

GiveMN's Give to the Max Day 2013: A Complicated Success

What Happened

Celebrating its fifth year, GiveMN's Give to the Max Day has become one of the gold standards for online giving days. However, on Give to the Max Day 2013, after processing an average of 66 donations per minute, the website crashed at 12:30pm and was non-operational for roughly five hours.

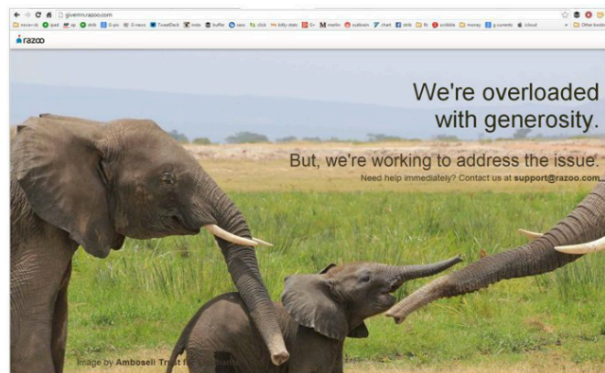
Having had the site run slow during the 2012 Giving Day, the GiveMN team worked with strategist Beth Kanter and the crisis team at GiveMN's public relations firm, PadillaCRT, to proactively plan for potential Giving Day issues.

Immediately following the website crash, GiveMN staff were in contact with their donation platform provider, Razoo, and remained in close communication with them throughout the crisis via telephone, text and email.

At first the GiveMN and Razoo teams thought the site would only be down temporarily, but once they realized that the site would be offline for an extended period of time they began discussing possible options, including extending the Giving Day to the following day or canceling it altogether. Minutes before GiveMN was prepared to call off the event, the site began processing donations again.

The Good

GiveMN has coined Give to the Max Day 2013 a "complicated success."¹ The Giving Day broke its previous record, with 52,371 donors donating \$17.1 million to 4,437 organizations and public schools. The day attracted more media attention than ever and unprecedented evening coverage; when the site came back up local radio even interrupted its regular programming to announce the breaking news.



GiveMN provided hourly updates to the public about the website's status throughout the afternoon and into the evening. With a crisis plan in place, GiveMN reacted in real-time with pre-crafted social media updates, emails, and livestream reports. GiveMN had prepared a template response for social media in the event of technical problems, which read: "Thanks. We are now aware of the issue and are working to resolve it. Stay tuned!" They used that tweet at 12:30pm when the site initially went down to acknowledge the issue. The team then responded personally

to each tweet and Facebook comment about the website issues. GiveMN used a shared Google Drive document to co-create and share tweets, Facebook posts, hashtags, bit.ly URLs created for specific campaign links, and more.

About 30-45 minutes into the crisis, nonprofits and schools that had other ways of collecting gifts started redirecting donors, initially alarming Dana Nelson, Executive Director of GiveMN. “My knee-jerk reaction was to be frustrated that the organizations were pointing their donors elsewhere and giving up on us,” she said, until a colleague reminded her that, “this day is about giving...this is Give to the Max Day.”² From that point forward, the GiveMN team embraced the theme “give by any means necessary.”³ They began using the #TechFail #GenerosityWin hashtags and tweeting posts such as, “#GTMD13 is all about giving. Though our site is down, we encourage you to give by any means. #CantStopGiving.”⁴

Give to the Max Day nonprofits, donors, colleagues, and community at large were generally supportive during the crisis. The nonprofit community responded with creativity, using clever social media posts, comments, pictures, and memes to lighten the situation and keep the focus of the day on giving. Many nonprofits used humor to soften the mood. For example, the Como Zoo tweeted “good gorilla vibes” to the GiveMN staff (pictured below). However, GiveMN steered clear of humorous responses both during the Giving Day and afterwards due to the severity of the issue.



The Bad

The GiveMN website failed because the technology equipment could not handle the amount of traffic on the site, and Razoo was unable to fix the issue for five hours.

GiveMN’s response to the crisis was public through a pre-planned live broadcast at its Mall of America “command center.” Even though they were in regular communication with the public, to their frustration the

GiveMN team had no new updates to provide supporters for four hours.

Although GiveMN had a crisis plan, they were not prepared for the enormity of what happened. For instance, without the ability to take donations through the website during the giving day, the primary structure of the Giving Day was impacted greatly. A few donations trickled in during the site failure, raising questions about what to do regarding hourly drawings and prizes. GiveMN wound up honoring the full 24 hours of donations on the site and added an incremental set of prizes for the five hours when the site was not functioning.

The Ugly

GiveMN will never be able to quantify or regain the lost revenue due to the technology failure. To make matters worse, after the event, many individuals turned their frustration towards GiveMN staff, sending harsh criticisms through emails, phone calls, and public media. GiveMN suffered a serious loss of public trust.

Moving Forward

GiveMN remains dedicated to its mission of growing charitable giving in Minnesota. GiveMN is conducting a competitive process for a new technology partner and is reaching out to the Minnesota technology community for their support going forward. The organization is also creating a robust crisis communications strategy and a back-up technology plan for subsequent years if the site goes down again for an extended period of time. In addition, GiveMN is creating a PR campaign to enhance its brand in 2014, with a focus on rebuilding community trust and regaining its place as a reliable platform for online giving.



Tips for Technology Crisis Prevention and Management

If your Giving Day is using a third-party donation platform provider, there are inherent risks that you have to accept. However, there are a few precautionary steps you can take to prevent a technology crisis:

1. Create a crisis management plan outlining a list of potential issues and how you will respond to them. This will minimize crises when they do occur.
2. Employ a competitive selection process to help identify the best online giving platform for your needs.
3. Request platform referrals from other organizations; learn which companies and features have worked or not worked for them.
4. Leverage your local technology community to help you prevent and respond to technology issues.
5. Have a back-up solution in case your donation platform fails; some community foundations, such as the Wichita Community Foundation, have a plan in place to redirect donations to their own website if the donation platform goes down.

Here are some tips for managing a technology crisis once it is happening:

1. Stay calm and refer to your crisis management plan.
2. Communicate quickly and directly with your donation platform provider.
3. Communicate with the public early and often using pre-crafted messages.
4. Proactively contact participating nonprofits to avoid an overwhelming influx of calls and emails.
5. Always respond to negative messages and engage your public audience with gratitude, empathy and reassurance.
6. Remember that the day is about giving. If the website crashes for an extended period of time, provide donors an alternate way to contribute.

¹ Dana Nelson, Executive Director, GiveMN. Knight Foundation Peer Learning Exchange Call. December 2013.

² Dana Nelson, Executive Director, GiveMN. Knight Foundation Peer Learning Exchange Call. December 2013.

³ Dana Nelson, Executive Director, GiveMN. Knight Foundation Peer Learning Exchange Call. December 2013.

⁴ GiveMN Twitter 11/14/2013