BLOG

Ready For The Holidays?

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The combination of extended staff holidays, increased time off requests, along with a marked increase in volunteering can make the end of the year feel especially volatile. It's also a very popular time for charitable giving, and many nonprofit organizations depend on the generosity of the public to fund their mission into the first quarter of the new year, which means ramping up their outreach efforts.

Many organizations start planning for the holidays six to eight months in advance, as this gives them plenty of time to adjust to the shifts in demand, staff availability, and other sources of uncertainty. Not every mission-driven organization has the resources to plan this far ahead, and it isn't always necessary to do this to survive the holidays, but even a small amount of preparation and planning can smooth out the more stressful elements and help you identify potential risks and opportunities.

If you're an organization which provides essential services or depends on volunteers, planning ahead can help ensure you have the capacity to keep up with demand. Here's some of the best ways to prepare:

Be ready for shifting capacity

Mission-driven organizations are in a unique situation during the holidays. Although every organization will experience some reduction in staff availability as people celebrate the holidays, many nonprofits are also simultaneously inundated with volunteers who are looking to give back. As any organization with volunteers knows, having too many can be just as difficult as having too few, especially when your team is working less hours and many may be taking time off.

Using past holidays as guidance can be very instructive for setting up particular benchmarks and capacity for each day. For example, you may have to turn volunteers away if you have too many, so developing resources to help direct their efforts towards other organizations or causes can help. You might also need to take a close look at what elements of your mission are vital and what can be curtailed, as you may need to temporarily refocus your available team members on the essential tasks at the expense of longer-term work.

A lot of outreach and other typical marketing and awareness efforts can be pre-loaded onto platforms and scheduled to publish even when those team members are out of office, and the same can be done on social media. Encouraging your teams to think about what they can do to frontload this kind of work is critical, particularly if the services or assistance you offer will continue through the holidays.

Don't be afraid to fundraise

The holidays are often used by private sector organizations as a barometer for the state of the market, as the amount of consumer spending can reflect the level of confidence people feel, the amount of disposable income available, and other important considerations. Holidays are also a time of increased generosity, with 62% of Americans making a donation to a cause they are passionate about. This makes it both a critical period for fundraising as well as a challenging one, as the reduced capacity means that outreach and fundraising efforts will need to be scaled back somewhat.

How much you expect to fundraise will depend on the nature of your mission and organization, as those which provide essential services may be hard-pressed to keep them going and simultaneously fundraise during a period of reduced capacity. However, an ambitious fundraising effort can also mean starting the new year in a much more stable financial position, which is worth considering when you assess which parts of your organization's work are considered vital to keep going over the holidays.

The holidays are seen as a chance for reflection and an opportunity to look forward to the coming year. Crafting stories around these themes can help you describe the benefits that past fundraising had and how it helped your mission, and to point to future goals and how your mission might change and grow in the coming year. This kind of messaging is also important in a time of economic turmoil and polarization, as nonprofits are seen as some of the most trustworthy organizations in the country. These stories help reward this trust with accountability and information about where and how donations were spent and who they helped.

Support your team

The holiday season can be a source of both joy and stress, and this is as true at work as it is at home. It isn't hard to see how sudden shifts in labor capacity and priorities could lead to a potentially challenging work environment for your team members, or even yourself. It's a well-documented fact that the holidays can add stress to people's lives, and setting some ambitious goals or not doing enough to support your team could lead to burnout or other issues that may not be worth whatever short-term benefits come from these efforts.

Mission-driven organizations have potential to help with these sorts of issues if their team feels supported and prepared for the demands of the holiday season. Most nonprofit workers are in their field because they feel personally invested in the mission, and doing work that benefits that mission can make even stressful work feel rewarding. However, as any longtime nonprofit worker can tell you, it's a fine line between going the extra mile and getting burnt out.

Planning and being transparent about your organization's goals can be a good way to open discussions about capacity and what your team can expect during the holidays. You can also affirm your willingness to listen to and support anyone that feels overworked or is dealing with an inordinate amount of stress. Sometimes, just knowing they are supported is enough for people to deal with these periods of heightened change.

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