CULTIVATING RELATIONSHIPS WITH YOUR NONPROFIT COMMUNITY
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INTRODUCTION
There’s a lot of talk these days about “community engagement” and “cultivating relationships.” With all of the new ways to connect with consumers (in the business world) and donors and supporters (nonprofit world), organizations are finding it increasingly important to take things to the next level — beyond talking to people via ads and Tweets and snappy headlines.

As a platform that works primarily with nonprofits and social good projects, the CauseVox team definitely knows how valuable it is to build relationships with our community and with the communities of the organizations and people we support.

In fact, we believe that cultivating relationships with your community should be a top priority, as it impacts your overall fundraising goals, and potentially, your success.
Defining “relationship cultivation”

So what exactly are we talking about when we say “relationship cultivation”? Just like in our daily lives, relationships require continual maintenance and effort to make them work. Whether it’s friends, coworkers, family, or a significant other, you work together to be stronger, more fulfilled, and perhaps loved. Each person contributes to the relationship in different ways. Maybe it’s through words or deeds, or gifts or activities. You call, email, text, or visit in person. You learn about each other and support each other’s goals and plans.

To that end, relationship cultivation with your nonprofit community shares many of these aspects, albeit in a different way. You strive to make your supporters happy, and they look to support your cause through various ways. You thank them, ask them questions, reward them, and perhaps even get to know them in-person. When you take the time to enhance the connection with your community members, you are cultivating relationships.
Connecting the dots

But why do we need to spend so much time getting to know our community better? It may seem an impossible task to “get to know” everyone that supports your cause and make them happy. Of course we don’t expect that you will literally meet every donor or every person that follows you on Twitter or Facebook. But it is reasonable to expect that you can connect with many of these people, in one way or another...and nonprofits are realizing the immense value of making relationship cultivation a priority within their overall goals and plans. It’s no longer just for the partnership team or the major gifts department. Now, marketing and communications teams are incorporating it into their work — and it makes sense to, as they are ones doing most of the front-facing outreach for the organization.

But back to this essential question, of why do we need relationship cultivation? How does it fit into the bigger picture? Why can't we just go about our business of sending out mass fundraising appeals and Tweets and seeing what happens?

If we put ourselves in the shoes of our supporters for a second (and we’ve all been there), we can imagine all the reasons why connecting with the people behind a nonprofit we care about would ultimately impact our future contributions. We can go from an organization noticing our Instagram posts or Tweets to being sent a request for a personal story, to receiving a small gift, to a request for an emergency fundraising appeal, to being invited to an event, to getting a call from a staff member as a thank you...and it goes on and on. And it all started because someone was listening and wanted to deepen impact—on both ends.

That’s the power of relationships — the opportunities for changing lives and changing the world together are endless.
GETTING TO KNOW
YOUR COMMUNITY
Now that we understand the importance of cultivating relationships with your nonprofit community, let’s dive into what exactly that means. As we said earlier, getting to know someone on an individual level has various stages, and the same approach applies to a nonprofit and its supporters.

When you first begin to learn about someone, you ask lots of questions, and listen to his or her story. You’re curious, you’re intrigued, and you want to find something to connect on. To that end, one of the first things we recommend as you begin your relationship cultivation strategy is figuring out how you will “listen” to your community.
Listen up

There are multiple ways to set up “listening dashboards” and utilize various online tools to tune in to what your community is saying – not just about your organization, but the overall issue, philanthropy and giving, and life in general. Many of the more commonly used social media tools have reporting functionality to help you listen and track specific keywords, search terms, and content, ranging from free or inexpensive to premium levels.

Here are a few ways you can get started listening to your community:

- Using Twitter, HootSuite, Instagram, and other social media tracking tools, set up streams, filters, and lists for select hashtags, keywords, handles, and more. **Monitor these daily to see what people are talking about.**
  - Example for a dog shelter: #dogs, @Welovedogs, #puppylove, “adopt a dog”

- Set up Google News Alerts or other news trackers to **collect blog posts, videos, and articles** about your organization, issue, and other relevant topics.
  - Have a plan in place to comment or respond to pieces on behalf of the organization as appropriate

- Create a folder for all responses to organizational emails. **Designate someone to respond to emails as quickly as possible**, with an answer or next steps as relevant to the topic.

**Resource:** SocialMedia Examiner’s 6 Steps to Build a Social Listening Dashboard
Ask lots of questions

As we said before, one of the best ways to get to know someone is to ask questions. The same applies to your nonprofit’s online community, and you have many opportunities and platforms from which to collect answers to your inquiries. But what kinds of things should you ask your supporters? We’re not talking favorite color and spirit animal. The goal is to learn how and why your community supports your mission, what they want to do more of, less, and their preferred ways to hear from you. Here’s a list of sample questions to try with your own community:

- How did you learn about our organization?
- Why are you interested in supporting this particular cause or mission?
- How would you prefer to hear from us, and how often?
- What types of content do you prefer to consume and share?
- What are the ways you’d like to be involved with the organization? i.e. donating, volunteering, events, etc.
- How could we be telling our story better?
- What inspires you to give your time, money, or skills?
That’s just the start of the myriad questions you could ask your audience to learn more about their views of philanthropy and your organization. And depending on how you ask, you will get different answers. You may want to combine some of the questions together, or spread them out, depending on the channel and your strategy. Consider the options on the opposite chart for collecting information from your supporters.

Ultimately, you should always be getting to know your community, so you should always be listening and asking questions. People’s interests and behaviors evolve, just as your organization’s goals and programming does, and you should include consistent surveying and data collection in your annual planning so you can incorporate feedback as appropriate. Your supporters will appreciate that you are attuned to their needs and personal goals, and it sets a foundation for your overall relationship cultivation strategy.

Resource: 4 Tools to Understand Supporters (CauseVox)

HOW TO COLLECT INFORMATION FROM YOUR SUPPORTERS

A short survey via email or your website

Tweets or Facebook posts

Focus group

Via a sweepstakes or contest

After a donation or other action

At an event
DEFINING THE COMMITMENT CURVE
In life, as we become more passionate about a hobby or interest, more dedicated to a cause, or devoted to someone we care about, we move through different stages of commitment. Once we’re past the initial interest and excitement, we forge deeper connections, and we’re willing to give more of our time, money, brainpower, or emotions to whatever or whomever it is.

In the nonprofit world, when we bring individuals along a series of actions of deepening support, it’s called the “Engagement Ladder” or “Commitment Curve.” The images are a little different, but the concept is the same: with each step upwards, a supporter is making more of a commitment to your cause, and giving more of him or herself in various ways.
Determining your ladder

Each ladder or curve will be unique to your organization, but again, many nonprofits have similar steps, starting with the “low-hanging fruit,” usually based on creating awareness, and reaching as high as full-time volunteers or major donors. And – you may decide that you need to create multiple versions based on your goals and your audiences, if they are varied enough to require it. A commitment curve for young people may not be the same as for your boomer audience, and you may want to create a shorter, more broadly appealing one for new supporters but a focused one for long-time donors.

Here are a couple of samples to get an idea of what we mean:
What are we really trying to do here? The goal is to move someone from the bottom of the curve to the top over time, providing the way for him or her through explicit actions that benefit the organization and the individual. For instance, you may want to take someone from learning about your nonprofit to following you on Twitter, to sharing a piece of content, to signing a petition, to making a small donation, to submitting a story, to attending an event, to becoming a recurring donor, and becoming a volunteer. Or you may want to turn a recurring donor into a major donor, then into a committee member, and then into a board member.

The timeline on your curve too will vary depending upon the steps. Perhaps some curves can be completed in a matter of weeks or months, while others need a year or more.

The important thing to remember is that you can’t force people to follow your curve’s steps or timelines – people will ultimately act on their own feelings and time. You may see people go up the ladder in a different order, or rush through all the steps in a week, depending on their interest levels. And that’s okay! You should think of your engagement ladder or commitment curve as a guideline – for both your organization and your community.
Measuring each step

An important element when creating your curve or ladder is setting measurement goals and ROI, so you know what’s working and what isn’t. You’ll want to keep track of things like number of shares and follows on social media, email sign ups and forwards, petition signatures, event attendees, and of course, donation metrics.

You likely already have a handful of metrics that you already use to track progress and impact for your organization that you report on internally and externally. Think of how you can use these existing metrics and new ones that correlate to your commitment curve actions to compare to each other and see how you perform against your overall goals.

To be clear, each of the steps in your curve should match to an organizational or programmatic goal – and if it doesn’t, consider if you really need it or not, and how it could be tweaked to fit in with the rest of your plan. If it doesn’t fit, it’s ultimately a waste of resources and time for your team and for your supporters.

Here’s a list of potential actions and their corresponding measurements:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ACTION</th>
<th>MEASUREMENT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Email signups</td>
<td>New email addresses over time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social media follows</td>
<td>Growth over time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social media sharing</td>
<td>Shares, clicks, views, likes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Petition</td>
<td>Signatures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content creation</td>
<td>Stories, photos, surveys submitted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donation</td>
<td>New donors, avg. donation, recurring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Event</td>
<td>Number of attendees, email signups</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The end of the curve

Perhaps one of the more challenging questions is figuring out where the curve stops...if it ever does. What happens when someone has reached the top, and you’re not sure what the next step should be, but they want to do more?

There isn’t any one answer to what the final step should be on your ladder or curve – it may be constantly evolving, as your nonprofit determines its goals each year. That being said, it’s an opportunity for you to work with your newly engaged supporters to determine what the possible next steps might be. Can you create a committee of your most dedicated supporters and join forces to come up with a new series of actions to continue their engagement? Can they help you bring people at the bottom of the curve up, based on their own experiences?

Another thing to consider is developing a rewards system to correspond with your curve: will you provide incentives for people to take the next step up the ladder? You could send small gifts, provide exclusive content or opportunities, and recognize supporters via your communications channels. Of course, you don’t want it to turn into a race and risk losing the focus and purpose of each activity, so be strategic about how you reward people for their increased engagement.
GETTING SPECIFIC:
RELATIONSHIP CULTIVATION ACROSS MEDIUMS
As we said earlier, each channel of communication and outreach may require a different approach as you cultivate relationships with your supporters. There will likely be overlap, but it’s probably obvious that you shouldn’t send out 20 tweets in a row for a survey, and that a video is more shareable via Facebook than via email.

While developing your strategy, you should be willing to experiment and test different tactics on each medium – what works for one organization may not work for another, and what works in January may not work over the summer. The important thing is to grow and adapt with your community, as they adapt to new technologies and media. The following sections break out some ideas and tactics for relationship cultivation on email, social media, websites, and just for donors.
Email

In recent years, email service providers have gotten more sophisticated with a multitude of options for templates, segmentation, tracking, customization, and more. And best practices show that sending the same generic newsletter to everyone on your list no longer gets results. People are bogged down by email, and they want personal, fast, and compelling. Finding the right combination of all that and bringing your supporters up the commitment curve requires strategy, and of course experimentation. Here are a few tactics to try with your email outreach:

- Create a **3-part welcome series** for new supporters: each email should provide new information or content, ending with a low-lift action
- **Segment your email list** into donors, non-donors, recurring donors, those who have taken other actions, etc. and target content specifically to them
- Send **exclusive updates** and opportunities to certain segments of your list
- Craft a survey with questions about how people would like to **engage with you via email and online**
- Put all subscribers who respond to your emails or send you emails into their own group for **follow up and continued engagement**
Social media

As with email, social media, in just a few years, has also become crowded with thousands of brands and individuals vying for attention. A single tweet or Facebook post can get lost in a sea of messages, and people are looking for more than an organization just talking at them with a headline or link to generic content. That being said, don’t be intimidated! There are plenty of opportunities to use social media to generate new community members and nurture existing relationships in a smart and resourceful way. Some options could be:

- Make use of lists, filters, and streams in Twitter management tools to monitor and engage with more active supporters (those who RT you, mention you, and answer your questions)

- Provide opportunities for engaged social media supporters to be “ambassadors” for your cause: to share content, recruit others, and take action

- Look for quick and easy ways to collect information and feedback from your social community, with 1-question surveys, polls, votes, etc.

- Find out which of your social community lives near your headquarters and schedule a fun meet up or gathering to get to know them

- Create actions on your commitment curve that fit with social media behaviors and technology: submitting photos or videos, using a hashtag to sign a petition or to donate

- Show your social community how they can be more involved and have access to other opportunities and content by taking the next step: signing up for email, visiting your website, etc.
Website

For many people, an organization’s website is the first look at what you’re all about – a first impression. While this eBook isn’t about setting up a great website, we do think your site design and structure should lead people in a direction that matches your commitment curve, and shows them the way to greater involvement. It shouldn’t be a challenge to learn about your mission, to sign up for emails, to make a donation, or take whatever other major action you’re currently promoting. Site visitors shouldn’t have to go through page after page and menu after menu to figure out what to do to support your nonprofit, and nor should they be led offsite unless it’s directly to take an action. Just because your website isn’t as much of a “conversation” channel as say email or social media, it doesn’t mean your options for supporter cultivation are limited.

- After taking an action like donating or signing a petition, a thank you or follow up page should provide more information and a next step
- Strategically place share buttons, donate widgets, email signups, etc. in and around content where it makes sense for a user to take action
- Consider if blog comments and discussion boards are right for your site, depending on the engagement you want
- Provide exclusive opportunities and content on your website for those who “unlock” certain sections by sharing, viewing, or commenting
- Consistently promote your other channels of engagement (email, social, etc.) and what you offer through them
Donors

Many of the tactics we’ve been talking about in the previous sections could apply to the general community, donors and non-donors alike. But it’s important to have a cultivation strategy just for your donors, because for most nonprofits, they are your bread and butter – they’re the ones helping you meet your financial goals. If someone makes a financial investment in your cause, they trust that you will come through on your commitment, and do right by them. There is a plethora of ways that you can work your donors up your commitment curve (we could have an entire eBook on donors alone), but here are a few ways to get started:

- Give donors a chance to be **a part of your planning or the feedback process**
- Provide “sneak peeks” on new content, announcements, and behind-the-scenes to **make them feel on the inside**
- Remind donors of their impact through **real time updates, stories, and data**, with special emails, or even phone calls and snail mail

There are dozens, perhaps hundreds of other strategies and tactics you could employ for each of these categories, and as philanthropy and technology continue to evolve, so will your approach. What works now may not work a year from now, and it’s up to you to figure out what is most effective for your goals and your community.
GO
GET ’EM
The key to all of this is keeping focus on the idea of building relationships, not just growing supporter numbers or meeting a certain dollar amount.

If it helps to remember the steps you take as you get to know a friend in real life, then do so. Remember to listen, to ask questions, and then find ways to do good together in a way that works for everyone. Ultimately, your community is ready to make a difference, but they want your guidance and want to be inspired by you as well. It’s your job to make that connection and make them feel like they can make an impact. So get out there!

If you’d like support with cultivating relationships with your nonprofit community, visit CauseVox.com for more resources, or contact us by email.
LEVERAGE YOUR COMMUNITY ON CAUSEVOX
Now that you’ve cultivated your community, let’s put them to work!

You can use CauseVox to launch a crowdfunding campaign and have your community share it far and wide to drive traffic and donations. You can also launch a peer-to-peer fundraising campaign to get your community involved in the fundraising process through personal fundraising pages.

Take a tour and learn more by visiting www.causevox.com.