an opportunity to build loyal donors who see themselves as partners of your organization and mission. They become your champions, your volunteers and sometimes your best planned-giving candidates.

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