CharityEngine®
Powering the good to be great.

5 Steps to **Shake Up Your Fundraising**

And How a Nonprofit CRM Helps

Contents

Introduction

You've heard it all before, right? You know how nonprofit fundraising works. And there's not an auction or fun run you've met that hasn't raised money, so you're just fine, thankyouverymuch.

That's fair. Those events do work.

But what if we told you there's a secret list of steps to explosive fundraising?

There is. And the secret pulls together a lot of things you might already have — like technology and a powerful mission and a lot of passion — with things you might not have, like understanding the immense power of marketing attribution and reporting and shifting your fundraising paradigm and learning about how the right technology can be the biggest secret weapon of them all.

CharityEngine has been working with nonprofits of all sizes for the past decade, and our technology and expertise have combined to transform the fundraising of charities large, medium, and small.

No matter where you fall on the spectrum, **this guide will give you best-practices, actionable advice that addresses the biggest challenges most nonprofits face** — and details the easiest, most cost-effective way to solve them.

And it's kind of funny and kind of scary that we're going to say this, but every word of this guide was written by a person. Every corny joke, every statement that the sales team would love to delete, every word was written by a real, live person in her home office with this adorable dog draped across her feet. In a world in which it's hard to tell what was written by a human and what was spit out by technology, we wanted to give a shoutout to...well, humans. Cheers to the real deal.

Time and time again, clients come to us looking to solve a problem or enhance a result. And we've helped these clients—the biggest and the smallest—raise billions of dollars to, quite literally, change the world. From Rescue Village and the animals they save to Batten Disease Support & Research Association looking for a cure to Research!America and their advocacy efforts to Wounded Warrior Project and MD Anderson Cancer Center and Easterseals, we can assure you that the money our clients have raised has had an impact.

That's just to reassure you that we're a reliable source for mind-blowing fundraising secrets.

And when we have a new client looking for knock-your-socks off fundraising, we've learned that there are five steps, or areas of focus, that form the foundation of effective fundraising.

To make your fundraising soar, a nonprofit needs these five things:

- Campaigns that raise ridiculous amounts of money
- A solid sustainer program
- High donor retention
- Secure payment processing
- A powerful donor database that pulls it all together

When you have these five things in place, we'd go so far as to say you can't do anything other than see explosive results. They form the most solid foundation a nonprofit can have.

In this guide, we're going to look at each one of the five steps. We will share real-life client stories and tell you our approach to helping clients succeed. Knowing how CharityEngine approaches these foundational fundraising steps will educate you, hopefully inspire you, and give you solid questions to ask of your technology vendor.

You, the nonprofit exec or team member or board member sitting here reading this today, can do all of that with any number of technology choices. This isn't a commercial for CharityEngine! You can try one of these **solid nonprofit CRMs** and affiliated partners and check off most of those five items. When we talk about CharityEngine or features we recommend you seek in other systems, it's just because that's what we know. We know our software, so we know what's possible. We want you to know it, too, even if you have and love another CRM.

1 Create Campaigns That Raise a Lot of Money

"Duh," you're saying, "Doesn't take a fundraising expert to know that."

True!

But let's talk about how you create and execute campaigns that raise more money.

How many ways can you grow?

Channels

- Digital
- Phone
- DRTV
- Radio
- Email
- SMS
- Mail
- Social Media

Tools

- Advocacy
- Payments
- E-Commerce
- Peer-to-Peer
- Events & Auctions
- Reporting/Analytics
- Major Gifts
- Sustainers
- Memberships
- Text-to-Give
- Online Forms

Run a Multichannel Campaign

The most critical component of successful fundraising is running multichannel campaigns.

Some clients assume that a multichannel campaign means television ads. And to be fair, we talk about Direct Response Television campaigns our clients, like Wounded Warrior Project, have run with great success — and for big fundraising numbers. TV ads are a potential channel.

For most nonprofits, though, you're not launching TV ads. What are the channels you're most likely to use?

This is definitely not an exhaustive list, but it's a good start. And it would get boring if we listed all of them.

Direct Mail

Direct mail isn't dead. In fact, one of our largest clients drives a whopping 80% of its revenue through direct mail! **Direct mail is the little black dress of fundraising**, because you can use it in so many ways. And it can be the foundation of a solid multichannel campaign.

If you're looking for ideas, you can send a letter with a link to your donation page. You can send a postcard with a QR code that lets supporters donate. You can send a direct mail piece with an offer to text a number to enter a lottery for tickets to an event. It's easy to get creative! And according to NonprofitPRO, 70% of people agree that direct mail feels more personal than digital methods.

In a world that's increasingly AI- and Zoom- and remote-work-focused, any channel that brings a feeling of a human, personal connection will make a difference.

Email

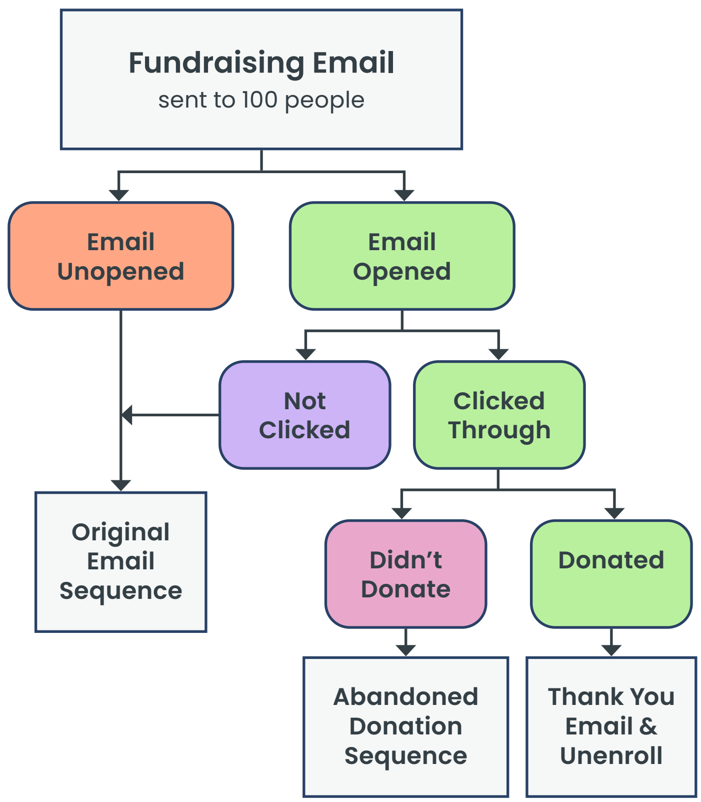
If direct mail is a little black dress, then email would be the sparkly shoes — can't really have one without the other. Email is another foundational element of a multichannel campaign.

Make sure your CRM offers email automation, and you'll sound like you really know your stuff if you question the presence of "if-then" logic. If your email partner says you've got that, you'll know if you have a good email partner.

Let's look at a few different aspects of email. See how your solution stacks up!

Email automation means you can enroll your prospective donors in sequences. We've written about how email marketing for nonprofits (including how often to email your donors) and have also offered a few takes on a fundraising email template for nonprofits.

If-then logic is also referred to as conditional logic. It means that you can program your emails to change the content based on the response. For example, you send a fundraising email to 100 people. (We hope you send it to a lot more than 100, but let's keep the math easy.) Let's say 70 click on your donation link, head to your page, and donate. The logic would say, "**If** this person donates, **then** send them the automated thank-you email and unenroll them from the rest of the email series."



Let's say 10 open the email but don't take any action. They would continue in the original sequence, which might proceed with impact stories, moves to stories of growing need, and then asks for a donation again.

What about the few that clicked but didn't give? They could be sent to an abandoned donation sequence with different messaging.

And let's say two click "unsubscribe." You know what to do then.

You get the picture. When you can thoughtfully create a sequence for each recipient of an initial email, you are personalizing the donor experience and increasing the chances of a donation.

A WYSIWYG editor is key to your email software. Not only is wysiwyg a fun word to say, it also means that you can type an email like you're really typing an email. Some systems ask you to mess with code or markups, and that isn't the easiest way to get your work done. When you can drag and drop logos and photos and change the font of words right on the screen, it's a benefit.

Artificial intelligence is the buzzword these days. As we noted at the top of this guide, sometimes you don't want to leverage it. But sometimes you do, particularly when you're a busy nonprofit trying to write emails, grant proposals, fundraising letters, and social media content…all before 9 am on a Tuesday. Then? AI makes your life a lot easier.

See if your CRM uses AI at all. CharityEngine has integrated the email tool with ChatGPT to make writing emails, letters, etc. faster. You can type "write a fundraising email about the plight of the bumblebee bats" and then choose your tone (the best is "go crazy") and the editor will quickly generate the copy. You review and edit it, then use it. Voila…easy!

These aren't the only important things about your email provider, but they're some headlines to consider.

Phone

Think of all the ways you can use the phone to help your campaigns! It's a little old school, but it really zeroes in on that personal connection we talked about.

One of our clients called her staff in on a Saturday and they pulled the phone numbers of top donors from the CRM. Then they went down the list, calling to thank each one personally. They did not ask for a donation.

Donations skyrocketed anyway.

In a multichannel campaign, you can send a direct mail piece that has a URL for a donation page as well as a phone number donors can call to give credit card information over the phone.

When you plan your next multichannel campaign, brainstorm creative ways you can utilize phone calls. There are certain audiences that will respond particularly well to phone calls. Later on, we will talk about segmenting your lists and targeting each with the appropriate outreach.

SMS and Text

Text-to-give campaigns are a highly effective channel to reach your donors. And do we mean reach — you can text thousands of phone numbers in an instant (as long as you have their permission).

Think of the Red Cross, which is an easy example everyone has experienced. In a disaster, you can text REDCROSS to 90999 and you'll automatically give $10 to American Red Cross Disaster Relief. The charge appears on your wireless bill. It's not being dramatic to say they've raised zillions of dollars with this campaign.

Now, we're not saying you're the Red Cross, but you've gotta think they're on to something with texting for zillions of dollars.

We've told you about this before, but mobile as a strategy is a smart strategy indeed. And when you make it part of a multichannel campaign, zillions get a little closer.

Our clients will often send a text that includes the call-to-action "Text the word 'donate' to give now." The donor texts the word, and they're sent to an online donation form.

You can get wildly creative here and can even "brand" a special number or word that will be affiliated with your nonprofit.

It's probably not awesome to admit, but we all look at our phones more than we should. And studies have proven we answer texts faster than emails. Catch your donors where they are.

We're going on and on about this but one last thought. Your year-end campaign is always going to be where you go big. Texting can help you add urgency to meet a deadline, even if that deadline is midnight on New Year's Eve. Everyone gets caught up in a "Three more $25 donations and we will reach our goal!" party atmosphere, so use it to your nonprofit's advantage.

Pay Attention to Your Forms

Let's step away from channels and talk about where those channels lead: **donation forms**.

Don't sleep on good donation form etiquette! Yes, this talks about what CharityEngine forms can do, but it will also give you ideas for your forms.

What's the advice for good nonprofit forms? Make it easy to give! Here are a few ways to consider:

- With our forms, we offer **one-click giving**. Because CharityEngine is a nonprofit CRM and a payment processor, all donor data is in one place. So if a repeat donor starts typing their name in, the database recognizes a repeat visitor and fills in all their information. With one click, they can donate.
- Offer **multiple ways to give**. Whether you're using mail, email, or text, you're sending folks to a donation form. Offer the choice of a credit card, but offer ACH, or bank transfer. Offer Google Pay, Venmo, and Apple Pay. Offer a phone number to call in credit card numbers. One tip: if you want to use virtual wallets, ask your payment processor if there's a fee. There shouldn't be.
- **KISS: Keep it Simple, Silly**. (You totally thought that was going somewhere else.) By this, we mean keep requested info to a minimum. No one wants to donate so badly they'll wade through field after field after field. Name, contact information, payment information. So also Keep it Short, Silly.
- Always **make suggestions**. Have donors choose between a one-time gift and a monthly gift. Let them uncheck a box if they *don't* want email communications from you (a little sneaky, but if they really don't want emails, they'll unsubscribe). Let credit users choose to cover the processing fee.
- Remain **accessible**. A good nonprofit CRM will make sure your forms are accessible, but if you're in charge of it, think about how to make sure everyone can use your form. This is a whole guide on its own, so just call us if you want to talk about form and even website accessibility.
- **Reduce fraud** without driving people crazy. Entering CVV codes and clicking the squares with crosswalks (when you never seem to get it right) will try your donors' patience. Much better to use built-in fraud protection and preserve the donor experience. Whether it's credit card or ACH fraud, make sure your CRM has you protected.
- **Make it mobile friendly**! As we said, we're on our phones a lot — a form that isn't mobile is likely going to be abandoned quickly.

Plan Spectacular Events

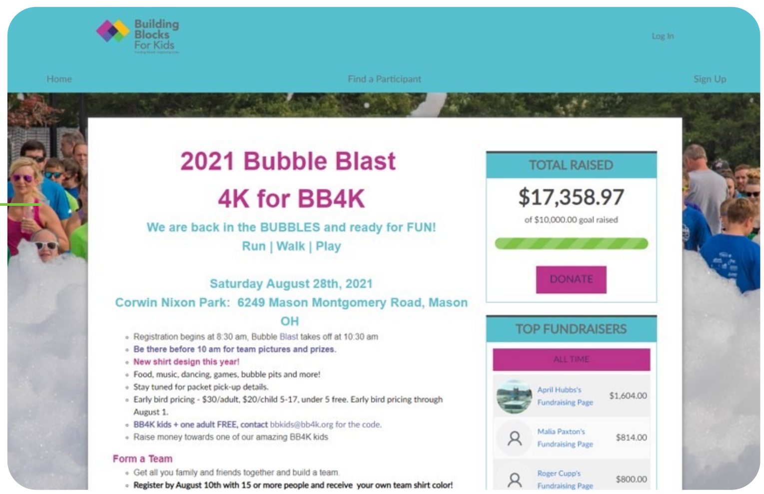
When you're crafting a campaign, think about anchoring it with an event. Your mind might go to a black-tie gala or an auction featuring getaways in Bora Bora, which are amazing fundraisers.

But if you don't happen to know anyone with a house in Bora Bora, or don't own a tux, does that mean events are off the table?

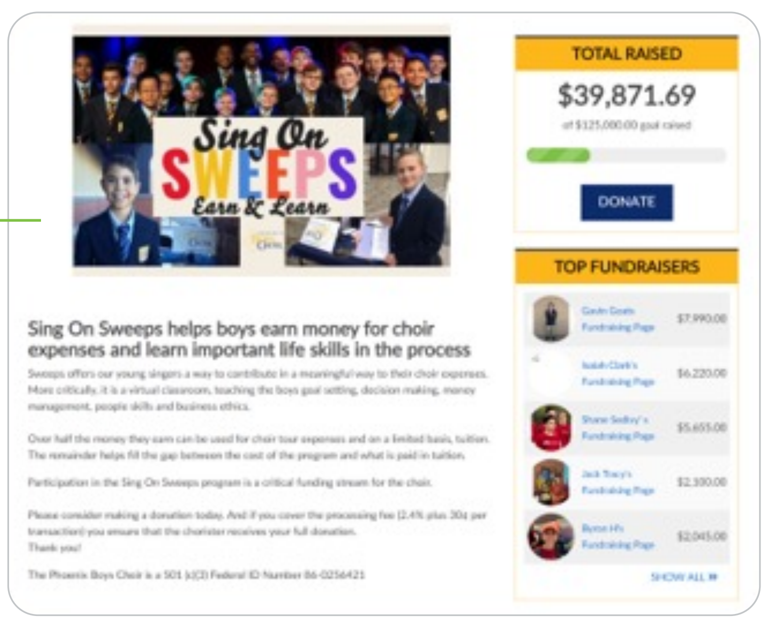
Nope.

On the contrary, the bread-and-butter events our clients love are much easier to pull off. Many of our clients use our peer-to-peer module and get pretty creative.

For example, this client has a "Bubble Blast 4 Kids" event.



Another client uses a kids' concert as their main event.



As long as you have the right software, adding a fun run, bake sale, food drive, or other event is easy. Make sure you can set up the event, get real-time data to show progress toward your goal, and then be able to click into different team members to see their results.

Nonprofit events are particularly wonderful when it comes to fostering a personal connection with your donors. And remember, we're talking multichannel, so you'll want to promote your events across channels to reach the largest number of people.

Track, Measure, Repeat.

We've recently begun beating the drum about a novel concept: digital marketing for nonprofits. The idea is that when you approach fundraising, you're looking at the same goals as a marketer.

- Marketers want to promote an organization. You want to promote your mission.
- Marketers want to communicate the need for a product. You want to communicate the need for fundraising or advocacy or other donations.
- Marketers want to find and keep clients. You want to attract and maintain donors and volunteers.

If (conditional logic!) marketing goals and nonprofit goals are similar, then it stands to reason that marketing principles can be applied to fundraising. And they can be!

It's called **moves management**, and it means engaging donors with different efforts, or moves, as they move through the donor lifecycle. Effective moves management means highly personalized and strategic donor engagement.

Tracking and measuring also means donor attribution, which is something many nonprofits don't consider. This simply means assigning credit to the different channels your donor touches. If you're running a multichannel campaign, wouldn't it be helpful to know if your direct mail is significantly more successful at engagement than your texts?

Donor attribution is a big secret to smart fundraising. When you know how to most effectively reach your donors, your fundraising numbers will rise. And your donor engagement will skyrocket, too.

Once you're tracking where your donors come from and measuring which channels are most effective, see if your CRM offers comprehensive dashboards. When you can see donations come in in real time, and you can see which channels are most effective, you've got everything you need at your fingertips.

Many times, nonprofits like email. Or they're wedded to direct mail. They might get crazy and use email and mail together, but that's not a multichannel campaign. A true multichannel campaign, which is what we're recommending, is created across channels so you are using all of them at the same time. **When you're running a truly multichannel campaign and tracking and measuring your results for each channel, you're increasing engagement with current donors, increasing reach with potential donors, and raising more money for your cause.**

Donor attribution is a big secret to smart fundraising. When you know how to most effectively reach your donors, your fundraising numbers will rise. And your donor engagement will skyrocket, too.

2 Develop a Strong Monthly Giving Program

One of our earliest clients has grown exponentially since its inception. And while there are many factors that have influenced its success, almost everyone on the leadership team would talk about its insanely successful monthly giving program.

There are some ways technology can help you build a program that will make a difference. When you get serious about building your program, talk to your CRM vendor and make sure the tech will support you.

In particular, look for:

- **High Collection Rates**. Meaning that your payment processor collects on the monthly pledges donors have made. Donor Dave, let's say, has signed up to be a monthly donor. He has given his Visa number and has agreed that $25 can be debited every month for your nonprofit. But then Dave's Visa expires, and the transaction fails. That means you haven't collected money that Dave intended to donate. Many payment processors can't collect 10% to 15% of monthly donations!

  What does 10% in lost dollars mean to you? Running some back-of-the-napkin numbers, we'd estimate (conservatively) that a smaller nonprofit would lose $300,000 per year. A medium-sized nonprofit could lose $1.3 million, and an enterprise nonprofit is looking at $2.5 million lost. Those are some seriously high numbers to leave on the table!

  Not to brag (but we're excited about it), but CharityEngine's collection rate is 99.86%. We were shocked to realize that so many intended donations weren't collected and set out to build a system that was different.

- **A Credit Card Updater**. This service is provided by some payment processors, CharityEngine included, to automatically update credit card information when it changes. So if Donor Dave loses his Visa and they send him a new one, his donation to your nonprofit will automatically be transferred to the new card. He won't have to lift a finger.

  This benefit includes expiration dates, too. The system talks to the major credit card companies and automatically updates the expiration date, without any interruption to the donor.

  Ensure your payment processor offers this feature to hang on to your 10%!

- **Ability to process donations from different sources**. Look at you, running multichannel campaigns! You're going to be raising funds through many different channels, so double check to be sure your system can handle it. A strong billing engine will support your sustainer program as it grows.

Ensure your payment processor offers a credit card updating feature to hang on to your 10%!

Time out for a quick commercial break!

There are two features of CharityEngine's software that specifically help with sustained giving. We're sharing them here so you can see what's possible and ask educated questions when you shop.

Sustainer Reactivation Series

This out-of-the-box benefit offers a customizable series of emails that can be triggered by an event. For example, let's say Donor Dave hit the limit on his credit card (not good, Donor Dave) and his monthly donation is declined. A series of emails might look like this:

- Oh no, Dave, we've hit a bump! Can you please visit the donor portal and update your card information, or enter a new payment method?
- Dave, we've tried to process your monthly gift a few times, and it won't go through. We'd hate to deactivate your monthly gift, because it's so important in our efforts to save bumblebee bats from extinction. Please visit our donor portal and change your payment method!
- The bumblebee bats will miss your support, Dave, but it's not too late! Update your information before the account gets moved to a lapsed status!

We're being a little silly, but you get the idea. The emails can say anything you want but it gives a donor many chances to remain in the monthly giving program.

(And before you google it, bumblebee bats really are in danger of extinction!)

Sustainer Successful Payment Series

This is an automated email sent to a sustainer after a donation, telling them their payment was successful and thanking them for their support.

The benefit? The donor knows they were charged and are thanked. Trust is built!

Commercial over! Call your vendor and ask how their technology helps you build a strong monthly giving program.

3 Show Your Donors Some Love

Nonprofits can't be successful without donors, and behind every donation is a person. Those people are the reason your nonprofit is able to make a difference.

When you think about donor stewardship, put yourself in the shoes of your donor. Hearkening back to our thoughts around marketing principles, it's a good time to think about donor personas.

Build Donor Personas

Can you imagine how many different types of people your donors represent? They can be old and young, moms and dads or grandparents, active veterans or retired schoolteachers or someone who just loves animals. It can seem as though it's a huge group of wildly different people!

And while it is, there is commonality. They care about your cause. They have enough income to consider charitable donations. They're the type of person who makes charitable donations.

If you asked, you'd find more similarities and some important differences. We recommend taking the time to create donor personas.

On an effort scale of one to five, this is like a three and a half. It will take a little time and effort but the results will shape your fundraising.

How do you create donor personas? There are some simple steps:

1. You'll start by interviewing people representative of different groups. Start with your donors and identify a cohort that represents different types of donors. You might look for sustainers, one-time givers, lapsed donors, prospects. Then look at your volunteers. Aim for five to ten interviews.

2. Try to ask similar questions. Why did they support your nonprofit? How did they hear about it? What causes them to increase their support? How would they describe your organization? What is their favorite thing about your nonprofit? Ask about their lifestyle, their interests, what their hobbies are. Learn as much as you can about them.

3. Enter information into a donor persona worksheet.

4. Once you have worksheets for the interviews, look for similarities and patterns. Did more than one donor answer a question in the same way?

5. Give each persona a name, like we did with Donor Dave. Looking at the data you have, you might conclude that Donor Dave regularly donates $25 to save the bumblebee bats. He is a science teacher who supports animal rescue organizations and several endangered species through monthly donations. He likes getting postcards in the mail with facts about bumblebee bats and how his donation is helping save them from extinction.

   Maybe Fundraising Fran is a California girl who is in her mid-twenties and saw adorable bumblebee bats on TikTok and wants to save them because her friends are all talking about them and wanting to help them. They're trendy! She gets a bonus from her tech job every year and donates $500 around the holidays. She follows social media channels that work to save endangered animals.

See what we mean? Then craft a plan of action for each persona. You could, for example, segment your donors and plan a multichannel campaign that hits each segment the way that will resonate with them. Donor Dave would get direct mail, and Fundraising Fran would get social media posts. Personas allow you to understand the motivations of each donor — why they support your mission — and you can tailor your messaging to appeal to them. Dave might get facts about extinction and how donations can preserve the habitat of the bats. Fran might be targeted with images of the bats and quick facts that will compel action.

This personalizes your messaging and makes your donors feel seen and appreciated.

Nurture Like Crazy

Every one of your donors should hear from you regularly. If your CRM offers marketing automation (and it really should or you're working much harder than you need to), set up a few communication series for smart, personalized outreach.

For example, a multichannel welcome series might look like this:

- Good old Fundraising Fran donates to your nonprofit online.
- Immediately, she gets a thank-you email.
- A few days later, she gets a text with a story tying her donation to your great work.
- A few weeks later, she gets a direct mail piece describing your next campaign (like a year-end campaign), reminding her of the good you can do because of donors like her.
- And a few weeks after that, she gets an email about your campaign.

That's one series that you can set up to be triggered when someone donates.

Another series would pick up where this one left off and would nurture Fran right through the end of the year.

It's about regular communication that doesn't drive anyone crazy but keeps your mission top of mind. The times you don't ask for a donation are the building blocks of your relationship, so don't skip them. Most people get weary of constant asks, so sprinkle in some feel-good stories about the results of the work you do because of donors.

Multichannel Welcome Series Example

Offer a Donor Portal

It's become increasingly common, and increasingly expected, that people can manage a lot of accounts online without reaching out for help. Donors aren't any different.

If you want to save your staff a lot of time (and therefore save your nonprofit a lot of money) and enhance your donor relationships, offer a donor portal. They can log in and update information or preferences, download tax receipts (you just got a bunch of time and money back if you're not mailing those), or even register to volunteer or attend events.

Once you set up your donor portal, make sure the changes people make are automatically updated in your CRM.

Consider Case Management

This isn't very sexy but it's important. See if your CRM offers case management tools.

What is this? It's task-management software. When donors have requests, they're entered and assigned to different team members. Notes can be made, and resolutions can be noted.

The benefits are obvious: all team members have access to the same information, and nothing falls through the cracks. The other benefit is that you're caring for your donors and strengthening that bond.

Say Thanks!

This one might be obvious but thank your donors often and in many ways. If your CRM offers batch acknowledgements, you can set up workflows to thank a bunch at a time.

Remember way back in chapter 1 (it seems like a long time ago, doesn't it?!), we told you about a client who had her team spend a day calling and thanking donors? They didn't ask for a penny, but donations went up.

Use every channel you've got to say thank you. Send memes or emojis or virtual hugs, but let your donors know you adore them.

Building strong relationships with your donors is a surefire way to develop a successful nonprofit. Have donor appreciation days and profile different donors on your website or social media. Host a reception with your board so your most loyal local donors can be thanked in person. Pick some names out of a hat and send donor surprise boxes of branded swag, like a tote bag or water bottle. Offer tours of your facility.

Bring your donors close, and chances are good they'll never leave.

4 Secure Your Payment Processing

Payment processing can be one of those subjects so complicated and wrought with technicalities that it can be tempting to pull the covers up over your head and go back to sleep.

You can learn the basics of payment processing, but even that can be a little more in the weeds than the average nonprofit wants. We'd suggest a few things you need to know to make a smart decision about your payment processor.

Step 1: Figure out what suits your nonprofit

- If you are a small shop (donations total less than $25,000 annually and you have fewer than 5,000 donors), you will do well with a payment processor like PayPal, iATS, or Stripe.
- You might want to have a CRM that can integrate with these payment processors if you raise around $200,000 in donations and want to be able to collect donor data and manage donors.
- Consider a CRM that is also a payment processor if you raise more than $250,000, want to analyze your data, and have access to CRM tools like email automation, peer-to-peer or events capabilities, and dashboards to analyze data.

Step 2: Ask the right questions about usability and donor data security

- How many types of payment options are there?
- Are they PCI-compliant or PCI-certified? Certification is a huge step up — and more secure — than compliance.
- How do they handle recurring billing?
- What are the payment processing fees, the flat fees, the incidental fees? Are there fees for using virtual wallets?
- What anti-fraud measures are in place?
- Do they partner with Google Pay or other organizations?
- Do they offer ACH processing in house?

This list isn't complete, but it's a good start.

Utilize Frictionless Giving

Remember how we said to make giving easy? That's what we mean, but specific to the process of donating. How can your payment processor make giving frictionless?

If your donor lands on your donation form but then must create an account and log into a third-party system, that's not making giving easy. And it's not necessary: the technology exists to use one-click giving, where your system recognizes repeat donors (and their payment information) and fills in the blanks so they can, literally, give in a click.

If you have access to a mobile swiper, take that to events with you. Using it means you can accept donations on the go with the tap of a credit card.

Are you noticing themes throughout this guide?

Yes, we're focusing on the five things nonprofits need to succeed, but we're also talking a lot about making it easy for donors to give. Making donors feel appreciated. Keeping their data safe. These are basic tenants that can get swallowed up in the stress of daily life, so it's a good reminder that they're the core of your donor relationships.

Let's recap before we finish up.

There are five things, we said, that every nonprofit needs. When all five things are firing on all cylinders, it's the perfect recipe for the most amazing, explosive fundraising ever.

- We talked about **running campaigns that make more money**. By focusing on multichannel outreach and festive events, your campaigns will form the foundation of all fundraising.
- We talked about building and maintaining a **strong monthly giving program** to have predictable revenue, loyal donors, and a growing nonprofit.
- We talked about different ways you can focus on **donor care and retention**, making sure your donors know you love them.
- And we briefly chatted about the importance of a **robust, secure payment processor**.

Throughout, we've talked about the importance of technology. We've shown you how CharityEngine helps clients instead of does things, so you've gotten a peek at one solution. You can use that information as research and a resource when you investigate other nonprofit CRMs.

Now for number five. If your nonprofit has this, or has the right one, all four of those previous things will be easy.

5 Use A Powerful Donor Database

Your CRM is, at its core, a donor database. No matter what bells and whistles you pile on, it's still got to record and maintain information about your donors.

And this may be a little naïve, but we can't imagine there's a CRM that can't help you manage your donors. An Excel spreadsheet can help you manage your donors.

But when you're investing in a CRM, make sure it's powerful.

There are a few hallmarks of a strong system:

- **It keeps your donor data in one place.** It doesn't have information segmented across multiple systems.
- **It offers automation.** Email automation, workflow automation, marketing automation.
- **It offers donation management.** This means that no matter how you reach your donors — website, email, text, phone, mail, in person — the donations go into a central database.
- **It offers real-time data.** If someone gives your nonprofit $100,000, you don't want to have to wait for the nightly sync to find out about it. You want to know then and there, instantly, so you can say thank you. Instantly.
- **It offers the tools you need to fundraise.** These include email marketing, reporting and analytics, sustainer and membership management, online forms, and major gift functionality. Bonus points if you can add specific functionality you need, like advocacy, e-commerce, events, peer-to-peer, and text-to-give.
- **It offers insights.** This is a biggie! If all your donor data is in one place, and your system is updating in real time, and you have robust analytics, you'll get insights that will open doors you didn't know existed.

  For example, and this is a favorite of our CEO's, a good nonprofit CRM will be able to tell you who won auction items. Those people are hot prospects for future fundraising! They came to your event, they donated money, they're invested. What about, our CEO asks, the people who came in second place? They too came to your event, they tried to donate money, and they're invested. Can your CRM find them? Can it find the volunteers that need a little nudge to donate, or those that registered for an event but won't open emails? Those are the insights you'll get from a top-notch nonprofit CRM.

There are a few other considerations when you're describing a great donor database.

Keep It All in One Place...Or Not

There are two schools of technology thought, and both are right and good for different nonprofits.

1. You can look at an all-in-one system that has native functionality. You would have email, for example, in your core software.
2. Or you can have a database that integrates with third-party providers. Looking at our example, instead of having email in the software, you might integrate with MailChimp.

The benefit to a CRM that offers native tools for most functionality a fundraiser needs is simple: **all your data is in one place**. And that means that your system has a nice big pool of data to apply AI and logic and spit out insights for you. There's no syncing, there's no data lost, there's no delay.

If your CRM updates in real time, you have the added benefit of complete, accurate data. Always.

Why then, if that's so great, would we say integrations are also great? Simple. Some of our biggest clients use CharityEngine but still have an industry-specific or otherwise necessary third-party system they need to integrate to fundraise effectively. For these clients, we have public APIs (which are somewhat like the password and handshake you needed to know to get in the tree house when you were younger) that make connecting to the software a breeze.

Benefit from AI That Makes Sense

Artificial intelligence is the coolest thing around, but it's not new. We've used AI in our CRM for years. It's cool, though, to use it in new ways, like the Chat GPT email integration we talked about.

One way we've used it for years is to calculate giving probability. Our system scans tens of thousands of real-time data points to let you know the best time to reach out to a donor, the best manner, and what to ask for.

We've plugged AI into our fraud prevention, too. Make sure your CRM vendor has AI included to make sure you're maximizing the most current technology to increase fundraising.

Keep Your Data Clean

If payment processing isn't sexy, data hygiene also falls into that "not sexy but an important subject" category.

Hopefully, we've imparted the importance of data — getting it, managing it, keeping it all together so it talks, analyzing it.

But if your data isn't clean, none of that matters.

What are some ways you can keep your data clean?

- Standardize data entry. Have specific fields, first name/last name, spouse first name/last name. Your data will be a mess if you have Mr. and Mrs. Bob Smith, Mrs. Bob Smith, Janet Smith, Bob Smith, and Smith family in your database! That's five records for the same household.
- Remove duplicates whenever you find them.
- If you notice missing values, fill them in.
- Always check for misspellings or inconsistencies.

What are some ways technology can keep your data clean?

- Assist with the standardization of fields by returning an error message if the value is incorrect.
- Matching on multiple fields. Instead of just matching on email addresses, the technology can match on home addresses, middle names, or other fields. This will identify duplicate entries more frequently so that you can....
- Have the tech dedupe your data. Once you've got it clean, your database can scan itself for duplicate entries.
- Set permissions for who can change data within your organization. There aren't that many people that need access to the entire CRM, so dole out permissions as needed.
- Run reports to find outdated or erroneous donor entries. If a person hasn't donated in ten years, it's not likely they're going to answer your email. And you're probably driving them nuts.

When your data is clean, your reporting is accurate. When your reporting is accurate, your observations, conclusions, and fundraising strategies are more likely to be spot on. It might not be sexy, but it's important.

It's As Easy as 1...2...3...4...5!

Shaking up your fundraising is as easy as following these five steps. What if you're a small nonprofit, just getting started? Then use this as a road map. A medium-sized-and-growing nonprofit? Use these five steps as a yardstick against which you can measure your own solutions and ask hard questions of your vendor or look around for a new system. And if you're a really big nonprofit? You might just find that one of these five steps can be improved so you're supersized.

One of our long-time clients was talking the other day, and she said something poignant. She said that the real secret to fundraising success and nonprofit growth is having a partner who believes in you and cares about your mission as much as you do. She's found that with CharityEngine, but it's another yardstick you can use to evaluate your CRM partner.

Shaking up your fundraising doesn't mean getting rid of everything you're already doing. Rather, it's an invitation to look at fundraising and campaigns through a different lens. When you see the five pillars of a successful fundraiser, it offers a checklist for your nonprofit and a road map to move forward. And if you're curious about how our fundraising software can help your nonprofit, just give us a call.


Are you ready to see CharityEngine in action?
Discover how CharityEngine's unique all-in-one solution will kickstart your multi-channel fundraising campaign.
Request a Demo
CharityEngine®
Powering the good to be great.