Sticky Sustainers

Using Technology to Power Monthly Giving

CharityEngine

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Introduction

Nothing warms a nonprofit's heart—and fundraising accounts—like a robust sustainer program. When you have tens or hundreds or thousands of supporters making monthly gifts, you have a reliable and steady stream of income that shores up your mission and gives you the ability to plan campaigns and set goals accurately. A strong sustainer program helps your nonprofit grow.

Our largest clients have hundreds of thousands of monthly sustainers. If each of those donors pledges just $20, the impact to a nonprofit's mission is millions of dollars. With that foundation, these clients can make an enormous fundraising splash (a Superbowl ad, for example), which further helps their organization and catapults support of their mission.

And here's a secret: any nonprofit can build a strong monthly giving program, and any nonprofit can keep those sustainers sticky. We've got decades of experience under our belts, and we've helped a lot of nonprofits leverage technology to build and maintain rock-solid sustainer programs.

In this guide, we'll share everything you need to know about creating a strong monthly giving program and then keeping those sustainers sticking around. Let's explore why monthly giving is not to be overlooked and how you can build a strong program—then we will share the technology features that are key to making your sustainer program shine.

ChargityEngine guarantees you'll collect at least 90% of your monthly recurring revenue. The industry average is only 70% to 80%, meaning you are leaving money on the table!

CHAPTER 1

Why Sustainers Hold the Keys to Success

Sustainers (also known as monthly or recurring donors) provide a stable financial foundation for a nonprofit. When you can count on money coming in regularly, you can plan your budgets, staff your programs, and invest in long-term growth.

You've likely heard that it's a lot more expensive (and we're talking about all resources, including time) to recruit and nurture a new donor than to keep an existing one. But existing donors are easier on resources! They've demonstrated a long-term commitment to your cause. They have shown that they trust your organization to be excellent stewards of their donations. They're likely to be opening your emails, following you on social media, and willing to participate in peer-to-peer campaigns and attend or volunteer at events.

In short, they're the invaluable core supporters every nonprofit needs.

And, of course, the healthier your sustainer program, and the stickier your sustainers, the more money you're raising to support your mission.

This graphic illustrates the cumulative fundraising difference between numbers of sustainers. Let's say that, in each case, the donors give $25 a month and then a $300 gift during your year-end campaign.

What if you had more sustainers?

# of Monthly Donors	×	Average Monthly Gift	+	Additional Gifts	=	Cumulative Donations
100		$25		$300		$60,000
500		$25		$300		**$300,000**

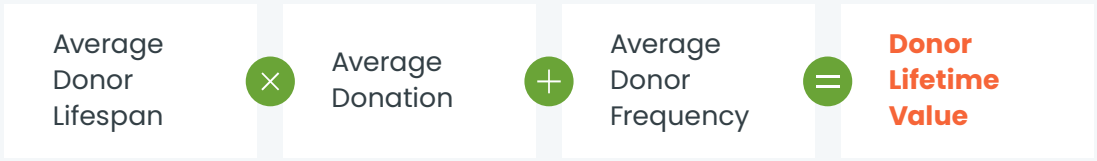
As you can clearly see, you don't necessarily need people giving larger amounts. You just need more of them donating regularly...which is why you should focus on building sustainer programs.

Here are some other benefits of a strong program:

- **Your nonprofit will enjoy higher donor retention rates.** Once donors have made the commitment to give regularly, they'll be less likely to withdraw their support. Because the monthly donation process is automated, donors can set it and forget it – no need to remember to log in and donate every month.
- **When you are saving the resources required to recruit new donors, you're lowering your fundraising costs.** Sustainers have a much higher Donor Lifetime Value (DLV), which is the estimated value of a donor's contributions over the lifetime of their relationship with your organization. This means that you can spend more resources on developing programs to impact your mission.
- **You will find that monthly donors are more deeply engaged with your organization.** They understand your mission well and are more likely to volunteer, attend events, participate in activities, and advocate for your nonprofit.

To calculate DLV, you need three metrics and a formula:

1. **Average Donor Lifespan**, which you can estimate by how long most donors remain with your organization.
2. **Average Donation**, which is the total amount of your gifts divided by the number of donors.
3. **Average Donor Frequency**, which is the total number of gifts divided by the number of donors.



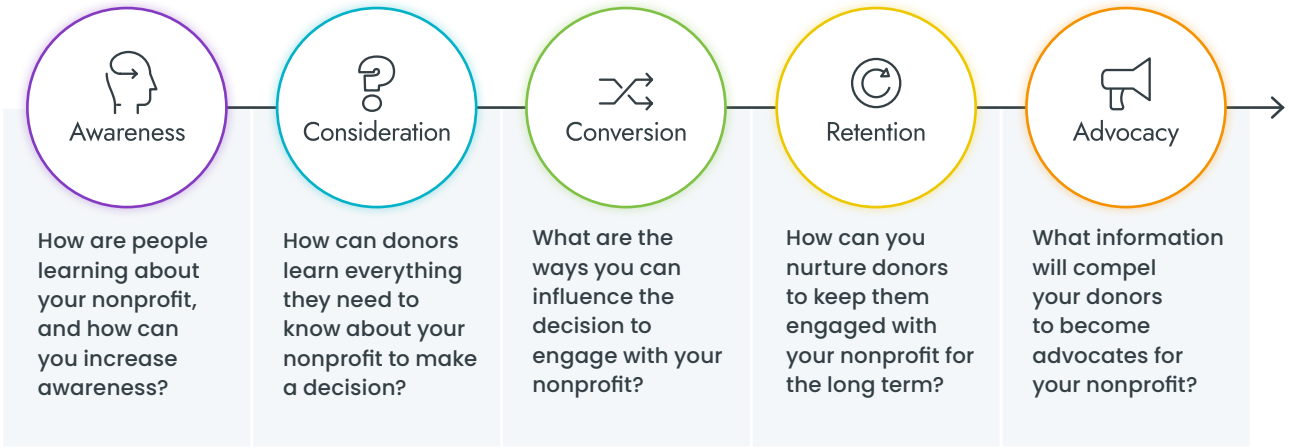
A solid sustainer program is one of the most foundational building blocks for your nonprofit. While these donors might give a smaller amount than a one-time donor, the DLV is significantly greater. This helps your nonprofit grow and increases your ability to impact your mission.

CHAPTER 2

It All Begins with One Step… on the Donor Journey

Imagine you're a regular person weighing some different nonprofit organizations. What is the appeal of each mission? Or you're a donor making a $10 donation whenever you think of it. What message would prompt you to engage more regularly?

The donor journey is the predictable path all donors take, from awareness to advocacy.



It can help you place yourself as the donor in the stages and consider what you'd be thinking, and how different messages or channels could influence you to move to the next stage. This free Donor Journey Template is a helpful tool.

Using your fundraising software to collect data on your donors, it's easy to segment them according to geographic or demographic parameters. Use your CRM to send surveys and discover how each segment likes to engage. You might find that Gen X and Millennials prefer email, Boomers like good old-fashioned direct mail, and Gen Z won't answer the phone but will respond immediately to a text.

Plan your campaigns accordingly. You will find that a comprehensive multichannel campaign, with messaging designed to appeal to each segment, enables you to cover a lot of ground quickly. If your technology offers dashboards for nonprofits, you can watch your campaigns in real time and pivot quickly when you see that one outreach effort isn't performing as expected.

Once you have the donor journey mapped, how can you leverage it to find sustainers?

- **Understand donor motivations** at each step so that you will know the message needed to motivate occasional donors to make more regular contributions.
- **Identify and track engagement**, such as attending or volunteering at an event, engaging in advocacy efforts, or participating in a peer-to-peer campaign. Even analyzing website KPIs (clicking on links or visiting the donation page) will identify highly engaged donors who could be likely sustainers.
- **Look for signs of friction in the donation process** to optimize it. Giving must be easy and donation forms must be tweaked to decrease the abandonment rate. When donors can give in a click and switch a one-time gift to a monthly gift with ease, you'll see higher donations and an increase in sustainers.
- **Leverage donor data**, such as giving history, to find those donors that are ripe for stewardship. If you know that someone makes a year-end donation as a tribute to a loved one, they might be amendable to lowering the one-time donation amount and giving monthly throughout the year.

Paying attention to the donor journey—focusing on moves management—is critical to finding sustainers.

The donor journey is dynamic, and nonprofits must stay on top of how and when donors are converting to new stages. Rely on data to take the pulse of your organization at any time, and test your messaging, donation page, channels, and outreach frequency to see what yields the results you want.

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CHAPTER 3

How to Find Your Strongest Sustainers

So you know sustainers are important, and you understand the value of leveraging the donor journey to nurture them. But what are some tricks and tactics that can help you find your strongest sustainers?

This answer leans heavily on technology. Not only can it collect and analyze hundreds of thousands of data points, but it can identify trends and predict future waves. Technology can shine a light on your donors and find those that can become strong sustainers.

In general, you'll want to analyze donor behavior and engagement patterns. Here are some different ways you can identify sustainers:

- **Look for giving recency, frequency, and monetary value.** Known as the RFM of a donor, it's a common calculation that moves your most engaged donors to the top of the list. Your fundraising software likely offers you the ability to calculate the RFM, or you can use our free RFM calculator.
- **Investigate whether your software offers giving probability.** This tool uses artificial intelligence and business intelligence to calculate the chance a donor will give, and what amount they're likely to give. Software that's integrated with a tool like WealthEngine will feed known wealth indicators into your database and leave you with a good idea of who might become a strong sustainer.

Beyond tools that will perform calculations, there are some other insights your fundraising software can provide:

- **Consistency in giving**. Because sustainers are simply donors who give consistently over time, you can flag anyone who's made multiple gifts with regularity. Comb through your year-end donors; chances are you'll find some excellent sustainers in there.
- **Engagement.** When donors are looking for non-monetary ways to support your nonprofit, they're clearly dedicated to your mission. Volunteering at events or phone-a-thons, clicking on your emails to read more in-depth articles, and dropping off in-kind donations are all signs your donor will be willing to give more.
- **Feedback from surveys and polls.** Good fundraising software makes it easy for you to send surveys through a variety of channels—mail, email, text, social media—to gather first-hand feedback. You can ask a question about the likelihood of a donor making a regular gift and you can ask them what might be holding them back. It's solid gold!

CHAPTER 4

Using Technology to Create Sticky Sustainers

Nonprofits lose up to 30% of their monthly revenue because credit cards are declined.

Only CharityEngine has the specialized technology to retain those dollars!

You want sticky sustainers, right? Sticky just means they stick around, supporting your nonprofit year after year. And the best way to get really sticky sustainers is through technology. After it helps you identify your sustainers, it can also help you nurture them. Remember that a sustainer can pull the plug on monthly donations at any time! Stewardship and nurturing are crucial throughout the life of a donor.

It's most effective to think of your donor relationships as more than just transactional. That guiding assumption helps you continually strengthen your relationships, and relying on your software will make that even easier. Here are some features of good fundraising software that will help you nurture your donors and make sure they stick:

Donor Database

A robust donor database will do a lot of the heavy lifting for you. When technology tracks every interaction with your nonprofit, from every channel, in real time, you will know if a sustainer needs attention. You'll have so much data on that donor that your outreach will be personal and prompt, leading to a much greater chance that sustainer will stick around.

Reporting and Analytics

Once you've got all that data, it's time to put it to work for you. Find out how many out-of-the-box reports your system offers and whether or not you can customize reports. See if reporting is automated and if you have access to advanced query options so you can create real-time sustainer dashboards and see what's working. When you see what isn't, you can pivot quickly, rather than waiting for a campaign to end and realize it was a dud.

Email Marketing Automation

At its most basic, email automation ensures consistent outreach to your donors. It's a "set it and forget it" feature to keep you relevant in the minds of your sustainers.

But there's more you can do. You can create sequences so the information and stories you provide are leading sustainers to a more permanent relationship with your nonprofit. Use custom sending options, email validation tools, A/B testing, custom tracking URLs, and advanced analytics to be sure your emails are hitting the mark.

Set your system so that certain actions, such as clicking on a link, trigger real-time emails for a customized experience. Ensure your technology offers a full suite of nonprofit email marketing tools to maximize your interaction with donors.

Smart Forms

Forms can be a powerful tool to help you nurture sustainers. Does your technology provide forms designed to maximize giving?

Let's look at some ways forms can bring sustainers in and keep them sticky by making it easy to give.

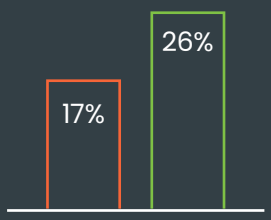
- Forms can streamline the donation process by making it simple to switch a one-time gift to a monthly gift.
- Friction is reduced when there are fewer required fields to complete.
- Capture information about communication preference and giving preferences so you can personalize communication and engagement strategies.
- Forms can trigger automated emails or even automated receipts.
- One-click giving means that sustainers are recognized and their information is right there.
- Responsive forms make it easy to give on a phone or mobile device.
- Accepting multiple payment forms gives donors flexibility; they can pay by credit card, ACH, DAF, or even use virtual wallets like Apple Pay, Google Pay, or Venmo.

Be sure you can customize your forms, too, to keep your brand front and center and decide exactly what information will be valuable to you.

Sustainer Management

Many systems don't offer sustainer management, so if you find one, scoop it up. Software designed for sustainer identification, engagement, and retention can be a game changer. Online monthly giving tools to look for are automated billing, an online portal where sustainers can update information and preferences and download yearly tax receipts, and dashboards built to identify and retain sustainers.

Not all fundraising platforms are the same and there's no one-size-fits-all. When your goal is focused on your sustainer program, though, there are certainly features that can make your job easier.



Did you know that the average industry conversion rate on donation forms is 17%? **CharityEngine clients see rates that average 26%.**

CHAPTER 5

Keep 'Em Coming Back (With a Retention Strategy)

Nurturing your donors means you're keeping them happy while they're with you, but let's focus on how you get them to stay.

When we talk about nonprofits losing donors, we're talking about churn. There's active churn, in which a donor unsubscribes from your emails and withdraws support, and passive churn, in which case their credit card expires or is reported lost, and they just don't bother to go back and update their information. Both can be addressed and managed, and addressing churn will help you retain your sustainers.

Most of what we recommend for active churn prevention and sustainer retention is fairly routine:

- Thank donors promptly and genuinely.
- Communicate regularly with personalized messages.
- Demonstrate impact so they see where their donations go.
- Practice complete transparency to build trust.
- Recognize and reward sustainer loyalty.
- Conduct regular sustainer surveys to get actionable feedback.
- Invite them in; have a board luncheon or a tour of your facilities.
- Make giving easy and convenient.
- Offer a portal so sustainers can manage their own accounts.
- Offer diverse payment options.
- Create a community through online forums or programs.
- Invest in the technology that will help you segment audiences, personalize messages, and leverage multichannel outreach.
- Use reporting and analytics to track key metrics like retention rate, lifetime value, and churn rate to measure the effectiveness of your strategies.

CharityEngine helps retain sustainers with robust payment options and virtual wallets.

CharityEngine has helped nonprofit clients of all sizes begin and grow significant recurring giving programs. Here are some tips you might not have considered:

- Update donors on how their monthly gifts are helping, but set frequency expectations low so that supporters aren't disappointed if they don't hear from you in a week.
- Choose a regular time each year to give a "State of the Nonprofit" address. It can be an email and the timing can be tied to your board report, so it's not extra work.
- Even if you get an online gift, send a handwritten thank-you note.
- Use your technology to customize your donation receipts and add a little story about your nonprofit's impact.
- Use unexpected media, such as video, to personalize communications with your sustainers.
- Plan a sustainer retention day each month. Map out your processes, check payments and reports, consult dashboards, check for feedback, and see if you're at risk of losing any sustainers. If you are, it's time to figure out why, and plan a personal phone call to reignite them.

The donors that become sustainers do so because they believe in your mission, and they believe you will be a good steward of their funds. They trust you, and trust is the first building block of a relationship. If you respond with personalization, respect, and interest in their lives, your sustainers won't go anywhere.

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CHAPTER 6

Never Take Sticky Sustainers for Granted

At CharityEngine, we have many clients with robust sustainer programs. Sometimes, though, we get panicked calls because sustainer programs are going down the tubes and our clients can't figure out why. Most of the time, it's because they took their foot off the sustainer-care gas.

Donors can be lifelong supporters, or they can be fickle. The economy changes, personal circumstances change, and sometimes it's harder to part with that $25 monthly donation. But if you're constantly watching your sustainer program and thinking of ways to recognize and engage these valuable donors, your program won't go down the tubes.

Here are some tips that will help you keep your sustainers fresh and engaged:

- Monitor technology and platform updates to see if there are new outreach methods or even advanced reporting that can help your sustainer retention plan evolve.
- Keep your whole team focused on your sustainers. Divide your list among team members and have them call these donors to say hello—not to ask for a donation.
- Use your fundraising software to note birthdays, anniversaries, tribute gifts, or other special dates. Keep a stack of cards in your desk and send them to donors.
- Look for fun ways to recognize donors. Put them on your website or highlight them on social media. Ask them to speak at luncheons or tell their story in an email. Show them how much you value them.
- If someone can't give because their circumstances have changed, offer multiple ways they can still connect with your nonprofit. Can they volunteer, start an online petition or survey, or help run a virtual peer-to-peer event? Be clear that their value to you transcends their financial impact.

It's essential for nonprofits to remember that sustainers are the glue that holds your organization together. They've demonstrated a commitment to support your mission over the long term, meaning you will have a reliable source of income to fund programs that will impact lives.

If your nonprofit prioritizes donor retention and stewardship, regularly expressing thanks and showing donors how their support is helping, you'll foster a sense of loyalty and deepen your relationship with these supporters. And that is the secret to having the stickiest sustainers around.

A COMPLETE SOLUTION

Ready to see CharityEngine in action?

Discover how CharityEngine's unique all-in-one solution will kickstart your multichannel fundraising campaign.

Request a Demo

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