

A CRITICAL VIEW ON THE ALS ICE BUCKET CHALLENGE

By Ken Chilton



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The success of the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge (IBC) has vast implications for nonprofit fund raising. The viral spread of the event, the diversity of participants, the sums of money raised and the global reach of the program shake the traditional foundations of nonprofit fundraising. The IBC will undoubtedly spawn numerous copycat fund raisers, but nonprofits need to think strategically about the long term ramifications of viral fundraising.

Often times, nonprofits spend thousands of dollars developing databases of donors and cultivating relationships with past and future supporters. The IBC shows that thousands, if not millions, of donors can be created seemingly out of thin air. No one knows how sustainable the IBC is or whether these new donors will continue to support ALS causes in the future. In the new world of generating resources, this concern is not particularly germane. The money raised by the challenge should support and grow operations for the charity for years to come.

How did the IBC succeed? The answer to this question is critical to nonprofit leaders hoping to emulate the success of the IBC. Research has shown that younger generations—those who typically do not make large donations to charities—tend to be more narcissistic than older generations. The chance to virtually demonstrate one’s charitable actions while starring in a video is attractive to this demographic. The IBC allows regular people to interact and emulate the actions of celebrities, political leaders and sports figures while demonstrating personal conviction. Social media contributes to a flat world where everyday citizens can demonstrate their virtuosity in real time—just like Rihanna, Roger Federer, Gwyneth Paltrow or Taylor Swift. Even international online publications show streaming videos of soccer stars like Germany’s Bastian Schweinsteiger and Argentina’s Lionel Messi completing the IBC.

In effect, the IBC leveraged hundreds of millions of dollars of celebrity endorsements and commercials. The project tapped into society’s growing narcissism and allows participants to show the world their generosity. These two factors are keys to the future success of other viral fundraising ventures.

If there is any bad news to the global sensation of the IBC, it's this: many nonprofits are staid and tied to traditional means of fund raising to be as bold as ALS. Yes, all nonprofits have online links for donors, but these are only successful for those who purposely seek out the nonprofit. The IBC created global donors who were largely unaware of the organization and its work. This is incredibly powerful.

Another potential problem with the IBC model is donor fatigue. How many grassroots viral video campaigns can successfully tap into the motivational factors mentioned above to increase charitable donations? We certainly do not know, but the universe of potential campaigns is probably limited.

Finally, the IBC exposes a growing generational rift in nonprofit fund raising. Videos on my Facebook feed and YouTube cover all demographics, but they skew towards younger individuals. Certain organizations and causes might not be well positioned to appeal to Generation X and Millennials. One thing is certain, nonprofit boards and consultants will spend considerable time in the next 6-months trying to figure out ALS's lightning in a bottle.

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