The Cycle of the Digital Donor Playbook:
A 10 Step Framework to Attract Donors and Build Community
Today's donors have different demands. They want to engage with the causes and charities that matter most to them, but they have trouble discerning between the multitude of options (both within and outside traditional philanthropy) … not to mention the noise in their email inboxes.

They want to participate on their terms – whether that’s donating, volunteering, registering, or sharing. They want options and flexibility – virtual, hybrid, or in person events; payroll deduction, paid time off, PayPal…

They want to see proof that their dollars and volunteer hours actually did something.

They expect a great, seamless giving experience.

These are just a few of the changing demands of today’s donor.

In our digital, attention economy, it’s even more challenging for nonprofit organizations to acquire new donors. When developing your donor acquisition strategy, it’s important to consider the needs of digital donors (many of whom are Millennials and Gen Z).

Recent data reported in the Belong Index states that “values-based communities” attract Gen Z. The index goes on to report that brands that develop the greatest affinity with Gen Z are those brands that engage authentically.

This offers a tremendous opportunity for nonprofit organizations to lean into this prospective group’s desire to participate in communities that reflect their values. If your organization’s mission or work speaks directly to their values, your organization needs to be present in those communities.

First step is to meet today’s donors where they are - ONLINE.

First step is to meet those prospective donors where they are - ONLINE. Then once you tap into their networks, fold these donors into your community, offer opportunities to deepen engagement based on their interests, and you create an engine for future growth.
If you’re in need of a framework to speak to the needs of today’s donor, look no further than the cycle of the digital donor. This ten-step framework allows you to create an ecosystem of givers, donors, volunteers, and partner agencies all committed to your mission.

**STEP ONE: Acquire New Names and Build Community**

Donor acquisition is the name of this game. In this step, you must leverage web traffic, social media, and digital ads to capture this audience.

Start with a distinct understanding of your donor personas to determine which channels to distribute your messaging. Two channels to consider include email and digital advertising.

Email marketing allows for a sophisticated means to build nurture campaigns or drip marketing based upon interactions (email opens, form submittals, event registrations, or social link clicks). This creates a personalized, scalable experience that donors and development professionals crave.

Nonprofit digital advertising is quickly growing as a top channel for nonprofits to build awareness. According to the public relations firm, M+R, nonprofit digital advertising spending increased by 33% in 2020.

Always start with considering your ad campaign objective. In this stage of the cycle of the digital donor, you’re building awareness; you must consider your donor personas and how that information influences your ad copy, messaging, and images, or graphics.

For example, if your intent is to attract Gen Z donors, consider advertising on Instagram and experimenting with messaging that appeals to their desire to be activists.

**STRATUSLIVE IGNITE MODULE SPOTLIGHT: Community Hub**

Today’s donors crave a sense of belongingness, of being seen, and connecting with others with shared experiences. With Community Hub, your nonprofit collects constituent information and brings together these groups in one common place. In this environment, these constituents share resources and bond surrounding commonalities.
By leveraging channels such as email, social media, and StratusLIVE Ignite Community Hub, your organization authentically builds your donor network in a way that not only benefits your organization but also the donor.

**STEP TWO:**
Assimilate, cultivate, and align to cause concepts and interests

You’ve gathered your donor network. Now’s the time to connect the dots between your donors’ interests and your programs. How will you get your donors ‘plugged’ into your work?

Is it the resources and information your organization provides to families affected by cancer? Is it your program for afterschool youth or yearly leadership camp? Is it the donor’s ability to connect with like-minded peers in your giving circle for young professionals?

First through information gathering, you must determine your donor’s unique interest in your cause. This information not only informs your messaging and outreach but also determines the engagement opportunities the donor will participate in.

The channels your organization utilizes to uncover this information may be the same channels your organization utilizes to foster these relationships. Here are several tools to leverage:

1. **Email Marketing**

   Monitor the clicks, replies, and opens of each campaign to determine donor interests. Use this information to segment your lists and create nurture campaigns that drive toward your desired outcomes.

2. **Create Programs and Cause Concepts**

   Create buckets of programs and cause concepts that align with your mission. Cause concepts may include Youth Development or Food Insecurity and Programs may include Lunch Tutoring and Food Drives. For example, once you identify your donor’s interest in youth development, you can then drive interaction and engagement with your lunch tutoring program.

3. **Donor Networks**

   These groups provide your donors the organized space to enact their philanthropic goals and wishes. They bring their values to life.
STRATUSLIVE IGNITE MODULE SPOTLIGHT: Donor Hub

Through StratusLIVE Ignite, you can showcase your programs and cause concepts through Donor Hub. This allows your donors to self-select which initiatives in which they want to engage. As an integrated platform, Ignite allows you to leverage all programs, cause concepts, and donor networks throughout the entire platform, so your donors have a consistent experience.

STEP THREE: Engage and participate with like-minded peers

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.” – Margaret Mead

Once you've built a community of supporters, it’s important to offer them opportunities to meet one another (virtually or in-person) and share their unique affiliation with your cause. We all know the feel-good effect of participating in philanthropic activity is contagious. By providing your donors the opportunity to connect, you will beget future giving.

Two giving modes to offer in this stage include volunteerism and DIY Fundraising or Peer-to-Peer.

Here are some best practices:

- Remember these digital-first donors prefer options, so your volunteer events must offer a variety of engagement activities – including the ability to participate virtually, privately (within a workplace giving campaign for example), or simply through a donation versus volunteer time.

- Utilize those donor interests you worked so diligently to track down and create fundraising categories that align with donors’ interests. If your donor is interested in youth development, create a fundraising category that features this cause. That way, your donor can quickly translate his or her passion into tangible results for your organization.

- Offer opportunities to create an individual or team-based fundraiser or join a team that's already in progress.
Volunteerism is a great first step for an individual to engage with your cause as it provides a gateway for future participation. With Volunteer Now, your organization can promote public or private events directly on your nonprofit’s website. Participants can post on their social media accounts about their participation and continue to build your community.

**STEP FOUR:**

Make Asks and Giving Opportunities to Aligned Cause Concepts

Now that you’ve laid the groundwork through donor acquisition and donor interest – cause alignment and surrounded these individuals with others fired up for good, all you need is a match (an opportunity to give) to mobilize action.

Bonus: this ask is frictionless since you’ve clearly communicated how your organization fulfills the donor’s need in the previous steps.

There are several giving modes in which this ask can be made. It’s your job to determine the correct environment – either a direct ask to the individual, within an event (like an a-thon), or within a workplace giving campaign. Again, your donors want options, and this is your chance to determine which mode resonates with which donor.

**STRATUSLIVE IGNITE MODULE SPOTLIGHT: Give at Work**

Give at Work is a solution to bring your corporate partners’ CSR goals to life with give, volunteer, and match capabilities. With the help of your partners in communicating your organization’s mission and vision, you can inspire their employees to give.
By providing your donors with a tailored experience, they will be more eager to evangelize on behalf of your organization – every organization’s dream.

First, you must analyze your campaign data and determine which donor activities indicate that a donor would be a prime candidate to tap into his or her networks to discuss your organization’s work. These activities may differ from organization to organization depending upon the demographics of your donor base. Consider generational differences and previous giving history.

Once these cheerleaders are identified, provide them with the appropriate engagement mode to seamlessly share their experience with their networks. This serves as a donor acquisition strategy for your organization and an opportunity to ignite peer-to-peer giving.

Experiment with an a-thon to leverage the network effect of giving. This quintessential peer-to-peer giving strategy offers multiple ways for donors and their networks to become involved. Either through participating in the walk, run, or video game marathon alongside the donor or donating to support their friend or family member, your organization will acquire new constituents.

**STRATUSLIVE IGNITE MODULE SPOTLIGHT: Give in Teams**

StratusLIVE Ignite, Give in Teams module easily allows your organization to create DIY fundraising pages such as a-thons. With options to register as an individual, join a team, create a team, volunteer, or donate, you provide your donors what they want – a multitude of options to engage.

**STEP SIX:**

Create Opportunities for Constituents to Organize, Volunteer and Solicit on Behalf of Cause Concepts and Funding Initiatives

The key to this step is to make it easy on your constituents to act upon their desire to give back. Provide them with an incentive that is so appealing, it’s not easily ignored.
This sounds easier said than done, but the good news is that you have the data to easily tap into their interests. If the ask occurs at the right time and promotes a program that a donor has a sentimental affection for, you’re in the business of social good matchmaking.

Let’s consider an example. Say you track your donor’s birthday, and you identify she has an affinity for heart health based on a previous designation. You can make an ask that she creates a DIY fundraiser to raise money to fund research for heart health in lieu of birthday gifts. You’ve just sparked a moment of giving.

STRATUSLIVE IGNITE MODULE SPOTLIGHT: Give with Friends

Map your donor interests to fundraising categories within your online giving platform to easily organize your programs. StratusLIVE Ignite provides a campaign structure that fundraisers can easily organize based upon their understanding of their donors.

Once your categories are built, you can begin to solicit your donors to create fundraising pages via StratusLIVE Ignite, Give with Friends. With the low code, no code environment, you eliminate any technological barriers and provide your donors with the tools and flexibility to inspire their friends and family to participate.

STEP SEVEN: Participate in Community and Network Opportunities

Now it’s time for your donors to look beyond their centers of influence (friends, family, household members) and network with individuals with shared experiences. As an organization, you can curate these experiences that will enrich the lives of your donors and embed them further within your organization. With these opportunities to participate in meaningful, authentic conversation with peers, your donors will consider how to expand their involvement with your organization in a way that meets their demands.
One engagement mode to consider in this step are events. Either in-person, virtual, or hybrid events allow your constituents to interact and engage surrounding common interests. These events may serve as donor recognition events, brand or awareness building experiences, or conferences to inform your donors on important issues. Some event types to consider include award ceremonies, galas, alumni gatherings, national and local conventions, expos, or affinity group meetings.

Events provide multiple means for your constituents to become involved: donate, attend, sponsor, or volunteer. As you track their participation, you can gauge future involvement or new interest with your organization. If an individual has attended a conference on civil rights for example, he or she may be interested in donating to a cause area that supports diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts.

Events offer tremendous opportunities for revenue generation, volunteer growth, and donor acquisition while they provide donors with expanded personal networks.

**STRATUSLIVE IGNITE MODULE SPOTLIGHT: Events**

StratusLIVE Ignite Events provides for the seamless coordination and execution of ticketed events. The various engagement types provide your constituents with multiple opportunities to get involved. Your event staff can manage small scale events or large conferences with the ability to add multiple event sessions.

**STEP EIGHT:**

**Acknowledge, Thank and Promote Proof of Performance**

This step may be the most critical in the cycle of the digital donor as donor recognition is critical to donor retention. Today's donors expect more than automated emails with first name personalization and a tax receipt.

Through this framework, you collected information on their interests which tied to your fundraising programs. Work with your program staff to collect data and personal stories on the results of the programs your donors funded. This data collection and storytelling will serve as proof points for your donors and will help build trust and credibility with the general public.
Three important considerations to make in this step include:

1. Thank your donors and then thank them again and again. Remember, they may miss an automated gift acknowledgment letter.

2. Gen Z and Millennial donors expect brands to behave authentically and humanly. Adjust your tone accordingly when engaging with this audience.

3. Consider donors’ communication preferences in your donor acknowledgment strategy. If the donor prefers direct mail communication, then send him or her a postcard or letter expressing gratitude.

**STEP NINE:**
Facilitate Self-Service and Personalized Donor Experiences

Now that you've thanked your donors (hopefully more than once), it’s important to empower them to own their ongoing relationship with your organization. Through self-service, you can ensure that your donor information is current – no need to survey your donors or manually update donor records. All this donor data provides further insight into their donor personas and if aggregated and analyzed, can be used to develop targeted messaging for a personalized experience. Furthermore, this grants your donors autonomy and control which will make your communications more relevant and applicable.

**STRATUSLIVE IGNITE MODULE SPOTLIGHT: Donor Hub**

In addition to offering opportunities for donors to provide demographic information and track their giving and volunteering conducted via Ignite, your organization can leverage a news feed. Based upon your donor’s interests, you can promote content based upon news categories they opt in to receive.

This along with the option to select favorite causes and charities contributes to a personalized giving experience that will encourage future action and engagement.

**STEP TEN:**
Analyze Campaign Performance, Effectiveness, and Audience Behavior to revise tactics

The final and most critical step of the cycle of the digital donor is to evaluate the effectiveness of your programs. Here are some best practices to keep in mind:
Consider leveraging real-time analytics to build data analysis throughout the course of your campaign. This will enable you to course-correct in case of any issues.

Identify critical data points in advance of your campaign to ensure you met your campaign goals.

Only choose a few metrics to track – that way you do not become overwhelmed, and you can commit to driving real success. Some key metrics to consider include:

- Total number of donors and volunteers
- Total donation amount
- Number of campaigns created

Analyze the effectiveness of each campaign type (birthday fundraisers vs. disaster relief) and make adjustments to fundraising strategies based on these findings.

The digital era offers new challenges to today’s nonprofits but also tremendous opportunity. Once your organization creates this framework to engage today’s digital donor, the cycle will continue in perpetuity.

With a digital presence, the amount of data you can now collect on your donors is limitless. Once you identify those key data points and create an automated structure, you can scale your donor acquisition strategy at a rapid pace. Now, let’s dive head-first into the digital era.

StratusLIVE designs, builds, implements and supports innovative Software for Social Good that connect donors – and companies – to the nonprofit missions and causes they care about.