How to Connect With Donors of Color

Here's how cutting-edge nonprofits are keeping up with a changing America.

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Chronicle reporters

When Margarette Purvis started as chief executive of the Food Bank for New York City in 2011, she embarked on a listening tour of the food pantries and soup kitchens her charity supports.

She quickly got an earful from leaders and volunteers offended by a food-bank appeal that featured an image of an older white man and the words "Don’t make me beg."

The staff members and volunteers she met — many of whom, like Purvis, are women of color — told her they felt alienated by the campaign. Their complaints all had one central question, Purvis says. "So is it OK for some people to beg, just not him?" they asked her.

The appeal met its goal, but it was not worth the antagonism it generated, she says. And it reminded her that too often fundraisers have only white people in mind when they make a pitch, turning off other potential supporters as well as disaffecting a charity’s work force. "When people have one idea of what a donor looks like, she says, "you’re not always
thinking about how all donors could think about a message."

Purvis, who stepped down last month, quickly moved to avoid a repeat of such an incident by insisting that informal focus groups vet the images and messages the food bank uses. It asks as many as 15 people with a range of relationships to the charity — including board members, leaders of member groups, and marketers at other nonprofits — for feedback on communications.

"How clear was this?" Purvis says her colleagues ask reviewers. "After reading this, do you feel that you now understand not only what we're talking about but also what we're asking you to do?" And most important, she says, did the food bank achieve its goal of putting dignity "at the heart of everything"?

**Disconnection, Not Disinterest**

By reaching out to other organizations for help, Purvis is also creating a wider net of supporters and attracting a far bigger share of donors of color than previously made contributions.

Purvis recruited Mike Walrond, a minister who preaches to a majority-black congregation of 10,000 at First Corinthian Baptist Church in Harlem, to serve on her organization’s board. The food bank runs a soup kitchen in the same neighborhood as the church, and Walrond’s involvement has spurred congregation members to give to food drives and volunteer at the food bank and charities in its network.

"I don’t know that lots of people see these leaders from megachurches as being the assets that they really are," says Purvis, citing Walrond’s strong community and political network, in addition to the thousands of parishioners he reaches at his church and online. "It just was win, win, win, win."

The time and effort the Food Bank of New York City has put toward attracting more donors of color makes the group unusual. The challenge of diversifying donors has proven difficult even at large national nonprofits, many of which have long taken a one-size-fits-all approach to fundraising. Attracting donors of color requires a long-term commitment to changing organizational culture and building trust with groups they have overlooked in the past. Household-name charities like Planned
Parenthood Federation of America, World Vision, and St. Jude Children’s Research Hospital have been making focused efforts to connect with donors of color, and they’re reaping new contributions as a result.

But even those groups — and many others — have a lot of ground to make up before the nation becomes majority minority around 2045.

The fundraising software company Blackbaud studied the racial and ethnic makeup of people who give to charity a few years ago and found that white people accounted for roughly three-quarters of donors. That’s a far cry from the American population, which is now 60 percent white. And it’s not just numbers of donors charities are missing out on but the amount of wealth at stake: Roughly 14 percent of millionaires are people of color, and that number seems likely to grow as demographics keep changing.

While many fundraisers know they need to improve their efforts to reach people of color, they often don’t know what to do, experts say.

Ashindi Maxton, co-founder of the Donors of Color Network, an affinity group for wealthy philanthropists of color, recalls a conversation she had with a well-known fundraiser who expressed frustration about her inability to recruit donors of color to support progressive causes. "They’re just not interested. We have really tried," Maxton remembers the fundraiser saying.

Maxton’s response: "You are not throwing the party they want to come to." It wasn’t that people of color weren’t interested in the cause but that they felt disconnected from it, Maxton told the fundraiser. The first step to fixing that, she added, was to recruit more people of color to plan fundraising efforts and get involved in the nonprofit’s work.

"If you want to throw the party that they want to come to, you need people planning this party who have the same lived experience as the donors. I just don’t think there’s a shortcut to that."

Of course, many organizations that are led by people of color and that focus on serving people of color have long relied on support from people close to the cause.

But too often, Maxton and others say, fundraisers at majority-white organizations overlook people of color, viewing them as recipients of aid
TAKEAWAYS

- Nonprofits with staffs and boards that are mostly white often overlook donors of color, sometimes because employees think of people of color as recipients of aid rather than potential supporters.
- To be successful raising money from people of color, organizations need to diversify their staffs and boards. Donors need to be able to see themselves represented in the group.
- The messages and images nonprofits use in appeals matter. It can be easy to offend potential donors, especially if a nonprofit has cultural blind spots.
- Organizations often need to form new partnerships. Enlisting the help of diverse volunteers as well as connecting with or creating networks like giving circles and affinity groups can be critical. Research shows that high-net-worth donors of color are less connected to one another than their white counterparts.
- Many nonprofits don’t know the racial and ethnic makeup of their current donors. Collecting data from supporters about how they identify can help organizations set meaningful goals, measure progress, and
Luz Vega-Marquis, then chief executive of the Marguerite Casey Foundation, encouraged Vaid to turn her question into a research proposal. Vaid, who runs an equity and social-justice consultancy, did just that and won support for her project from the Marguerite Casey Foundation and others, including the Ford and Open Society Foundations.

Vaid was shocked to find that, with the exception of some international studies, the existing research on wealthy people didn’t mention race at all. "The assumption was that all the donors were white," she says.

Vaid’s project used demographic data compiled by the analytics firm TargetSmart to estimate the level of household wealth by race. They found that 1.3 million people of color in the United States have more than $1 million in cash on hand — that’s 14 percent of all U.S. millionaires.

Vaid collaborated on the report with Maxton. They reviewed the scant research on wealthy donors of color and interviewed 60 people in philanthropy, including donors of color, wealth advisers, and academics.

The study found a mosaic of giving strategies and cause interests among wealthy donors of color. But it also uncovered some patterns. The way millionaires of color give is different than the way wealthy white donors give, differences that Vaid and Maxton attribute to racial injustice codified by federal and local policies such as redlining, the practice of refusing loans or other services to communities of color, or racially restrictive covenants that enforced widespread housing segregation.

Millionaires of color, for example, are more likely than their white counterparts to have built their wealth than to have inherited it. As a result, many give directly to family members who are less prosperous.

While millionaires of color give in large numbers, they are less connected to each other than white philanthropists are, and they have little contact with professionals in philanthropy. They told researchers they would like to change that but didn’t feel comfortable participating in existing networks of philanthropists, which were dominated by white donors.

"No one had built a home for them," Maxton says.

After publishing the report, Maxton founded the Donors of Color Network with Vaid and Hali Lee, a veteran fundraiser and leader. The network was
the first to connect wealthy donors of color with one another and with foundation leaders, consultants, and other philanthropy professionals.

The network has also led follow-up research, which will be published this spring, conducting 112 interviews with millionaires of color, more than three-quarters of whom are self-made. Lee and another co-author, Shawnda Chapman, joined Vaid and Maxton to travel to donors’ homes and interview them about their backgrounds and their approaches to giving.

Philanthropic networks can help donors of color learn from peers who give to formal charities, not just friends and family in need. Lee says many of the millionaires of color they interviewed were just beginning to give big gifts, and they were more likely to take advice on charitable giving from a more experienced peer with a similar lived experience than from "a young development director who they don’t know."

Most of the wealthy people of color interviewed reported providing financial support to family or friends. Multiple donors told researchers they gave nearly $500,000 a year toward rent, medical expenses, and tuition for relatives.

"The on-ramp to what we think of as philanthropy may look very different in communities of color and may be closer to home," says Maxton. She adds that fundraisers should be mindful that their appeals for donations could be competing with a donor’s commitment to support family members.

"They’re wealthy, but they’re part of family structures that aren’t," Vaid says. "They feel a responsibility to give back."

**Democratizing Giving**

In Minneapolis, one social-justice organization has found that giving donors a say in where grants go can be especially attractive to donors of color.

Volunteers have always led grant making at the Headwaters Foundation for Justice. But while the people making funding decisions ranged in age and came from different racial and ethnic backgrounds when Maria De La Cruz joined as the organization’s development director in 2014, the group’s donors were largely white upper-middle-class and high-net-worth baby
boom. A small number of wealthy donors gave a large share of annual contributions.

One of the foundation's goals is to democratize giving. So De La Cruz, now executive director, suggested the organization test an effort to bring together people from a broad range of races and economic classes to give, raise money, and make grants collectively.

The idea came from Social Justice Fund Northwest, which launched its first Giving Project in 2010. A network of social-justice grant makers around the country now take similar approaches.

At Headwaters, 20 to 25 people of diverse races and economic classes spend six to seven months volunteering roughly 100 hours each to raise money from their friends, family, and other networks. During that time, participants also review grant proposals, lead donors on visits to prospective grantees, and participate in training sessions about race and class.

De La Cruz and her staff work hard to make sure that African Americans, indigenous people, and other people of color have the support they need to participate, offering coaching as well as services like child care when needed. "This isn't typically a space that they get invited into," she says.

Headwaters has run the Giving Project six times so far and requires every participant to give. Participants have contributed as little as $50 and as much as $25,000.

At the outset, De La Cruz and her colleagues sensed the Giving Project could be a significant opportunity for the organization to recruit new donors. On average, each cycle brings in around 200 new donors, and the demographics of Headwaters’s donor base is changing, she says.

"It’s younger, it’s browner and blacker, and it’s also queerer," she says.
"We hear so often from our donors, ‘Headwaters is the only foundation that's ever engaged me in this way.’"

The group’s annual fundraising event used to be something of a homecoming for old friends of the organization. But De La Cruz remembers a moment at the Change Makers Gala following the first cycle of the Giving Project when participants mingled with new and longtime donors, grantees, and the foundation’s staff.

"A longtime donor came up to me and said, ‘Maria, I’m looking around this room, and I don’t recognize so many of these people,’ " she recalls. "I said, ‘Oh, what do you think about that?’ And she said, ‘This is so exciting. I feel like there is new life being breathed into the organization.’"

**New Partnerships**

It helps to have support from the top. In 2018, World Vision appointed Edgar Sandoval as its first CEO of color. A former executive at Procter & Gamble with a background in multicultural marketing, Sandoval has made diversity and inclusion one of his strategic priorities. And that vision is being carried out by the nonprofit’s fundraising and partnership teams.

For the past two years, Michael Chitwood, executive director of church and ministry partnerships, has worked to build a diverse staff and establish new partnerships with African American, Asian, Latinx, and multiethnic congregations — the kinds of churches that had not worked with World Vision as much in the past.

Chitwood and his team of 78 people nurture relationships with churches to encourage their members to sponsor children in need, run races to raise money for clean-water projects in developing countries, and participate in other service projects and advocacy and fundraising efforts.

Historically, international nonprofits like World Vision have not made concentrated efforts to reach people of color or churches of color, he says. But as he sees it, valuing diversity and inclusion is critical as a moral, Christian, and business imperative. After all, the share of white people who are Christian in the United States is dropping.

In recent years, World Vision launched two large national
partnerships with African American denominational affiliations — the Church of God in Christ, which has tens of thousands of churches across the United States, and the National African American Fellowship for the Southern Baptist Convention, which counts more than 4,000 churches in its network.

The charity’s annual gathering of pastor partners demonstrates the strides it’s made in building new relationships, he says. Of the 700 pastors at the gathering in January, a third were pastors of color. Two years ago, the share would have been closer to 10 percent, he says.

Getting there has involved building out a more diverse team. When he moved into his current role, about 13 percent of his staff were people of color. Now, the figure is about a third. He also brought in guest speakers to discuss topics like unconscious bias and the history of the church as it relates to racial justice.

These efforts have helped the organization build trust with churches that include many people of color.

World Vision also makes a conscious effort to show the diversity of people involved in its work in the photos it uses in appeals and marketing materials. The organization has translated materials into Spanish, Chinese, and Korean and has staff members who speak those languages.

"People can see through your intentions in your heart pretty quick," Chitwood says. They will "smell it a mile away" if you’re motivated only by business interests.

"If you’re not authentic in your concern for communities of color and for engaging them, if you don’t have representation on your team, if you’re not showing these values in the marketing materials, you don’t have a shot."

_Translation Isn’t Enough_
To reach more donors of color, fundraisers should also consider whether they’re reaching donors where they are — whether that’s on specific social networks, on radio or TV stations, or in physical locations.

Many fundraising experts say the St. Jude Children’s Research Hospital, which ranked No. 4 on the Chronicle’s list of organizations that raise the most cash from private sources, is a leader among national nonprofits that raise money from people of color.

Representatives of the children’s cancer hospital declined multiple requests for interviews. But Rick Shadyac, the president and CEO of American Lebanese Syrian Associated Charities, St. Jude’s fundraising organization, has said the charity’s "multicultural efforts are absolutely critical to our success." In an interview with Denver Fredrick, host of the Business of Giving podcast, he said, "We like to think of ourselves as being the charity of choice among Hispanics and African Americans."

St. Jude has woven itself into the everyday lives of Latinos, says fundraising consultant Armando Zumaya. When he’s cooking dinner each night, he turns on the radio to listen to Mexican music, and the deejay will be talking about why he gave to St. Jude. When he goes to shop at the Mi Pueblo market in Oakland’s Fruitvale neighborhood, the cashier asks if he wants to support St. Jude, then announces over the loudspeaker when he gives, which is designed to encourage others to do the same. He turns on the TV, and there’s a popular telenovela star talking about why it’s important to support St. Jude.

"It’s a comprehensive strategy to approach us where we live and where we shop," he says.

St. Jude’s success underscores that simply translating on-hand marketing materials from English to Spanish is not enough to reach a new audience of donors.

"The approach has historically been: Let’s see what we do in English, translate it, and then put it out there without any real nuance, understanding, or cultural sensitivity," says Ivan Leon, founder and chief strategist at Kerux Group, a marketing agency that helps nonprofits improve their outreach to Hispanic donors. "It was what they would do anyways, the same messaging just filtered through a language prism."
Kerux, along with digital-fundraising consulting company NextAfter, contacted 57 organizations posing as Hispanic, Spanish-speaking donors as part of a recent research effort. Researchers called, emailed, sent Facebook messages, and visited each charity’s donation page to gather information. Most of the groups struggled to communicate at all, let alone give a compelling case why Hispanic donors should support them, they write in the report "Why Should Hispanics Give to You?"

**Cultural Connections**

Corporate America has recognized the purchasing power of Latinos, but nonprofits have not, Leon says.

"You need to demonstrate that you understand where they come from — the language that they speak, yes, but the tradition and the values and the affinities. It’s connecting at a cultural level. And there’s no machine that can do that."

Other large national organizations like the Sierra Club and Planned Parenthood are taking steps to better connect with donors of color. Planned Parenthood is working to recruit new donors through digital advertising and outreach as well as through street canvassing for both its charitable and advocacy arms.

"Our overall objective is to build meaningful, inclusive relationships with communities that Planned Parenthood serves with our health care, our education, and our advocacy work on a daily basis all across the country," says Jethro Miller, chief development officer at Planned Parenthood. "But that, frankly, had been historically underrepresented among our donor base."

The organization’s street canvassing takes place primarily in urban areas with progressive residents. The street-canvasing workers themselves are racially diverse and young, which may help them connect with younger supporters of color, Miller says.

This is long-term work, he says, but the organization has seen progress. The average age of Planned Parenthood donors has decreased, while their diversity has increased. Last year, about 20 percent of Planned Parenthood donors under age 50 identified as a person of color. That’s a significant increase from where the organization was a couple of years ago, Miller
says. It's also a much higher percentage than donors over the age of 60 who identify that way.

"A more interconnected and diverse world is coming," Miller says, "and philanthropy, of course, needs to be there."

An earlier version of this story did not identify Urvashi Vaid as a co-founder of the Donors of Color Network.

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