

Click for future good old boys (and girls)

There likely are stories like this at nonprofits everywhere. In this particular organization, it had become something of a legend: Years before, a campaigner had secured a \$100,000 gift from a private donor. The pledge was signed on a cocktail napkin.

What did this maverick act of fundraising teach? First, that to get the really big gifts, it wasn't what you knew, but who you knew. And second, sketchy fundraising practices were fine, as long as you brought home a number and a name.

Reflecting on this story, many nonprofits and fundraising professionals would muse that the more things change, the more they stay the same. Sure, nonprofits still need to know the right people and cultivate those relationships, but focusing time and effort on just the "good old boys" is a surefire way for the nonprofit of the new millennium to shoot itself in the foot. It also highlights the degree to which consumers today are keenly aware of fraud, demanding accountability for all financial transactions.

Both of which bring us to online fundraising.

You're likely getting tired of hearing how important online giving has become, but numbers don't lie. Between 2005 and 2006, donating online jumped a staggering 51 percent to \$6.87 billion.

Online givers tend to be younger, which may explain why the dollar value of these donations is smaller (but growing). But our tech-focused culture is encouraging the generation X and M crowds to take philanthropy seriously by driving them to consolidated sites like GuideStar.com and NetworkforGood.com, or allowing them to review the financial data from thousands of nonprofits at CharityNavigator.com – exemplifying these donors' need to feel their money will be secure and well spent.

The internet also is encouraging people to take ownership of their favorite cause. The online networking site Facebook.com has enabled users to donate to any of the 1.5 million charities in its "causes" application. The donation will be included in the user's profile in hopes that friends will encourage friends to start giving.

For the average nonprofit, online giving should be taken seriously, but viewed as a part of an overall fundraising plan. Continue to cultivate relationships with current donors, then begin to establish your online presence for the donors of tomorrow. Just having the capability to accept online donations isn't enough – that capability needs to be marketed to be effective. Marketing can be simple and inexpensive. Announce that you accept online donations in letters and e-mails to constituents; include links in all e-mail communications and with your e-signature; send out short (50 characters or less) e-mails periodically – don't become a spammer; talk up your secure online capabilities at events and in your newsletter; and be sure people can find you by submitting your URL to all major search engines.

Continued communications and encouraged volunteerism will make the small online donor of today the good old boy (or girl) of tomorrow, but that relationship needs to be established and cultivated – on the donor's terms.

Then maybe someday you can ask them out for cocktails.