

YEAR END & BEYOND

Effective Strategies for Churches

For many nonprofits, ministries and churches, more than half of their annual contribution revenue comes during the last quarter of the year. While this isn't true for all, this is a season many donors consider making significant contributions driven by both their passions and the realities of tax benefits.

Make the Most of Both Year-End Giving and Beyond

These weeks at year-end can become hectic fast, especially for churches. If you don't go into it with a plan, you'll find yourself looking back in the spring with regret because you missed some opportunities to invite your members to deepen their commitment.

In this article, we'll look at four concrete steps to help you make the most of both year-end giving and beyond.

STEP 1

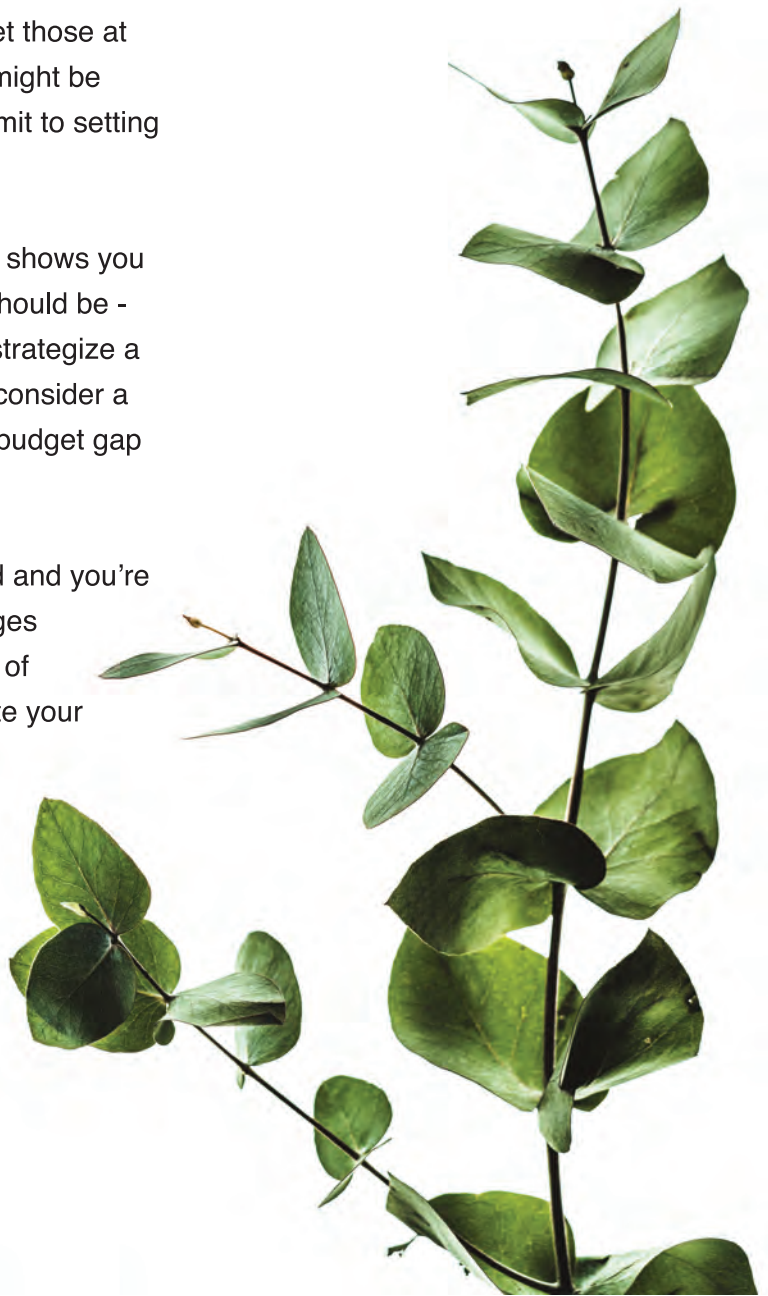
Review your goals and set an action plan.

Step one is reviewing your goals and setting an action plan. Take a close look at your annual contribution goals and if you are on pace to meet or exceed those. If you don't have any annual goal for fundraising income, you can look at past revenue numbers and based on your typical growth percentage and estimate what your goal should be for this quarter.

In addition to financial goals, it's important to review any goals you have for acquiring new donors, increasing monthly/ recurring giving among your donors, or any other donor or member retention goals you set. If you haven't set those at the beginning of your year, consider what those might be based on your member and donor data and commit to setting those goals in the new year.

Develop a plan that fits your goals. If your review shows you are a specific dollar amount short of where you should be - or where your pledges indicated you would be - strategize a campaign to motivate your members. You might consider a specific campaign or year-end push to close the budget gap or meet a specific need.

As an example, perhaps your pledges are behind and you're projecting a shortfall of \$125,000 if nothing changes with the pace of your giving. Planning a "12 days of giving" campaign could help educate and motivate your members. Think creatively about how you could structure that campaign. Is there a donor who would be willing to help with a matching gift? Could you break the goal down into manageable chunks? Is there a specific message to people behind on their pledge commitments versus a communication to new or prospective donors? Develop the strategies and actions for the campaign push.



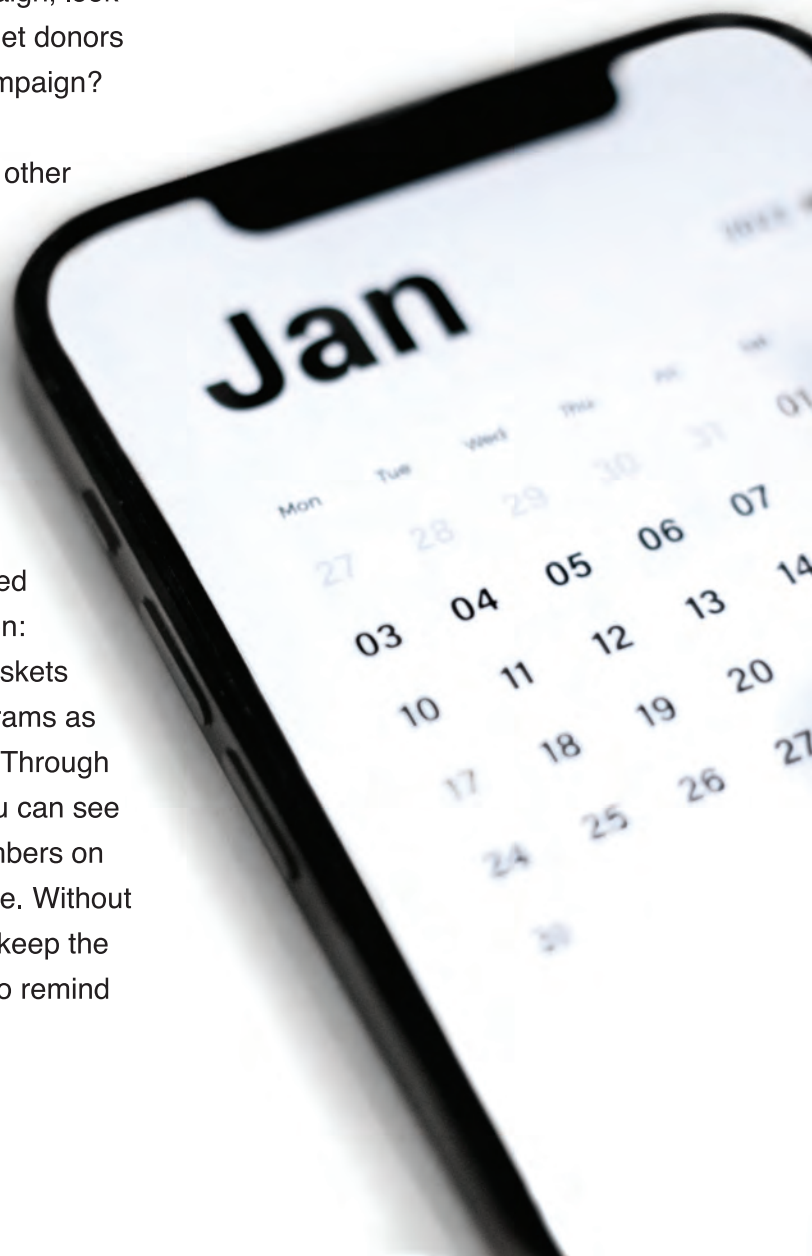
STEP 2

Plan your calendar.

Once you have a concept of what your year-end strategy will be, the second step is to plan your calendar. We've used the example of a 12 days of giving campaign where you're striving to close a \$125,000 budget gap. As you consider how to roll out this effort to your congregation, begin by first outlining the existing calendared items for communications, events and for your church in this season. It will be important to (1) layer and segment the year-end giving messaging against the existing items and/or (2) integrate the year-end ask campaign with those existing calendar items. If there is a men's fellowship breakfast or a children's ministry newsletter in the calendar timeframe for your year-end campaign, look closely at how to leverage those opportunities to get donors engaged. How can they be part of the 12 days campaign?

In addition to your church's calendar, make use of other key dates in the timeframe. Ideally, your year-end calendar would kickoff leading up to Thanksgiving with thank yous to donors. Many organizations also build a specific campaign around Giving Tuesday, using the national philanthropic spotlight as another way to encourage giving to the church in a specific way.

Many churches and ministries host service-centered campaigns and drives during the Christmas season: coats for kids, turkeys for those in need, dinner baskets for shut-ins. Don't view these mission-driven programs as competition for your church's year-end campaign. Through strategic calendaring and effective messaging, you can see these programs flourish while educating your members on how supporting the church makes them all possible. Without the church, there would be no coat drive - donors keep the lights on and the door open. Too often, we forget to remind them of that and thank them for it.



STEP 3

Gather stories for great appeals.

The third step is gathering stories for great appeals. I'd encourage you to gather these stories - how your church and its ministries impact real people - in a systematic way, year-round. Chances are, the frontline staff and volunteers are the ones you need to tap to share those stories of lives changed. Make sure to ask for these stories regularly from your frontline or program staff - anyone in your church - who can help you illustrate the difference your congregation is making.

The best stories compel an immediate need to take action. The descriptive language paints a picture of what is happening and how your church is advancing the Kingdom, meeting people's needs, solving a problem. Ideally, it's the story of a person and his or her transformation.

We've been using an example in this series of a 12 days of giving campaign to close a \$125,000 budget gap. This is a church-wide project and effort, so this campaign's stories could (and I'd argue should) come from a variety of ministries and places in the congregation. As you think about your local or global missions, children or youth ministry, your outreach programs, or your partnerships, consider these questions:

- *What is the problem our church/this ministry is solving?*
- *What is the situation like before the problem is solved?
After the problem is solved (and the church has played a role)?*
- *What are the real costs of these solutions/programs?*
- *How do we measure the impact?*
- *What is the true impact of an individual donor?*
(ie, how many donors giving at \$50 a week does it take to fund your hunger mission program?)

These questions help you tie your church's impact story to the direct need for donor gifts. Your appeals should share stories of your ministries' impact, the stories of the people whose lives have been transformed. And those appeals should be clear about the role donors have and the impact they can make through their giving.

In the case of our example project, we also need to be clear about what a \$125,000 shortfall from projected pledges could mean for the life of the church. We can illustrate that with professionalism and without being alarmist.

I've seen organizations launch "emergency" urgent giving campaigns that, while perhaps successful in meeting a need, caused more damage in the long-run. Discern launching an "emergency" fundraising appeal very carefully. They can, and often do, cause both concern and fatigue among donors—especially if you do them with any frequency. Your donors may feel as if the "emergency" really was ill-advised planning and poor management. These urgent projects are merited occasionally, but not nearly as often as they're launched on donors.

Donors have an emotional tie to your church and your mission - it's important not to ever exploit that for the purposes of meeting a specific budget need. The trust and credibility you have with your members and donors is far more valuable than any fundraising "win."

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STEP 4

Thanking, early and often.

The final step is thanking, early and often. Any year-end fundraising plans should include several touchpoints for thanking donors. It could be a thank you or Thanksgiving card, a calling campaign, or handwritten thank yous from staff, your board or ministry beneficiaries. It might mean a special thank you just for first-time donors or something unique for your recurring monthly donors.

Thanking goes beyond an email or mailed receipt: that is required stewardship and an acknowledgment of the gift. Think about how you can creatively - and often - show gratitude to your donors. Thanking also goes beyond year-end planning. It's something to sprinkle throughout your church calendar. Handwritten notes, donor appreciation events, donor thank you videos, phone calls and donor-specific recognition are all ways you can say thank you.

Remember when thanking donors to share the concrete impact they've made. Be clear that they are the reason the food or coat drive was successful, the youth group is flourishing or the choir trip was possible. While church staff and volunteers execute the programs, nothing could happen without the gifts and tithes of our donors. Your thank yous should reflect that and be as specific - and personal - as possible.

Donors who are thanked in a timely manner are happier and more engaged. First-time donors thanked quickly are much more likely to give a second gift. Churches often do a poor job of donor acknowledgement. We tend to take our regular, recurring, faithful givers for granted. If that is the case in your congregation, commit to changing that this coming year - even if you do nothing else for year-end! It will make a long-term difference in your donor relations and development success as a church.



In our example in this series of a year-end 12 days of giving campaign to close a \$125,000 budget gap, donor thank yous could be woven into the fabric of the campaign itself. Imagine if each of the 12 days included a spotlight on a giver or volunteer in your congregation and why he or she is involved. There's nothing more powerful than peer-to-peer testimony to encourage giving.



Gather a creative team and have fun getting to work.

Remember, even if you've missed the boat entirely on year-end campaign planning, these four steps can help you shape your giving plans and your outcomes for the coming year. Gather a creative team and have fun getting to work. If you feel behind this year, don't despair: These steps are not just fundamental for year-end, but they're tools you can use to build effective development strategies year-round.

Documenting your end of the year strategies - and their outcomes - will also help you evaluate how you did, so you'll have a plan to review when it comes time to build next year's end of the year fundraising.

Choosing the Right Ministry Partner

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Let's Talk

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