

GETTING PAST THE DONOR STORY: NEW IDEAS IN DEVELOPMENT COMMUNICATIONS

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Last year, Johns Hopkins closed its eight-year Rising to the Challenge campaign. Although the campaign exceeded its goals, raising \$6.01 billion, we in development communications wondered how our strategies contributed to that effort. Although we created our campaign website, case statements, and social media accounts before our team began a robust measurement effort, the late-campaign metrics we could pull were underwhelming. We asked ourselves the natural question: *What can we do better?*

I spoke with development communications colleagues at several institutions to find some new ideas. These people were generous in sharing how they're working to better serve their donors *and* their fundraising staffs. Here are three lessons I learned from these conversations — and how we're starting to adopt those lessons in Hopkins development communications.

1. Think of your workforce as a user or customer group.

Our gift officers are consumers of our content just like our donors — but too often, we overlook them when we ask, "What is the audience for this content?"

One development communications team I spoke with keeps in close contact with their fundraisers and use those conversations to inform their content strategy. For example: This team learned that gift officers often struggled to find stories and videos related to their donors' specific philanthropic interests, despite there being a ton of content produced across the institution. So the development communications team created an internal platform that collects content from the institution's central communications office, as well as school and division websites. They include the links in separate posts sorted by keyword for easy searching, and most posts offer suggested messages a gift officer can copy, paste, and personalize to send to a donor.

2. Be proactive, not reactive, with editorial planning.

Years of readership surveys tell us audiences just don't like donor stories and boilerplate news about gifts — so why do we keep giving this content to them?

Some teams I spoke with focus on developing content that follows one overarching theme for an entire year, while others cycle through different themes for set periods of time, like seasons. The goal is to tell the best stories they can relate to their fundraising priorities regardless of whether a donor or a gift is featured. This may sound counterintuitive, but here's why: Instead of focusing on gifts already made, this content promotes a compelling argument for why *this* institution is the best place to invest if a donor cares about a particular issue — whether it's combating climate change, stemming the opioid epidemic, or understanding threats presented by artificial intelligence.

3. Help your schools and divisions help you.

How many social media accounts dedicated to fundraising do you follow (not including your own institution)?

Likely not many. But your schools and divisions have thousands and thousands of followers. We, as development communicators, can help satisfy their need for content to share. When planning its current campaign communications strategy, one team I spoke with reached out to its schools to find out which of the campaign's priorities applied directly to them. Then, the team created original and curated third-party content that focused on people in each school whose work related to those themes. The team packaged links to the content in easily accessible "toolkits" alongside suggested social copy and other resources, and the toolkits were then shared with the schools. The goal: To have the schools post organically on their own platforms content that directs back to the institution's giving site.

Applying the lessons

Some of these ideas influenced the design of our new [giving website](#), which launched late last year. Now, we're halfway through a comprehensive content strategy research effort that's emphasizing the feedback of our workforce as much as that of our donors. We're not sure yet where the results will lead us, but we know one thing: We're definitely ready to get past the donor story.