

AI, Search, and Digital Fundraising: What's Changing—and What's Not.

Harry Lynch, Sanky Communications

AI is changing how donors find information—and the pace of change is breathtaking.

Google's AI-powered summaries now sit at the top of many search results. Questions are answered even before people ever reach a nonprofit's website. And for many, tools like ChatGPT are becoming the starting point for searches that once began—and ended—on Google. The result? Many nonprofits are seeing declines in organic website traffic—and fretting about the future of digital fundraising.

What's a fundraiser to do? First, take a breath. Look at the facts. The vast majority of online searches still happen on Google. Traditional search engines remain central to how people navigate the web. What's changing isn't whether people search—it's that answers are delivered before donors and potential donors ever even get to a website.

Is AEO the Answer?

By now, you've probably heard all the buzz about AEO—Answer Engine Optimization, or AEO. At its simplest, AEO means structuring content so AI-driven tools can clearly understand what you're saying and, in some cases, use it when generating answers. Unlike traditional SEO, which is focused on rankings and clicks, AEO is about clarity—making content easy to interpret, extract, and summarize.

There are technical aspects to this work: clean site structure, schema markup, and well-organized pages. There are also simpler changes that matter just as much. Pages that answer common questions directly, use plain language, avoid jargon, and explain clearly what your organization does and why it matters tend to perform better—with both people and machines.

Let's be clear, though: nonprofits shouldn't expect miracles. Even with a disciplined focus on AEO, most organizations are unlikely to appear regularly in Google's AI summaries or be cited by tools like ChatGPT. The bar is high, competition is intense, and these systems tend to rely on a relatively small group of

highly authoritative sources. AEO isn't a shortcut. And it certainly isn't a guarantee.

But AEO matters—because clarity still matters. Even when your organization isn't explicitly cited, AI systems may still be drawing on nonprofit content to shape their answers. And AEO-aligned content is usually clearer for donors, journalists, partners, and staff as well. In that sense, AEO strengthens the fundamentals of good digital communication—even if it doesn't deliver headline-grabbing visibility.

Paid Search Still Matters—Maybe More than Ever

If you are worried that AI is putting search engine marketing on its last legs, that's understandable. But it's also wrong—at least for fundraising.

Paid search remains one of the most reliable ways to reach donors at moments of clear intent. Sponsored ads often appear above, or alongside, AI-generated summaries, providing a direct path to your website when someone is ready to donate. AI tools can explain a cause or summarize options. They don't complete transactions.

Search marketing itself is evolving, too. Platforms are increasingly using AI to improve bidding, targeting, and optimization. These tools aren't magic, but they can make campaigns more efficient when paired with strong fundamentals like clear messaging, disciplined budgets, and well-designed landing pages.

Amid all this disruption, one important reality often gets lost in the noise: digital revenue is still growing for many nonprofits. The path may be less predictable, attribution messier, and tactics more fluid—but AI has complicated digital fundraising, in some ways enhanced it, without breaking it.

The real challenge isn't predicting exactly what comes next. It's staying engaged and adaptable. In an AI-shaped fundraising landscape, organizations that remain curious, disciplined, and willing to adjust will be best positioned to succeed. ■

Message from the President

Happy Spring! Hopefully your days are sunny, all your snow is long gone, and the only ice we see in our future is in our beverages.

For those of you who know me well, you know I'm an avid fan of science fiction and fantasy. And I hope we can all agree—it isn't *Star Wars* versus *Star Trek*; it's *Star Wars* AND *Star Trek*. Likewise, it doesn't have to be machine learning and predictive modeling versus artificial intelligence (AI). Why not both?

With that spirit in mind, I'm pleased to share a newsletter centered on technology and how we can use it for good in the For Good sector.

AI is already being rapidly adopted across tech stacks and systems. In this issue, three nonprofits share how they *are*—and *aren't*—using AI to tailor communications with their midlevel giving donors in the **Crossroads** article.

Avalon gives us an inside look at how AI can make paid advertising more affordable, sharing both their experience and a range of AI-powered platforms that help scale impact—even for smaller organizations with limited budgets.

Like the car, the TV, and the internet before it, this technology is a tool. It can be used to help or to hurt. As AI adoption accelerates, I hope we see strong ethical guardrails emerge alongside it. Personally, I'd love to use AI to talk to my massive data files in plain language, no queries or pivot

tables required. **Moore's** article on *Agentic Fundraising* offers an exciting glimpse of what might be possible.

And as our technical capabilities expand far beyond what we can yet imagine, data privacy and legislative oversight will only become more critical. As **TNPA** notes, "*AI implementation and usage are moving faster than oversight regulations.*"

We don't want the Singularity ... do we?

One thing AI cannot do (yet) is mini golf! I hope you'll join us in the DC area on **April 13** at **The Puttery** as we kick off the **Midlevel Giving Summit**, happening **April 14–15**.

Additional Upcoming Webinars & Events

The Omnichannel Blueprint for Growing Monthly Donations

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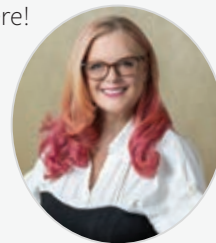
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Texting Comes of Age: Unlocking a New Frontier in Donor Acquisition

Kate Mucci, Mal Warwick Donordigital

Do you remember when you saw a text message for the first time? For me, that was about 25 years ago, and it was shocking to see that new icon on the left corner screen of my bright yellow Nokia.

Fast forward to now, our Mobile Division at MWD is approaching the anniversary of our first decade in text messaging management, where we have harnessed the transformation of texting from primarily a communication and advocacy tool to a reliable source of direct revenue for nonprofit organizations.

When legislation changed around text messaging in 2021, technology and data modeling rapidly adapted and improved across platforms specializing in texting. The texting channel itself became cheaper, with competing platforms fostering innovation. As a result, the possibilities around texting have exploded—growing in capabilities of personalization, speed, and quality. Platforms can handle sends at much larger volumes much faster, deliver higher quality images, more exciting video, and garner higher open rates than email.

These exciting advances in text messaging have occurred as industry-wide challenges in new donor acquisition have grown.



However, a new frontier has started to develop in response to that challenge: texting acquisition. Texting acquisition has proven to be both successful and scalable with the right mix of technology, messaging, and data. Organizations deploying texting acquisition are enjoying a 100% or higher return on investment, with investment levels starting at just \$5,000 per campaign. This new acquisition channel has been exceptionally effective when implemented during rapid response moments or matching gift offers. In addition, first year donor retention is comparable to traditional acquisition channels.

It's been quite a ride since I received that first text message on my Nokia. With the continued advancements in technology percolating around RCS texting and integrated messaging, it is imperative to pay attention to the rise of texting and the new frontier of fundraising. 📱

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Smarter Spend, Stronger Results: Paid Media in the Age of AI

Mary Meredith, Avalon Consulting

For years, paid media wasn't for every brand. It was too expensive, had too many barriers to entry, and came with too many requirements. TV advertising required high minimum spends, long commitments, expensive creative development, and labor-intensive optimization. Even early digital campaigns needed manual setup, rigid A/B testing, and fragmented reporting, making it difficult to extract insights across audiences and platforms.

While the tooling has matured significantly over the last decade by bringing automation, faster learning, and better integration, the pace of change has only accelerated.

Today, paid media is evolving so quickly that organizations not actively rethinking its role in their programs are already falling behind.

How AI is Reshaping Paid Media

What used to be complicated and costly is now more affordable and accessible than ever. Search, paid social, programmatic, display, connected TV (CTV), and niche platforms offer lower minimum spends, faster creative turnarounds, more flexible testing, and easy set-up for the advertiser.

AI-powered tools assist with ad formatting, creative variation, media planning, and real-time optimization to reduce manual effort while accelerating learning cycles.

AI in Action

During the pivotal end-of-year fundraising season for one of our clients, Avalon piloted AI-optimized CTV home screen ads through **Magnite's streamr.ai** solution and we ended up driving their strongest December on record.

This emerging format allowed us to create thoughtful, streaming-ready messages more efficiently without compromising brand integrity, using AI-optimized templates and formats with people-powered ad copy and images.

Other AI-powered platforms we're seeing deliver strong results are:

- **Performance Max (PMax):** This is an AI-powered campaign type in Google Ads that expands reach across Google properties using machine learning. Although reporting granularity is still evolving, PMax has proven effective for fundraising campaigns by enabling dynamic creative testing at scale.
- **Google Ads AI Max:** Designed for conversational and AI-driven search experiences, AI Max automates targeting, creative, and landing page selection. As search behavior becomes less keyword-centric, this emerging suite meets donors where they are.
- **Meta Advantage+:** Meta's AI-powered tools support variable copy testing and creative development, offering accessible efficiencies when used thoughtfully.

Beyond platform-specific tools, **AI-powered contextual ads** are helping nonprofits reach privacy-conscious audiences in brand-safe environments. And the expansion of **programmatic buying and AI-driven optimization for CTV** has enabled smaller brands to access TV advertising's premium inventory with lower minimum spends, automated targeting, and real-time measurement.

AI is Nothing Without Human Strategy

While AI may be transforming execution, make no mistake, human expertise is essential. You need that strategic oversight to make sure your campaign aligns with organizational goals and brand authenticity. You need humans to interpret performance signals and avoid over-optimizing toward short-term metrics at the expense of long-term donor value, trust, and brand alignment.

TLDR: Paid media for nonprofits is faster, smarter, and more accessible than ever before. When paired with experienced strategy and thoughtful oversight, AI-enabled advertising is a powerful engine for sustainable donor growth. 📊



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Predictive Modeling is the Essential Technology Every Nonprofit Needs Now

Lisa Greene, Data Axle Nonprofit

Predictive modeling is changing how nonprofits identify opportunities, allocate resources, and connect with supporters. And it's not just for organizations with massive databases and seven-figure budgets. Modeling has become accessible, practical, and increasingly essential for nonprofits of all sizes.

From Gut Feelings to Data-Driven Decisions

Traditional donor segmentation relies on static segments: major donors, mid-level donors, annual giving, lapsed donors, etc., typically defined by gift size and recency. It's better than nothing, but it treats everyone in each bucket the same way.

Predictive modeling goes deeper, analyzing hundreds of data points—giving history, demographic attributes, channel engagement patterns, event participation, upgrade/downgrade patterns and more—to score individual donors based on their probability to take specific actions. Who's most likely to respond to your year-end appeal? Who's at risk of lapsing? Who has major gift capacity you haven't tapped into yet?

The power of modeling isn't just in understanding who your best prospects are but also who they are not. When acquisition costs are rising and every mailing matters, modeling helps you eliminate waste and focus resources where they'll actually deliver results.

Recently, PETA faced a common challenge: their direct mail acquisition costs were climbing while response rates declined. Working with Data Axle Nonprofit, they implemented Data Axle's OptiScore modeling to identify which prospects in their acquisition universe were actually worth mailing and which creative messaging would resonate most. By eliminating chronic non-responders who had a 211% higher cost per donor and personalizing messaging based on donor affinities, PETA achieved a 40% increase in response rate and reached positive ROI within just six months.

Making Every Dollar Count

Fundraising budgets are tight, but the bigger problem is often not knowing where to focus them. Before investing in modeling, nonprofits should understand what they're trying to solve.

The most effective modeling strategies start with an honest audit of your current performance. What's working? Where are the gaps? A good data partner doesn't just run models, but will also help you diagnose the specific challenges holding your program back and recommend the right modeling approach to address them.

Acquisition models pinpoint the prospects with the highest probability of responding and converting to your mission, allowing you to avoid spending on low-likelihood names. Retention models detect early signals of donor attrition so you can deploy targeted re-engagement strategies before they lapse. Upgrade models identify supporters with the capacity and behavioral indicators

for increased giving. Sustainer propensity models surface donors most likely to convert to a recurring monthly gift.

The key is matching the model to the problem. That requires a partner who understands both the data science and the fundraising reality you're working in, someone who can translate your goals into a modeling strategy that actually moves the needle.

Getting Started with Modeling

Many fundraising data partners now offer modeling as part of their services, handling the technical complexity while you focus on strategy and execution.

The key is starting with a clear question. What decision are you trying to make better? Which donors do you want to understand more deeply? The most successful modeling projects begin with specific goals and a willingness to let data challenge assumptions.

Your donors are already telling you what they're likely to do next. Predictive modeling just helps you listen. ■



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Interactive Content That Converts!

Claire Kerr, Care2

Have you ever taken an online quiz to match your makeup colors, or to discover which flavor of coffee is best for you? It's no surprise that when surveyed, most professional marketers say they work interactive content opportunities into their overall marketing strategies. Interactive content requires the audience to participate, as opposed to passively reading, listening or watching. In the nonprofit sector, we often see this take the form of polls, surveys, and quizzes. These activities offer potential supporters and donors a richer experience than one they could have watching a video or scrolling text.

We have lots of examples from the consumer world showing that customer surveys boost retention. When you allow your audience to give and receive feedback, you enhance their experience and give them the opportunity to highlight the things they care most about. All of this is valuable data for you as a marketer!

When we look at the reasons that marketers use interactive content, conversion and lead generation are top of mind; two reasons that connect directly to a nonprofit's fundraising goals. However, a third reason stands out: Educating the audience. Your supporters crave directing their own learning experiences! When you allow people to participate in knowledge-seeking, the result is higher engagement with your messaging. Your potential donors respond well when they don't feel they're being sold something. They want to make choices that serve their needs and are spurred by curiosity. That's also what we want as nonprofit marketers; we want buy-in from mission-aligned supporters. They're on the journey with us to make change in the world.

At Care2, we have an online community of about 60 million members who want to take action for good causes and largely do that through signing and creating petitions. We wanted to figure out how we could use interactive content to improve action-taking, so we built a platform called Care2 Cultivate that serves activities like quizzes and polls to people who visit Care2.com. We didn't want to target anyone randomly who may or may not have an affinity to the content. Instead, Cultivate targets everyone on a specific charity's list. If anyone in that charity's database visited Care2.com, they were eligible to engage with a branded activity for that organization. After completing the engagement, they could be taken to a website link on the charity's site or a donation opportunity.

As we started building this out for nonprofit clients we had millions of engagements and very quickly learned a lot about the content that performs best. One thing that surprised us was that the more challenging the question, the less engagement we got. We found people are uncomfortable engaging with something when they don't know the answer or don't feel aligned with its sentiment. The easy quizzes that we thought were less



serious were outperforming ones that we thought were more important. Confronting people with information they don't already have buy-in for was less effective in converting to action. And, as we continued to test, we found quizzes with "wrong" answers were lowering conversion. People don't like seeing their errors pointed out!

So, our team flipped the content around. Instead of asking the donor prospect if they know some facts, we *told* them a fact and asked them how they *feel* about it. These feedback or affirmation pieces were most popular with donors. For one animal welfare client "Do you think?" polls asking prospects to agree with positive statements about animals were rated the most effective.

Clicks were just one metric we monitored. By tracking which prospects engaged with Cultivate activities, our clients were able to measure fundraising ROI over a year and saw a significant boost in donations from individuals who interacted with content on Care2.com. A fantastic bonus was an increase in re-activation from lapsed list members after interacting with Cultivate quizzes and polls.

I'll be sharing a full case study at AFP ICON 2026 in April, so be sure to mark my session, "*How to Use Interactive Content to Boost Online Donations*," on your calendar. You'll learn why retargeting your existing supporters, leveraging the power of interactive versus static content, and crafting messaging that reinforces what supporters already feel, are all key strategies for driving greater engagement and giving. ■

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An agent on every fundraiser's desk

Nick Ellinger, Moore

The mission of Microsoft circa 1980 was “A computer on every desk.” It’s rare to have a statement that is both ambitious and lowballing.

It’s time to update this. It’s time for AI agents on every fundraiser’s desk to make their lives easier and their donors happier. AI agents are there to pursue tasks that you give them by interacting with their environment autonomously (that is, on their own) and using these inputs, plus memory and reasoning, to perform tasks. Here are some.

DEMOCRATIZING DONOR KNOWLEDGE

Right now, the most sophisticated fundraising nonprofits aren’t messing around with RFM segmentation. They use AI on billions of data points to best predict who will give, in what channel, in what amount, and on what journey.

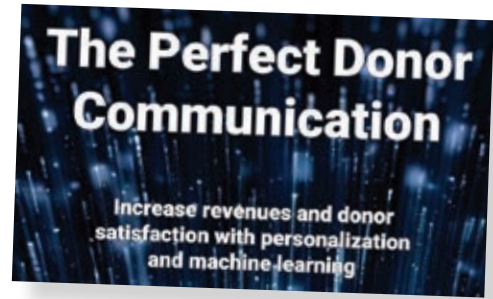
Case in point: a health care organization tested RFM segmentation versus a modeled solution. They saved \$315,000 by using the modeled list. But most organizations can’t afford to save \$315,000 on a mailing just like I can’t afford to save \$30,000 on a new Aston Martin—it’s out of scope.

No more. With agentic services, you can now upload your list (or hook it directly into the modeler) and instantly get back the people on your file who are most likely to become major or mid-level donors, complete with a customized email you can send them right now. All for a subscription where you pay only for the records you use, making it affordable for small organizations to use the tools the big ones do.

REAL 1:1 COMMUNICATIONS

A highly customized communication might have five different variables that are selected for and customized on. However, in my book *The Perfect Donor Communication*, I go through every letter of the alphabet and show a variable that nonprofits can profitably select by and customize to, whether cause connection or ethnicity or faith or ZIP code (something had to be the Z).

Humans can’t hold these in their heads at once; an AI can.



Imagine getting a letter or email from a nonprofit that feels like it was written just for you ... because it was. AI can take a core story, program, or narrative and create the perfect donor communication (hey, that’s a catchy phrase!) for each individual receiving it.

THE DRUDGERY

Physicists have proven that the total disorder of every system increases over time. Less well known is that they were watching a CRM when they made this observation. A long-time donor can be turned into a new one simply because someone accidentally typed in .con instead of .com.

Als excel in important, boring tasks like data cleaning, shortcutting your pivot tables and eliminating the need to remember whether this query should be an INNER JOIN or LEFT JOIN.

But more than that, agents are going to change your relationship with data. You can now have conversations with your data to learn more about patterns that interest you and explain concepts to your leaders. They can also switch from you having to pull insights to pushing them to you, highlighting when investment in a new audience is paying off or a new potential higher-value donor has entered your file.

A modern fundraiser is a juggler across many domains, audiences, and channels. The new AI agent platform can equip them for that world, taking the easy things off their plate and allowing them to create unique 1:1 communications for their most valuable audiences. If we are going to unlock a new age of American giving, it will start here, with advanced tools for all. 🏠

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Nonprofits and Data Privacy Policy: — What You Need to Know —

Ann Hollingsworth, The Nonprofit Alliance (TNPA)

Nonprofits face a rapidly evolving patchwork of state data privacy laws, as well as the anticipated introduction of a federal data privacy bill later in 2026. While most state privacy laws set high applicability thresholds that many nonprofits won't meet, exposure can still arise through state chapters and specific state statutes with no nonprofit exemption. Nonprofits must continue to invest in compliance and closely track implementation of current laws and pending legislation. Nonprofits also must be cognizant of their commercial vendors and data partners, who are subject to these laws. Meanwhile, federal activity on both data privacy and AI could reshape the landscape in 2026, though timelines remain uncertain.

Where Nonprofits Stand Under State Data Privacy Laws

The thresholds for applicability are high for the nonprofit sector. Across state statutes, nonprofits are not classified as data brokers. However, nonprofit organizations with state chapters or significant in-state operations can be covered if they meet certain thresholds. As an example, a nonprofit could be applicable if an entity controls or processes personal data of at least 100,000 consumers in a year, or 25,000 consumers and derives 25%+ of gross revenue from the sale of personal data.

Many small nonprofit organizations would not meet such a threshold, and this measurement approach is fairly standardized in existing state laws, with some variations. Larger nonprofits are more likely to be subject to state data privacy laws than smaller organizations because the thresholds are so high to reach, but all nonprofits must continue to track state laws that may impact them and those that will impact commercial vendors and third-party providers that nonprofits work with directly. Nonprofit exemptions also vary by state. As an example, Colorado's data privacy law includes no nonprofit exemption, but Virginia's law does and has been cited as a potential model for other data privacy legislation.

Regarding pending state legislation, multiple data privacy state bills have been introduced, with New Hampshire and New York including language around a data broker registry. New Hampshire would amend their existing comprehensive privacy law to include opt-out for processing consumers' data for any purpose.

Comprehensive Federal Data Privacy Bill

With some House members of the Energy and Commerce Committee stating interest in drafting new legislation on comprehensive data privacy and the announcement of the House Data Privacy Working Group in February 2025, TNPA worked with key offices on Capitol Hill to provide early and

substantial policy priorities on data privacy. We clearly addressed the justification for a federal law as opposed to the existing piecemeal approach by individual states.

The Nonprofit Alliance continues to be a resource for senior House personal office and committee staff for the expected comprehensive federal data privacy bill, built from months of consultations with the nonprofit and private sector. While the 43-day government shutdown in late 2025 and the legislative calendar have unfortunately pushed back the timeline, TNPA expects a bill text release in 2026.

Artificial Intelligence (AI)

The Trump administration's December 11, 2025, Executive Order (EO), *Ensuring a National Policy Framework for Artificial Intelligence*, laid out several new initiatives that will create bureaucratic roadblocks for AI regulation, building on the January [Executive Order](#) and July [AI action plan](#), which included language regarding possible retaliation towards states that regulate AI and pushed for a general lack of AI oversight. Notably, the EO called for the creation of an AI Litigation Task Force within 30 days, which would singularly focus on challenging state AI laws not consistent with the administration's position on artificial intelligence. State legislation introduced in 2025, or bills that have recently passed, targeted the regulation of AI use in hiring practices, demanded public transparency in AI tools, and specified financial fines for noncompliance.

AI implementation and usage are moving faster than oversight regulations. Some helpful recommendations for nonprofits regarding AI include: educating staff on available AI resources and parameters for using such tools; providing AI training and education across all departments; assigning organizational responsibility for tracking AI regulations in relevant jurisdictions to ensure compliance; prioritizing cybersecurity investments; and maintaining privacy of sensitive beneficiary data.

So what does all of this mean for the nonprofit sector?

While the December EO targets state AI oversight, the resulting federal state dynamics could delay or redirect congressional focus on both AI and comprehensive data privacy legislation. And many of the same policy staff who are working on data privacy are also working on artificial intelligence. A comprehensive federal bill on AI is a low likelihood in 2026. At the same time, states are likely to continue their legislative efforts on AI and data privacy, sustaining a complex compliance environment. ■

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The Nonprofit Alliance's website: tnpa.org**



Midlevel Giving Spotlight

Leveraging Technology to Address Scale in a Mid-Level Program

Jeff Muller, Crossroads Insights LLC

During a time when many nonprofits are chasing major donors, an increasing number of studies are demonstrating the importance of mid-level programs as reliable sources of essential unrestricted revenue. A 2025 article on the Giving USA website shared that, for many organizations, mid-level donors comprise just 5 percent of the annual giving population but represent 35 percent of annual giving revenue. Given that mid-level programs typically have large numbers of donors and lean staffing, practitioners face the challenge of delivering personalized communications and effective engagement to this valuable cohort that expects more time and attention than smaller dollar annual giving donors.

I recently spoke with three mid-level experts—Gloria Goosby from The Obama Foundation, Chelsea Rominiecki from Save the Children, and Ellyn Goncer from Doctors Without Borders/Médecins Sans Frontières – USA (MSF)—about how their mid-level shops are deploying technology to deliver their programs at scale. Here are the key takeaways from those conversations:

Automation is beneficial to engaging large numbers of donors

While all three organizations use, and are exploring, artificial intelligence (AI) solutions, Gloria finds the most valuable tool for The Obama Foundation to be one that uses traditional computing methods—rather than AI—to automate donor outreach activities. She deploys Vanillasoft, a sales engagement platform she had used at a previous organization. It allows users to design and deploy communication cadences, including outreach through phone, emails, and SMS.

Since starting at the foundation in July 2023, she has seen tremendous growth in her program. She attributes her success to having done “a really good job bringing people in and making them feel seen. Donors really feel connected through one-to-one outreach and because of the care that’s being taken with the personalization of the messages to their interests.” Vanillasoft allows her to keep her meeting pipeline full through their email nurturing feature, which automates email outreach through a user-created cadence. This allows her to focus her time and energy on meaningfully engaging donors and managing valuable one-to-one relationships while still being able to ensure she’s securing first meetings with new mid-level donors.

Her primary use case for the email nurturing feature is with donors for whom she has an email and mailing address but no phone number. After someone makes a gift and Gloria has sent a personal note of gratitude, she initiates an email nurturing campaign that allows her to provide a personal touch, at scale. Her goal is to cultivate and identify those donors who would welcome a conversation. She has a second use case for the platform, to build on the interaction following a donor meeting. Gloria notes that “People have a lot of places they can support, so it’s important to consistently remind them of their impact to influence the decisions they make about their philanthropic priorities.”

AI-powered fundraising assistants also work well for managing large donor portfolios

At Save the Children, the fundraising teams are deploying several AI-powered solutions. One of these tools is Raise from Gravyty, a fundraising assistant that helps with donor prioritization and email drafts. According to Chelsea, “Especially in a mid-level program where an officer has a larger portfolio, it really helps by providing a smart order of who’s your best contact to reach out to right this minute. It makes it so you don’t have to spend all your time organizing your portfolio in the CRM and figuring out who did you reach out to last and what’s the schedule. It just does it for you.” In addition to assisting with cultivation emails, as described above, she notes that the platform also automatically generates stewardship emails whenever a gift is made. This allows teams to more quickly thank donors and build goodwill through timely expressions of gratitude.

Chelsea pointed out a few other things about the software that she appreciates: it integrates well with many CRMs, there are regular updates, and the tech support is responsive. However, she notes that cost can be an issue, with organizations needing to determine whether their use case justifies the investment.

Deployed responsibly, ChatGPT can be a flexible, multipurpose tool

MSF has invested in an internal version of ChatGPT—behind a firewall to protect sensitive donor data—that is customized and trained on the institution’s brand. Ellyn and her team have found a variety of uses for the tool, including aggregating and synthesizing donor data to identify topics that will individually

resonate with donors, writing and editing copy, and even helping plan donor events. To the latter use case, Ellyn shares that she has asked ChatGPT “how many cans of seltzer should I bring to an event and what should my variety be? It can help draft the event budget as well.”

“As a gift officer, I definitely see the pros in how it makes my job faster and a lot more streamlined,” says Ellyn. “We can spend more time on the phones, on emails, writing more letters and physical note cards, and the like.” At the same time, she cautions that generative AI has some risks that need to be mitigated. “[Even though it’s trained on our brand], it still makes mistakes. Always make sure that you double check what the AI produces.”

Organizations need to be cognizant of these issues when considering a technology investment

Even though she believes that technology is essential to efficiently and effectively scaling an operation, Chelsea at

Save the Children identified several challenges that affect most, if not all, organizations. First, she notes that integration can be an issue, saying, “Not everything works well together. And sometimes, systems weren’t built knowing that we’d need to use different tools later.” Second, Chelsea suggests that organizations be clear-eyed when considering investments in technology. “There’s always more that we want to do than we can physically accomplish,” she says, identifying the bandwidth of both the IT and implementing teams as key considerations. Finally, she says, “With limited resources, it’s worthwhile to be really thoughtful and systematic about our technology investments.” This includes ensuring teams make the most of existing technology investments and routinely revisiting investments to ensure they are delivering the desired value for the organization. 🟦



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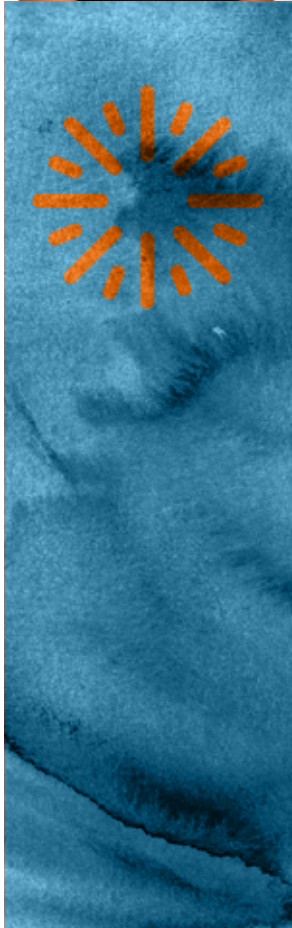
MARKETER of the Year

John Perell

DIRECTOR OF STRATEGY AND MEMBER EXPERIENCE Smithsonian Institution

John Perell has more than 26 years of experience in nonprofit fundraising and has served at the Smithsonian since 2013 as Director of Strategy and Member Experience and Director of Friends of the Smithsonian—the Institution’s largest membership program. In these roles, he collaborates across the organization to expand and engage a national base of philanthropic supporters and partners with major and planned giving teams to strengthen donor relationships.

Before joining the Smithsonian, John worked on both the agency and nonprofit sides, developing strategies to increase engagement, membership, donor support, and overall philanthropy. He currently serves on the board of the American Museum Membership Conference and has previously served on the boards of the Direct Marketing Fundraisers Association and the International Museum Membership Conference.



DMFA Spark Award

CELEBRATING THE NEXT GENERATION OF LEADERS:

Meet Molly Baker, Spark Award Winner

Launched in 2024, the DMFA Spark Award recognizes emerging leaders who have already made significant contributions to our industry through innovative projects or volunteer work.

We’re thrilled to introduce you to Molly Baker, Manager of Retention Marketing and Monthly Giving at Planned Parenthood Federation of America—and now our 2025 Spark Award winner!

Molly often jokes that most people don’t grow up dreaming of becoming a direct response fundraiser, but she did. At 15, she was knocking on doors for her local municipal races, an experience that sparked her interest in connecting with people on the causes she cared most about. For her, fundraising was a natural fit, combining strategy with both storytelling and true purpose.

Only a few months into her career, she was introduced to all the DMFA has to offer when she attended our Direct Mail 101 event—and she’s continued getting involved ever since. *“The DMFA has helped me stay current with trends and best practices, and networking opportunities have*

connected me with peers and industry leaders whose insights continue to shape my work.”

She cites passion, commitment, and adaptability as essential to succeeding in this field, but also the incredible value of having strong mentors. Her team at Planned Parenthood has helped shape her growth as a fundraiser, and she feels lucky to work with leaders who are generous with both their time and knowledge.

When asked what advice she would give to someone just starting a fundraising career, Molly’s response is characteristically thoughtful: *“Be curious and open to learning from every experience—and remember that fundraising is ultimately about relationships. Don’t underestimate the value of any role, which can give you a direct understanding of supporters or processes and can shape how you think strategically for years to come.”*

All of us at the DMFA are honored to count Molly as part of our community of committed fundraisers. Congratulations again!

If you know an emerging leader with fewer than five years of experience in the field of direct response fundraising (whether starting their careers or transitioning from another sector), please keep them in mind for the 2026 DMFA Spark Award. Nominations will be collected in Fall 2026.



Save the Date

APRIL

- **2026 Mid-Level Giving Benchmarking Summit**

4/14/26 - 4/15/26

LOCATION: College Park Marriott Hotel and Conference Center, 3501 University Blvd East, Hyattsville, MD

Registration for 2026 event closed.

Learn more and find out how to join next year at: dmfa.org/mlgbenchmarking

- **The Omnichannel Blueprint for Growing Monthly Donations**

4/28/26, (1:00 PM - 2:00 PM) (EDT)

LOCATION: Zoom

SPEAKERS:

Madiha Ahmed, *Associate Vice President, Digital Integration, Faircom New York*; Heather Foye, *Associate Vice President, Faircom New York*; Hank Walter, *Associate Director, Sustainer Retention, International Rescue Committee*

MAY

- **2026 Spring Sustainer Virtual Group Meeting**

5/19/26, (3:00 PM - 5:00 PM) (EDT)

LOCATION: Zoom

SPEAKERS: TBD

JUNE

- **2026 DMFA Awards Celebration and Annual Membership Meeting**

6/04/26, (11:30 AM - 4:30 PM) (EDT)

LOCATION: Royalton Park Avenue, 420 Park Avenue South (at 29th Street)

Contact info@dmfa.org for more information.

Be sure to check your email and dmfa.org for more information.



The DMFA believes that when any one of us becomes a better fundraiser, it helps lift up our peers as well. That's why the DMFA Professional Development Fund was created—to help fundraisers, and those interested in fundraising as a career, pursue education by subsidizing some of their costs. This scholarship is available to nonprofit organizations, students, and non-working professionals.

If you fit into one of the above categories and want to further your career with a conference, webinar, or membership, apply here:

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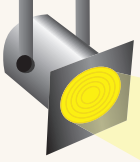
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MEMBER ORGANIZATION SPOTLIGHT

ACLU

Every year, the DMFA recognizes a nonprofit organization whose programmatic work and business practice reflect the spirit of our Diversity, Inclusion, and Systemic Change (DISC) pledge.

This past December at our year-end event in New York City, we named the **American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU)** as our Organization of the Year.

For over a century, the ACLU has been one of the most powerful defenders of constitutional rights and civil freedoms in the United States. As an organization, it has stood on the front lines of history—challenging injustice, taking on powerful institutions, and fighting in the courts to protect the rights guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution.

From defending free speech, voting rights, and racial justice to LGBTQ+ equality, reproductive freedom, and privacy in the digital age, the ACLU works to ensure that everyone’s civil liberties are protected—no matter who they are or what they believe. Through groundbreaking lawsuits, bold advocacy, and grassroots organizing in all corners of the U.S., the ACLU has helped shape landmark Supreme Court decisions and expand freedoms for millions of people.



At its core, the ACLU is driven by a simple but powerful idea: rights only matter when they’re defended.

The DMFA is honored to count the ACLU as part of our membership and our community. 🇺🇸



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