The Brief
MONTHLY INSIGHTS FOR NONPROFIT MARKETERS
AUGUST 2026

Predictability in Unpredictable Times

A Community-First Approach to Your Digital Marketing

Nonprofit marketing has rarely felt less predictable. Government funding is pulling back, donor behavior keeps shifting, and economic uncertainty makes every quarter feel like a question mark. Almost none of the organizations we work with right now describe the environment as stable.

We've spent the past year thinking hard about the challenges stacking up against nonprofits right now, declining donor participation, thinning institutional trust, a shrinking share of wallet, and a quiet epidemic of disconnection. The reflex in a moment like this is to double down on transactional digital marketing, work the list harder, cut a wider net, extract everything you can while the getting is tough. We think that instinct is exactly backwards.

That's why we've arrived at a conclusion that sounds strange coming from a digital agency. Digital marketing, as most of the sector still practices it, is dead.

What's dying isn't the channels. Paid search, social, SEO, and email aren't going anywhere. What's dying is the model underneath them, the assumption that a nonprofit's job is to interrupt someone's scroll, extract a gift, and move on to the next prospect. That model was never built for stability, and in an unpredictable environment, its cracks are showing.

The share of households giving at all has dropped since 2008.

66%
2008

51%
TODAY

SOURCE: URBAN INSTITUTE'S CENTER ON NONPROFITS AND PHILANTHROPY - GENEROSITY COMMISSION'S FINAL REPORT

THE CRISES ARE REAL, AND THEY'RE STACKING

Donation count has fallen across every donor frequency segment year over year, from occasional givers to the most engaged repeat donors, with declines ranging from 4.5% to 6.5% depending on the segment. Giving capacity is shrinking too. In 2000, Americans gave about 2.4% of their disposable income to charity. That figure has fallen to 1.7%, the lowest level in nearly three decades. The share of households giving at all has dropped from roughly 66% in 2008 to about 51% today.

Trust has thinned out as well, and unevenly. Charities land at 23% trust and nonprofits at 22%, both below healthcare providers at 31% and the military at 27%. Nearly as many people, 28%, say they don't trust any of these institutions at all as trust the most-trusted one on the list.

Each of these numbers is real, and each gets treated as its own crisis with its own fix. But they share a root.

THE ROOT IS DISCONNECTION

About 1 in 3 U.S. adults report feeling lonely, and about 1 in 4 say they lack social and emotional support, even though 92% of adults still name relationships as a key source of meaning in their lives. That gap, between how much connection people want and how much they have, is the actual story underneath the giving, trust, and affordability numbers. Donors aren't stepping back from causes. They're stepping back from being marketed to as a lead rather than related to as a person.

WHY WE BELIEVE COMMUNITY IS THE FIX, NOT JUST A NICER STORY

This isn't a values argument dressed up as a strategy. The economics make the case directly.

Only 19% of first-time online donors ever make a second gift. A recurring donor's average lifetime value runs 9 times higher than a one-time donor's, the average recurring donor stays engaged for 8 years, and 71% of recurring donors stay with an organization once they're moved into an automated giving funnel. That gap between a 19% return rate and a 9x lifetime value multiple is the entire business case for building relationships instead of chasing transactions. A model built to win as many new names as possible will always underperform a model built to keep the supporters it already has.

Community-First marketing also matches the shape of the problem it's solving. Where transactional marketing sends a one-way message outward, community marketing builds a two-way relationship, and increasingly a many-way one, as supporters connect with each other around a shared cause. That directly answers the disconnection sitting underneath the sector's numbers, using the same channels that transactional marketing was using to interrupt people in the first place.

HOW THIS WORKS IN PRACTICE

Our Community-First Blueprint consists of three stages: **Build, Activate, and Multiply.**

Build is where a community takes shape. The goal isn't a gift; it's reach, new followers, and email list growth — the raw material a relationship needs before any ask makes sense.

Activate is where a community member takes their first meaningful action: a first gift, a ticket purchase, an event signup. This step converts well specifically because Build already established some sense of shared belonging first.

Multiply is where the return shows up. Supporters move toward recurring giving, retention, and peer-to-peer advocacy, turning a single transaction into compounding, predictable revenue.

PROOF FROM THE FIELD

All Hands and Hearts faced a structural problem. Disaster relief funding is reactive by nature, spiking after headlines and drying up between them. We applied Build, Activate, Multiply directly to that problem. Build phase messaging invited people into the broader community behind the organization, not just a single disaster response. Activate phase content used real-time updates and storytelling to convert that early trust into gifts. Multiply phase messaging reframed recurring giving as preparedness for the next disaster, not just a reaction to the last one.

The results were measurable. **Total donation value grew 11.8x.** Average donation value reached $211. Volunteer applications rose 200% year over year, all without a bigger one-time campaign push behind it.

THE TAKEAWAY

None of this argues against digital channels. It argues against using them the way most of the sector still does, as a megaphone aimed at strangers. The nonprofits building real resilience right now are treating supporters less like a funnel and more like people who want to belong to something.

WANT TO LEARN MORE?

Join us **Wednesday, August 12, at 12 PM ET** when we'll walk through our argument and our Community-First Blueprint that you can bring to your own nonprofit's digital marketing program.