Managing Information For a New Nonprofit by Cheryl Weissman, CJW Consulting and Services

One of the Social Networking groups I belong to is organized around people who are interested in starting or have recently started a nonprofit. I've been wading through some of the comments and questions that have been raised and have been struck by how little content there is about managing information in the early days and months of building an organization.

I am convinced that this phenomenon – or lack thereof -- is what causes nonprofits to be victims of what I am now calling the "**It's All In (Insert Name Here)'s Head**" syndrome.

I've been consulting with nonprofits on data-related issues for over 20 years. I can't tell you the number of times I've heard, "Oh, we don't track that in our database. That's all in the Executive Director's head," or, "Those details aren't important to track. Our Board President knows all that." Or whatever. I also hear a lot from small or new nonprofits that "We aren't big enough for a database. We track our donors in Excel." For all I know, some are still using 3 X 5 cards, which were all the rage in the 1980s and earlier.

For every person who has ever told me that they don't need a database or fundraising application because they are too small, my reply has been the same: "The fact that you are small means that you are in the best place to start tracking information."

If you are starting a nonprofit, or working with a small group that has aspirations to grow, here are a few intrinsic truths:

There is no nonprofit without fundraising
There is no fundraising without information
Information can only be of value when it is ***available to use, share and analyze***

I have a good friend who started a nonprofit quilting association about a year ago. She did what most people do – she researched people who she wanted on her board, structured the programs and benefits she wanted to make available to members, created a brand for her organization (logo, website), filed the necessary paperwork with the state, etc.

But here's what else she did: She located information about every quilt shop owner in the United States and created a database with whatever information that was publicly available. One of the benefits she offers her members is the ability to attend free online seminars (webinars). In order to help her get to know her members and keep them interested and aware that she understands their needs, she is tracking which webinars are attended by which members, which in turn allows her to target her invitations based on sessions that members have attended in the past.

Think about the organization you're working to get off the ground. It's likely that you have a core group of people committed to the organization who may provide initial funding to get it going. You will also pull together a Board of Directors, set goals and start considering from where you will draw your ongoing operating revenue.

You may very well know everything there is to know about that core group of dedicated supporters, and when it is a very small group of people whom you know well, you – and ONLY you – can manage the information about them and use it to keep them involved. Remember, though, that no single person or group of people can serve as the institutional memory for your organization.

"Institutional memory" is a term that I use to define what a nonprofit database needs to be. The term distills down to the concept that every piece of information you have about any entity with whom you interact MUST be housed in a location that is easily accessible and available to anyone who needs to know anything about that entity.

Organizations that start tracking information electronically in the early stages of operation position themselves far above those that put off data management "until we're ready." If you have information, you need to track it. So the question should not be "Do we need to track information electronically?" Rather, it should be, "What do we need to track?"

The answer: Institutional Memory. There will be some things about your constituents that truly don't matter (eye color, number of Facebook friends, favorite books/movies, etc.) But stop and think about what you know about your close supporters: Marital status, number and ages/names of their children, the neighborhood in which they live, what they are interested in giving to, what they choose not to support, the organizations they are connected to in some way (houses of worship, other nonprofits, etc.), how much they typically give, how often they typically give, to what type of appeal do they tend to respond (mail, email, phone, in-person).

All of this information can and should be used to allow you to most effectively interact with your supporters, and to let them know that ***you know who they are***.

I recognize that there are budget concerns and potentially other issues as well that might be keeping you from implementing some kind of database solution. Be aware, though, that there are resources available to you.

TechSoup, for example, maintains a wealth of information about technology-related products and services available to nonprofits. Their site includes listings of various software applications that are available to nonprofits for free or at a discount.

IdeaEncore is a great online sharing resource. You can become a member at no charge and be able to search through their reference library for information about pretty much any topic relevant to nonprofits. There are also resources available for download. Some are free, some not.

Search engines are an option as well, if you want to get a sense of what's out there in terms of tracking your data. Googling "low-cost fundraising software" will return tens of thousands of hits, but by going through the first few pages of search results, you should get some ideas, learn some product names, get some information about what these products can do and how they feel to you.

Remember, you can only use information that can be accessible and available to everyone who needs it. You simply cannot afford the option of counting on one person's history with your organization and that person's knowledge about your constituents. Getting through the "brain dump" to turn this valuable information into data can be painful, but the benefits returned will make it well worth your while.

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