

Fundraising Lifeline: How a Sustainer Program Will Help You Survive and Thrive in the Years Ahead!

Kelly England, Multiply Strategies

It is no exaggeration to say that the past decade has been a roller coaster, and nonprofits have faced an onslaught of twists and turns. From COVID-19 to funding cuts and economic turmoil we have been through some dramatic ups and downs as an industry.

These stormy times have exposed the volatility of fundraising models that rely disproportionately on one-time giving. To create a proverbial umbrella, organizations that have invested in sustainer programs are grateful to have this reliable income as they navigate the current storm.

We think of sustainer programs as a three-legged stool made up of acquisition, conversion, and retention. Each leg must be solid to maintain a stable and scalable program, and so as not to tip over when we put too much weight on it. When our team at Multiply Strategies works with our clients on these three areas, we audit and strengthen each of these components to drive growth and ensure a resilient giving pipeline.

The key to acquisition is not just channel selection, but how each channel is optimized for cost-efficiency, sustainability and donor experience. Face-to-face fundraising remains the most reliable channel for scaling sustainer acquisition. We see a predictable flow of new sustainers with a 24-month break-even point on an investment model where you only pay for donors that are acquired. However, diversification of acquisition streams is crucial for risk mitigation and growth. With digital avenues, we see organizations driving annual recurring donors with optimized default landing pages that call out the need for a recurring commitment, CTV success in telling impactful brand stories to drive the call to recurring, or paid acquisition with treatments like

premium offers and survey funnels driving to a sustainer offer. Often with digital options, we aren't seeing a one-size fits all, so continually testing is critical.

Conversion—moving prior one-time donors to monthly giving—is often an overlooked growth opportunity. Converting one-time donors over the phone is still one of the highest-converting channels, and all of the channels working cohesively lifts results. We see opportunities to convert in each channel—expanding the mail acknowledgement touchpoints to a series to drive

conversion in the first 60 days post join, or immediate conversion with pop-ups on the landing page. The key here is to optimize for incremental lift.

Once you have secured a sustainer, the donor journey is critical to retaining the donor and maximizing value. Success here requires donor stewardship, recapture, and upgrade strategies. Regular thank-you

messages, impact stories, and failed payment recovery systems are all essential. Strong programs take a “surround sound” approach, using coordinated outreach through email, direct mail, SMS, and telemarketing at each point in the donor journey.

Auditing the full donor journey on both your one-time and sustaining donors will help to determine if all channels are being used to optimize conversion and value.

A well-balanced sustainer program offers more than just revenue—it provides nonprofits with stability and a platform for growth. In an unpredictable world, recurring donors can create a financial foundation that weathers any storm. Now is the time to assess your program, strengthen each leg of your stool, and make strategic investments in long-term stability. ■

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Message from the President

Hello everyone,

I am so excited to be kicking off a new programming year at the DMFA! I am grateful to be surrounded by an amazing group of dedicated (and overachieving) fundraisers on the Board. So many thanks go to our recent past president, Kristen Shank Finn, whose leadership and successes over the past two years not only helped ensure the DMFA's success but also fostered an environment of growth, support, and structure. I am deeply humbled to follow in her footsteps and continue the work of helping all our members, volunteers, and friends become more change agile to adapt to these (I will not say unprecedented) interesting times.

To pull from our mission statement, "The mission of DMFA is to enhance the skills, knowledge, and expertise of professional fundraisers engaged in direct mail, digital, multi-channel, or any other channel of fundraising, raise more revenue and provide better financial outcomes for the causes, organizations and companies they represent." And supporting that is our new tagline—**You Belong Here**. And you are very welcome here, and we thank you for your membership!

We follow up the summer newsletter on Sustainers with a continuation of this critical theme. It's absolutely worth doubling down on monthly giving—the whys and the hows. As you read the articles from our

contributors, I think you'll find the message is coming through loud and clear in surround sound—the opportunity is great, the rewards are many, and the need is paramount.

Across the sector, one-time gifts under \$100 are decreasing at an alarming level. Mid-level giving and sustainers can be our life rafts. The DMFA will continue to provide education, resources, and events to help you shore up your programs.

To that end, please mark your calendars for our upcoming events:

2025 DMFA Year-End Luncheon |

Thursday, December 11, 2025

(A cannot miss!)

The Power of Personal Connection: How to Build a Mid-Level Telemarketing Program | Wednesday, January 14, 2026

Data Privacy Legislation: What's Coming in 2026? | Tuesday, January 27, 2026

As we embrace autumn and all the work that goes into year-end fundraising, I wish you resilience, success, health, & joy. Hope to see you soon!

Take care,

Jenn Bullard

Jenn Bullard



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PREDICTIVE INTELLIGENCE MEETS HUMAN TOUCH:

Strengthening Sustainer Relationships Cost-Effectively



Lee Gartley, MiLo Analytics, ROI Solutions

Sustainer Programs: The Backbone of Mission-Driven Work

Monthly giving and membership programs are the backbone of many mission-driven organizations. They provide reliable revenue streams and help donors feel deeply connected to the cause. But keeping sustainers engaged for the long haul is no easy task as donors' priorities shift, inboxes overflow, and limited staff time can stretch outreach thin.

Smarter Targeting Through Predictive Insights

Organizations like **ROI Solutions** and **Contributor Development Partnership (CDP)** are demonstrating how predictive analytics can give fundraisers an edge. By highlighting which sustainers are most likely to lapse, these tools turn guesswork into strategy. A timely thank-you, a brief check-in, or even a simple text can be prioritized where it's most likely to make a difference, which saves staff time and outreach dollars.

Targeted Outreach That Works

CDP's experience with public media has long shown that even small, personal touches—like a quick thank-you call—can dramatically boost donor loyalty. The challenge has been knowing who to call and when.

This spring, CDP and ROI Solutions ran a pilot with a major public media station to test text-based outreach. Predictive signals identified at-risk sustainers. One group received a carefully crafted text highlighting their impact, while a control

group received none. The questions driving the test were straightforward but crucial:

- 👉 **When is outreach meaningful?**
- 👉 **When does it become unnecessary noise?**
- 👉 **And when is it worth investing in higher-cost efforts such as calls or mail?**

The early results are promising: predictive targeting appears to help fine-tune engagement strategies, boosting impact while managing costs. These results line up with anecdotal testing done by several national nonprofits. More tests with additional stations and national nonprofits are already on the horizon.

A Community of Learning

These efforts are part of a **broader learning community**. Through benchmarking platforms and peer cohorts supported by ROI Solutions and CDP, nonprofits can compare sustainer performance, share strategies, and adapt quickly. This collaborative approach means individual organizations aren't solving retention challenges in isolation. They're raising the bar together.

The Future: Predictive, Collaborative, and Human-Centered

Predictive tools aren't a replacement for human connection—they're a way to make it smarter. By blending data-driven insights with thoughtful outreach, organizations can build deeper, longer-lasting relationships with their most-committed supporters. Sustainer success isn't just about reaching donors—it's about reaching them meaningfully, at the right moment, for the right reasons. ■

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STRENGTHENING DONOR RETENTION IN UNCERTAIN TIMES:

The Power of Sustainer Programs

Allegiance Group + Pursuant

As we head into winter, continuing economic uncertainties, higher costs, changing donor behavior, and increasing competition for attention make for a challenging fundraising environment. In these unstable times, sustainer programs offer a lifeline to stabilize and build long-term fundraising growth.

The key to stronger retention is investing in and optimizing sustainer programs, which can provide consistent revenue and foster deeper donor loyalty.

DONOR RETENTION IN UNCERTAIN TIMES

Rising donor fatigue, changing giving priorities, and decreased one-time donations are key stressors for nonprofits. Retaining donors in uncertain times requires new strategies—stabilizing revenue, meeting evolving donor expectations, and adapting to economic shifts.

It costs

7–10x

more to acquire a new donor than to retain an existing relationship

According to Q4 data from the Fundraising Effectiveness Project (FEP), donor numbers have dropped by 4.5% year-over-year, with smaller donors (\$1-\$100) showing the sharpest decline at 8.8%. These signal weakening grassroots support, a critical component in sustaining broad-based contributions, and demonstrate why sustainer programs are more crucial than ever.

This approach requires a **shift in focus** from acquisition in the short term to a long-term focus on retention, with a nod toward cost-effectiveness in sustaining programs.

THE ROLE OF SUSTAINER PROGRAMS IN RETENTION

Sustainer programs are naturally designed to create ongoing, predictable revenue streams, making them a key strategy for retention, especially in volatile times. Donors prefer that type of subscription-like giving, which is *predictable and manageable*, since they can incorporate it into their monthly budget, especially during times of economic uncertainty.

Sustainer programs can also reduce churn by demonstrating the value of the donor's contribution while offering several additional

benefits, including convenience for donors, a predictable revenue stream for the organization, and increased donor engagement. These programs also allow for personalized communication and the ability to track donor behavior, which can lead to more effective fundraising strategies.

Key benefits of sustainer programs for retention:

- **Revenue Stability:** A steady stream of support allows organizations to plan long-term.
- **Lower Cost to Retain:** Once onboard, sustainers are cheaper to retain than acquiring new donors.
- **Stronger Donor Relationships:** Sustainers are more engaged, loyal, and open to upgrading.
- **Opportunity for Upgrades:** These donors can be upgraded to higher levels of giving with tailored appeals and benefits.

OPTIMIZING SUSTAINER PROGRAMS FOR MAXIMUM RETENTION

Consider implementing these tactics to improve sustainer donors' retention:

- **Personalization and Engagement:** Tailor communications to show sustained impact and recognition for recurring gifts. Share milestones, personalized updates, and exclusive content that acknowledges their ongoing support.
- **Strategic Donor Stewardship:** Invest in donor stewardship programs that nurture relationships through engagement strategies—surveys, VIP events, and targeted messaging.
 - ◆ Use automated yet personalized thank-you messages and appeals tailored to donor history and preferences.
 - ◆ Learn how one organization was able to uncover more mid-level donors with the potential for increased giving.



“

Despite the slowest growth rate, giving by individuals continues to be the dominant source of giving in American philanthropy, representing 67% of all philanthropic dollars.

—Giving Outlook
2024-2025 Annual Report

- **Data-Driven Segmentation and Targeting:** Use advanced data tools (like GivingDNA) to understand donor behavior, predict attrition, and segment sustainers for targeted retention strategies.
 - ◆ Proactive outreach to at-risk sustainers with retention-focused campaigns (e.g., mid-year updates or impact stories).
 - ◆ Segment based on tenure or donation level to adjust retention strategies.
 - ◆ Consider how one foundation maximizes its outreach and met its giving goals.
- **Multi-Channel Engagement:** Use a mix of channels (email, direct mail, social media, SMS) to keep sustainers informed with consistent, high-touch messaging.
 - ◆ Send SMS reminders before a scheduled payment and follow up with personalized thank-you notes and behind-the-scenes content through email.
 - ◆ Increased touchpoints and engagement opportunities keep donors connected to the cause.

NEXT STEPS

In uncertain times, donor retention—especially through sustainer programs—provides a stabilizing force. This predictable form of giving helps nonprofits weather volatility and plan with confidence.

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SCAN ME

Nonprofits are encouraged to review current sustainer programs, take steps to integrate better stewardship and engagement practices, and make use of data-driven strategies to optimize retention.

Remember, retaining sustainers isn't just about holding on to donors—it's about building a resilient, sustainable fundraising base to endure challenging times. 

SCAN ME

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The DMFA Sustainer Group

The DMFA is celebrating the one-year anniversary of our Sustainer Group—a space for sustainer professionals to gather, connect, explore, learn, and grow. It provides a safe space to share insights, opportunities, and challenges with fellow professionals.

Following the success of prior events focused on sustainer acquisition sources, retention, giving frequency, and donor self-service, the Sustainer Group hosted its third virtual event focusing on **sustainer recapture and reactivation** on October 28, 2025. Kristina Faragher, *Managing Director, Membership Acquisition*, Sierra Club; Ishmam Raidah Rahman, *Director, Audience and Donor Strategy*, International Rescue Committee; and Hank Walter, *Associate Director, Sustainer Retention*, International Rescue Committee, shared key insights from their organizations that help guide strategies for retaining and regaining recurring donors. Sustainer Group members can access prior presentations through the member portal.

These events provide a unique opportunity to continuously learn and grow by connecting nonprofit sustainer professionals across various sectors in an educational setting that allows you to learn

in detail what other organizations are doing, dive deeper into strategies, and discuss testing ideas.

If you are a DMFA member, your organization's sustainer program consists of 1,000 or more recurring donors, and you are not yet an active DMFA Sustainer Group member, contact us today at info@dmfa.org.

Sustainer Group Volunteer Advisory Committee

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LOOKING BEYOND TRADITIONAL SUSTAINER ACQUISITION

Nora Millwood, NNE Marketing

Sustainers have been such a critical audience for solid, predictable revenue generation for nonprofits. And it goes without saying that organizations with strong monthly giving programs have been better able to weather the storm through economic downturns and other events that often scare away the one-time donor population. The challenge for more established monthly giving programs is that they've often already mined the traditional audiences and invested heavily in a multi-channel approach. Their strategies include targeting both direct to sustainer acquisition and conversion strategies for existing donors. **So, what's next?**

How do you continue to identify new audiences when it seems like you've already tapped into all available resources?

While pondering this very question, we were also evaluating matchback results for a large nonprofit we work with. As industry trends suggest, we are seeing higher rates of new online donors matching to recent acquisition mail files and we wanted to understand the impact of that shifted giving behavior on our program at a campaign and list level. Through that analysis, we also identified another interesting phenomenon—these newly acquired donors (who saw a mail piece but went online to make their donation) were also converting to monthly giving at a higher rate year over year. And that was without any concerted strategic shifts to engage and convert these one-time donors to monthly giving.

Our goal now is to build upon that annual increase. How can we message and reach this audience with customized asks to convert to monthly giving at an even higher rate? How can we show the impact and value of becoming one of the organization's most valuable donors? And what channels do these newly acquired donors want to be messaged to that will be most impactful to the donor and the nonprofit? All I can say is that in this era of dwindling response rates compounded by nonprofits needing individual giving support more than ever, we need to continue to innovate and find ways to maximize investments to drive the strongest ROI. Sustainers are a key to that. Challenge accepted! ■



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PATH 2
RESPONSE

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OPTIMIZE YOUR RECURRING GIVING PROGRAM FROM EVERY ANGLE:

The Who, When, Where & How of Sustainer Acquisition & Retention

MissionWired

In 2025, nonprofit fundraisers are faced with the challenge of finding opportunities for growth and stability in an economically uncertain environment. Recurring revenue offers exactly the kind of reliable revenue you need to future-proof your fundraising strategy—and allows you to shift some of your efforts from one-time appeals to retention efforts that support your donors' long-term relationships with your program.

So how can you grow and strengthen your recurring giving program to protect your organization from the ups and downs of the fundraising environment? Optimize your appeals for sustained giving from every angle by considering when, where, who, and how you make the ask:

When to ask:

It may seem counterintuitive, but the perfect time to ask for another gift is the moment when supporters are most engaged with your work—right after a one-time gift, when a new supporter joins your list, or right after they've donated to a rapid response campaign.

Where to ask:

Digital channels are often the primary place for sustainer appeals, and interactive post-donation upsell surveys like those we've built for our partners have driven strong response. Integrating these campaigns with telemarketing and in direct-mail welcome packages has also proven to drive results.

Who to ask:

Modeling for the most likely donors to upgrade to sustained giving can have an incredible impact on your response rates.

Try modeling not just for look-alikes, but “act-alikes”: likely donors modeled to match the behaviors of your current, most-generous supporters.

How to ask:

Understanding that not all supporters will be able to give monthly, we recommend testing sustainer frequency to determine if donors can come into your recurring giving program through quarterly or annual asks. And consider trying a branded name for your group of recurring donors—we've seen this approach lift conversions for our partners.

And ... how to retain:

Consistently reinforcing brand relationships with your recurring donors by providing engagement messaging or premiums is a great way to offer surprise-and-delight moments without any monetary ask. We also recommend using a lower cadence for sustainers for additional appeals. And automations can recapture donors with lapsed payments or credit card failures or commemorate milestones in recurring donors' giving to communicate the impact of their high-value gifts.

When it comes to your recurring giving program, the **why** speaks for itself: A strong sustainer program can have a powerful impact on your overall fundraising—without (as we've proven through rigorous testing) depleting your results from one-time donors. If you'd like to read more about the impact of a powerful sustainer program strategy, check out our conversation with our partners at Brady United (missionwired.com/insights/brady-qa-building-a-sustainer-strategy). 

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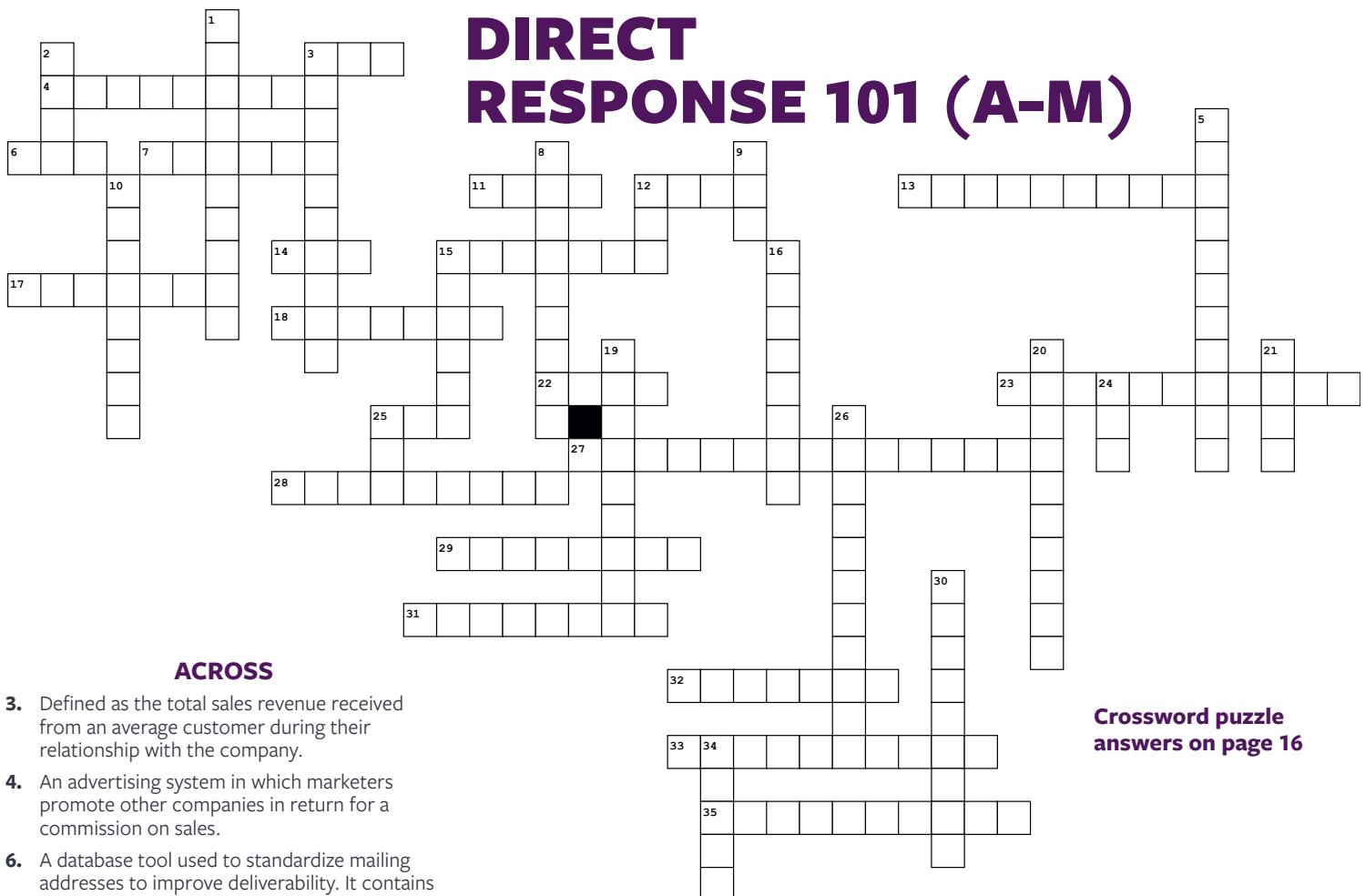


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DIRECT RESPONSE 101 (A-M)

ACROSS

- 3. Defined as the total sales revenue received from an average customer during their relationship with the company.
- 4. An advertising system in which marketers promote other companies in return for a commission on sales.
- 6. A database tool used to standardize mailing addresses to improve deliverability. It contains every valid postal address in the United States.
- 7. A marketing program where promotional materials are placed into a package, envelope, magazine, catalog, or other medium.
- 11. An online journal that may be setup and maintained with minimal technical expertise.
- 12. A prospecting database that is sourced from many mailing lists from many different sources.
- 13. The event that occurs when a recipient of a direct mail or email offer takes action.
- 14. An unattached promotion found in a newspaper or magazine.
- 15. Established in 2003, the first U.S. standard for senders of commercial email.
- 17. A tracking code consisting of letters and/or numbers which is assigned to a specific list by the list user.
- 18. A direct mail package that is used as the baseline for measuring performance of test packages with different offers, content, or formats.
- 22. A prospect who has identified himself or herself, and is engaged in the buying process.
- 23. The total number of copies of a magazine, newspaper, newsletter, or catalog that are distributed via direct mail or other channels.
- 25. An envelope that is prepaid by and preaddressed to the mailer.
- 27. The cost associated with bringing on a new customer.
- 28. The process of assigning geographic information, such as latitude and longitude, to street addresses and other map locations.

29. Any marketing effort that targets potential customers based on established buying patterns.
31. A reciprocal arrangement between two mailers where they each allow the other to send a promotion to their house list.
32. Names and addresses of individuals on a mailing list who are no longer active buyers, subscribers, members or donors.
33. An inbound telephone support or telemarketing department within an organization.
35. A program in which products, such as CDs, books, or videos, are purchased in a series over time.

DOWN

1. A dedicated computer that is used to deliver or send email.
2. Certification used to improve delivery and qualify for postal automation discounts.
3. A company that assembles, addresses and mails direct mail pieces or packages.
4. A page where a visitor arrives at a web site after clicking on a paid banner advertisement, paid search URL, or organic search URL.
5. A list of all of a company's customer names and addresses.
6. The actual cost or average cost-equivalent that is paid for click-through advertisements.
7. An alpha-numeric combination, often containing a zip code, which is used to de-dupe addresses on a mailing list.
8. Calculated by taking the number of times a banner ad is clicked divided by the number of times that same banner ad is viewed.
9. A postcard that is prepaid by and preaddressed to the mailer.
10. The process of updating a mailing list to remove unwanted names, undeliverable addresses, or individuals who have chosen not to receive direct mail offers.
11. Marketing channels such as television, radio, or newspaper advertising that are targeted at large audiences as opposed to individuals on a mailing list.
12. Acronym for American Standard Code for Information Interchange.

Crossword puzzle answers on page 16



ARE YOU TAKING ADVANTAGE OF RECURRING GIVING'S RICH AND BRIGHT FUTURE?

Gary Weinberg, DM Pros

On May 15, **Tim Sarrantonio** of the Fundraising Effectiveness Project hosted the first-ever international virtual panel discussion on recurring giving. The roundtable discussion included five participants: **Ken Burnett** (Author and Consultant, Retired) from the UK, **Harvey McKinnon** (Author, President, Harvey McKinnon Associates) from Canada, **Dave Raley** (Author, President, Imago Consulting), **Dana Snyder** (Author, Host, Monthly Giving Summit), and **Erica Waasdorp** (Author, President, A Direct Solution & Panel-Initiator) from the Netherlands and U.S.

As someone who has worked with nonprofits for decades, I've been interested in monthly giving for almost that long. That's why I am excited to share some highlights of this insightful conversation.

Does monthly giving have even more potential? Absolutely!

Dana shared these amazing stats: Each year, only 2% of new donors in the U.S. are recurring. But if we grew that rate by just 5 percentage points, it would unlock an additional \$10 billion in annual recurring revenue for nonprofits. Imagine the impact that could have! Can you grow your program by 5 percentage points? You bet!

How can you show the powers that be the value of sustainers?

Ken shared that you need to convince leadership to invest in monthly giving. It will improve retention and keep charities alive. "The statistic Dana shared—that each year, only 2% of new donors in the U.S. are recurring donors—is an embarrassment."

The Fundraising Effectiveness Project reports that 2024 4Q first-time donor retention was 19% ... repeat donors retain at about 50% ... and monthly givers about 90% retention!

Ken elaborated, "Monthly giving is not a strategy or tactic or program. It is part of culture... relationship building... You'll keep people longer. Loyalty leads to legacies."

"It's the way donors live now. I couldn't picture paying Spotify

\$100 per year, but I will pay \$10 per month ... Easy payments ... The commercial world learned this a long time ago."

How do you start and scale? Convert one-time donors to give monthly.

Harvey says start early. Use a soft offer to become a monthly donor in your mail acquisition. Ask for a one-time gift but also give a monthly donor option. Same goes for your renewal appeal.

If you're doing a digital campaign, include goals and urgency, such as, "Our goal is to generate 200 monthly donors in one month."

Tim added that in his research for the Recurring Giving Report and the Generosity Report he saw that oftentimes small donors, legacy givers, and donors who are paying off pledges to a capital campaign are likely to give recurring gifts when asked.

What is the best time to convert one-time to monthly? Start early!

Dave shared his research; reviewing several programs showed 58% of all one-time donors who became monthly donors in the first year did so in the first 60 days, with most in the first 30 days. He says: "There's a curve that shows the longer you wait to ask again to become a monthly donor, the harder it is to convert."

Further, it's important to remember that monthly giving is more than just a check box. The donor is joining a program—just like your major donor program.

A few final comments

Dana adds: Your monthlies are your core donors. Invite them to a major donor event such as a town hall or webinar. If you're a local organization like a theater, invite them to a show together. It is about building community.

Ken shares: "Studies have shown that giving is good for your health and wellbeing. Deliver joy, no pressure, offer real benefits. Deliver interest, information, involvement, worthwhile achievements, easy and enjoyable experiences ... and you'll do well." ■



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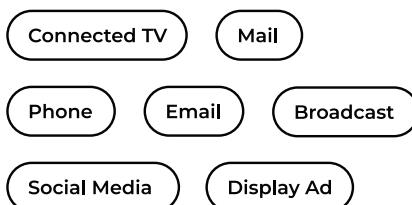
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Save the Date

DECEMBER

- **2025 DMFA Year-End Luncheon**

12/11/25, 11:30 AM – 4:30 PM (EST)

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

JANUARY

- **The Power of Personal Connection: How to Build a Mid-Level Telemarketing Program**

01/14/26, 2:00 PM – 3:00 PM (EST)

LOCATION: Zoom

SPEAKERS:

Christine Lowman, Senior Officer, *Mid-level Giving, IRC*; Ayesha Mahmooda, Manager, *Donor Retention, ACLU*; Amanda Zook, Director of *Business Development, DCM*

- **Data Privacy Legislation: What's Coming in 2026?**

01/27/26, 2:00 PM – 3:00 PM (EST)

LOCATION: Zoom

SPEAKERS:

Ann Hollingsworth, VP, *Government Affairs, The Nonprofit Alliance*; Britt Vatne, President, *Account Management, Adstra*

FEBRUARY

- **Silent Killers of Digital Growth**

02/11/26, 1:00 PM – 2:00 PM (EST)

LOCATION: Zoom

SPEAKERS:

Laura Cole, VP of *Account Services, Sanku Communications*; Alison Hermance, *WildCare*

APRIL

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

04/14/26, 8:00 AM – 7:00 PM (EST)

04/15/26, 8:30 AM – 2:30 PM (EST)

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

LEARN MORE ABOUT THIS EVENT AT:

<https://dmfa.org/mlgbenchmarking/>

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

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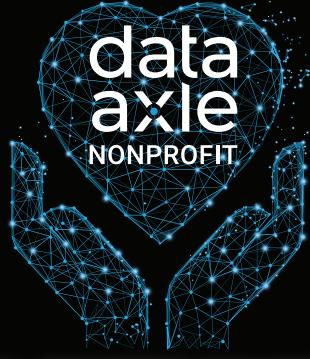
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CONSIDERING SUSTAINER GIVING FOR YOUR MID-LEVEL PROGRAM

Jeff Muller, Crossroads Insights LLC

Some describe ours as being a “subscription economy.” Per Federal Reserve data, in just the past two years (between 2022 and 2024) the average number of automated monthly payments for U.S. consumers has increased from 39 to 48, up from fewer than 20 just six years prior. This has conditioned donors to feel comfortable making regular, automated payments for things they value. Such trends are encouraging for those who make, or are considering making, monthly sustainer giving a part of their organization’s mid-level giving program.

I spoke with three mid-level experts—Ishmam Rahman from the International Rescue Committee (IRC), Valerie Vierengel from the National Audubon Society, and Andrew Wiley from the World Wildlife Fund (WWF)—about how mid-level shops can think about incorporating sustainer giving into their programs. Here are the key takeaways from those conversations:

• DETERMINING WHETHER A SUSTAINER PROGRAM IS RIGHT FOR YOU

The team at IRC is in the process of formally launching a new mid-level sustainer track. According to Ishmam, “The idea comes from donor behavior. We’ve seen that a lot of donors prefer the consistency of monthly giving, and some are giving at levels that add up to mid-level thresholds over time. To us, it makes sense to recognize and engage these donors in a way that matches their level of commitment.”

While Ishmam notes that there are operational challenges—including coordinating across teams to track cumulative giving from sustainers, making sure to flag when someone has “crossed over” into the mid-level, and ensuring that stewardship is integrated and not duplicative—they say the benefits far outweigh the challenges. These include increased retention rates, high average one-time gifts, and deep engagement with the mission.

Ishmam concludes with an encouraging early analysis of the program. “What we’ve seen so far is really positive. Donors appreciate being acknowledged for the full scope of their giving, not just the size of an individual gift. It makes them feel that their commitment is valued no matter how it’s structured. This has positively impacted both their one-time giving and sustainer gift upgrade rate.”

• DEPLOYING SUSTAINER GIVING TO ADDRESS CURRENT ECONOMIC TRENDS AND CHALLENGES

We are currently experiencing economic uncertainty as federal funding cuts and threats of a recession are causing real concern for many nonprofits. Add to that the worrying trends identified by the Fundraising Effectiveness Project—with the most recent report showing a continued decline in the number of donors, falling by another 1.3% year-over-year and retention rates slipping from 18.3% in 2024 to 18.1% in Q1 2025—and it is becoming increasingly clear that organizations must do all they can to engage and retain donors while building more predictable and dependable revenue sources. This trend has led Val and the

team at Audubon to reconsider the rationale for their mid-level sustainer program.

“In the past, the mid-level programs I worked on were defined by who had the capacity to be in this exclusive club. While these programs often included sustainers and donors who accessed the club level with cumulative giving, we struggled with that because we felt they were different donor profiles from a donor who could give the qualifying amount in a single gift. Often, these non-single gift qualifiers didn’t know or even care that they’d been included in our special giving club.

“Now, with a shrinking donor pool, we must do everything we can to retain our best donors. So, I’ve shifted my thinking and welcome these other segments into our mid-level giving program because it gives us an opportunity to focus on them with tailored messaging and a custom donor experience.”

• BUILDING TRUST IS KEY TO A SUCCESSFUL SUSTAINER PROGRAM

Two recently published studies identified a lack of faith in charities and an absence of trust as significant barriers to philanthropy. Given that a sustainer program requires that a donor feel comfortable entrusting an organization with their credit card and other personal information, it is essential that there is a focus on building trust in order to have a successful monthly giving program. As Andrew notes, “our sustainer donors are practically investors in WWF.”

He says that WWF has built a culture of transparency and accountability by ensuring their sustainer donors receive the same treatment as all mid-level donors—known at WWF as Partners in Conservation—including having a direct point of contact, regular access to staff and information via webinars and in-person gatherings, and consistent reporting on the activities of the organization. He adds, “Some of our closest, most active Partners are monthly donors. Many have given for more than a decade, and a significant number make additional contributions through DAFs, IRAs, and other giving vehicles. They trust us to care for their data and private information, and we take that responsibility seriously.”

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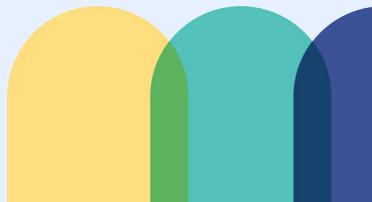
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