



How Technology Will Shape the Nonprofit Sector in 2019

Meet the Authors



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GENERAL MANAGER, DIGITAL

Mike is a seasoned political technologist, having previously worked in the Obama Administration, where he led the award-winning relaunch of Treasury.gov. Mike also served as Director of Online Communications for the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee (DSCC) in the 2006 and 2008 cycles and as the Director of Online Communications for the 2004 Democratic National Convention. He got his start working on state legislative campaigns in the great state of Texas and has worked on campaigns at the congressional, statewide and presidential level. Mike is a proud University of Texas Longhorn.



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GENERAL MANAGER, ORGANIZING

Amanda is the General Manager of Organizing at NGP VAN. Previously, she spent five years in our Product department, working with national and international clients to improve and develop new features that help campaigns and organizations maximize NGP VAN's organizing tools to win in the field. Amanda believes strongly in marrying new technology with traditional organizing best practices to achieve efficient, grassroots-driven field campaigns. She has also spent more than a decade working in field and get out the vote (GOTV) operations on local, state, and national campaigns. Most recently she served as the Statewide GOTV Director for both Senator Elizabeth Warren and Senator Ed Markey in her home state of Massachusetts.

How Technology Will Shape the Nonprofit Sector in 2019

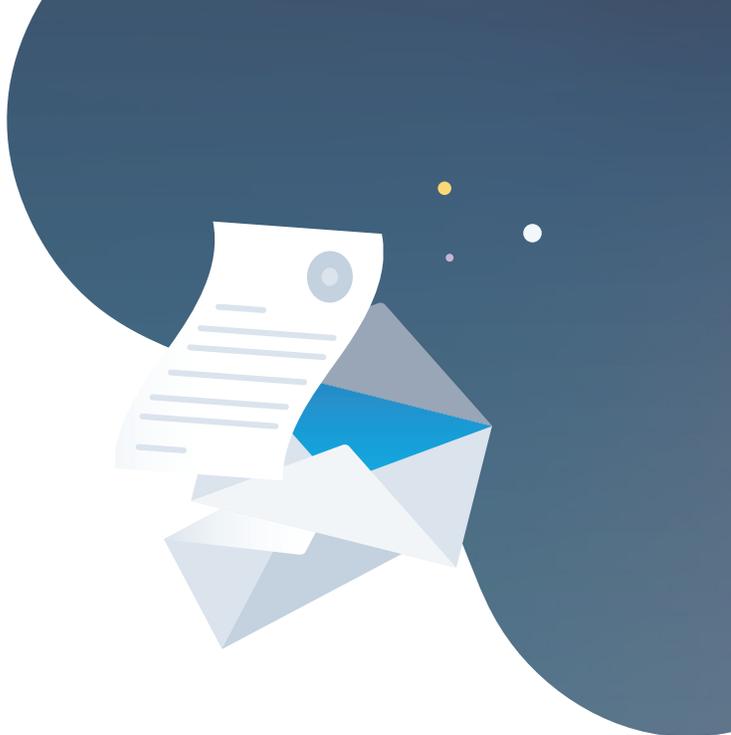
Introduction

2018 was a landmark year for many nonprofits. In the face of political uncertainty, individuals and communities turned to the causes and organizations close to their hearts to unite them. Organizations with diverse missions, from protecting the environment, to providing education and healthcare, to promoting the arts, served as an anchor to many Americans looking to invest their time and talents in the things they care about.

In conjunction with this phenomenon, 2018 saw a sweeping spirit of innovation and evolution in the nonprofit world, with more and more strategists willing to experiment and test new, creative techniques for engaging donors and volunteers than ever before.

- Technological advances also played a major role in shaping 2018's nonprofit landscape. New developments in the sphere opened more possibilities for text message-based organizing and fundraising, peer-to-peer communication, mobile optimized web pages and forms, and more. Technology continues to help bridge the gap between online and offline communication, giving nonprofit staff a more complete and holistic understanding of the lives of their supporters.

In this white paper, we will recap some of the biggest nonprofit technology trends that emerged in 2018, explore how they will continue to impact the market in 2019 as well as predicting other developments on the horizon, and advise nonprofits on the steps that they should be taking early in the year to ensure that they are positioned for success in 2019 and beyond.



2018 in Review

EMAIL

In the digital realm, email continues to dominate the fundraising game. Although tech devotees are constantly on the lookout for the “next big thing” when it comes to digital fundraising, the “death of email” has been greatly exaggerated. However, within the realm of email, 2018 saw an increase in experimentation, with more digital fundraisers and campaigners willing to take risks, test new tactics, and find new ways to push their email programs to the top of the game. Some key trends and takeaways from the world of nonprofit email programs in 2018 are:

- **VOLUME**

When it came to nonprofit email programs in 2018, there was no clear trend in regard to the volume of emails being sent. Rather than coalescing around an agreed upon limit for emails sent, nonprofits across the industry found that this question is still up in the air. The biggest volume-related trend of the year was experimentation—email staff are more willing than ever to try a change in their traditional programs, including drastically expanding or reducing the amount of emails sent. While everyone is searching for the “golden number,” which maximizes fundraising without compromising donors’ happiness or the program’s email deliverability rate, only time will tell if the industry will begin moving in one direction or the other over the course of 2019.

- **MOBILE OPTIMIZATION**

Continuing the path of previous years, 2018’s focus on mobile optimized emails further solidified that content which displays equally well on mobile devices is a requirement, not an option. From the simplest text-based emails to complex gifs and graphics, 2018 further highlighted the move towards mobile.

DIGITAL FUNDRAISING

Through 2018, the share of nonprofit fundraising occupied by online donations continued to expand, and while direct mail may not have been overthrown, it is clear that digital fundraising is steadily becoming a nearly equally important area. For the digital fundraising sphere beyond email, some of the biggest trends that emerged in 2018 include:

- **HIGH QUALITY, ALL THE TIME**

The necessity of high quality donation experiences, both in terms of email and donation forms, was highlighted by the number of nonprofits investing additional time and resources in providing the easiest and most enjoyable donation experience possible. From emails to websites and donation forms, speed and simplicity are a requirement, with customers expecting a seamless experience from start to finish. Professional graphics, videos, and other effects are frequently integrated into emails and donation forms, but can't come at the cost of the lightning-fast loading speed that users expect. Overall, an emphasis on polished products and simple, engaging user experience has dominated 2018.

- **RAPID RESPONSE**

2018's fast-paced and unpredictable political climate, as well as our social media-driven tendency toward "viral" phenomenon meant that more and more nonprofit fundraising and supporter engagement is driven around "moments." When a particular issue, location, or event is catapulted to national news, nonprofits in 2018 found themselves scrambling to take full advantage of the sudden increase in attention, with some organizations finding more success than others.

- **CREATIVE ACQUISITION**

Attracting new donors continues to be competitive process, with more organizations investing in advertising programs beyond the standard methods. Utilizing tools such as Facebook's lookalike algorithms and similar modeling strategies, savvy organizations are using technology to identify and target likely supporters with precision. Providing a streamlined experience is equally important to this process, with results generally best when the message and images on the landing page are in sync with the ad creative displayed to the user initially.

- **DIGITAL STORYTELLING**

Though storytelling itself is not new for nonprofit fundraisers, in 2018, many nonprofits began to develop new and innovative ways of using technology to integrate narrative elements with their online presence. From interactive graphics, videos, and other personalized content, telling compelling stories through digital mediums is a crucial skill for nonprofits to develop in the coming years.





PROGRAMS AND ORGANIZING

Beyond fundraising, 2018 saw more nonprofits leaning into the political space. With the American populace becoming increasingly politically active, organizations poised to harness this energy reaped the benefits. For nonprofits newly participating in this sphere, this meant using tools to help with growth and transition, while long-time advocacy organizations saw an increasing need for technology that empowered individuals at a grassroots level, to keep up with newer, local organizations.

The primary trends observed in the nonprofit organizing and advocacy realm in 2018 include:

- **HOLISTIC VIEW OF SUPPORTERS**

2018 saw nonprofits continuing to integrate their programs across departments, understanding and interacting with their supporters from a 360-degree perspective. With the goal of running truly well-informed multi-channel outreach campaigns, advocacy nonprofits and others utilized more internal collaboration than ever—moving away from siloed Digital,

Development, and Organizing departments and toward holistic, multi-channel campaigns. National organizations such as Planned Parenthood, EveryTown for Gun Safety's March For Our Lives, and For Our Future all integrated digital communication with offline organizing and fundraising and saw successful campaigns that engaged supporters in more effective ways.

- **SMARTPHONE FRIENDLY**

The trend toward mobile-responsiveness didn't stop at emails and donation forms in 2018 – this midterm election year saw significant increases in the number of people using mobile devices for face-to-face voter outreach. MiniVAN app usage across both political campaigns and advocacy nonprofits rose from 42% in 2016 to 71% of all canvassing contacts. Developments in mobile organizing technology meant that nonprofit organizers utilized advanced features such as script branching and embedded videos to personalize the message that they delivered.

- **MORE CHANNEL OPTIONS**

Since 2016, more and more niche communication channel options have been developed, giving nonprofits a wide variety of services and providers to choose from. The biggest focus areas for these new channels have been offering

integrated and automated tools to support relational organizing, primarily peer-to-peer communications (including through social media) and text messaging services.

Looking Ahead: What to Expect in 2019

Moving into 2019, nonprofit professionals can expect many of these trends to continue increasing in importance.

Successful digital programs will increasingly rely on an omnichannel approach, meaning that messaging and branding should not only be consistent across email, websites and forms, and social media, but also work in conjunction with direct mail, telephone, and other types of offline contact. In 2019, nonprofits will continue to see the convergence of online and offline communication—no longer operating as separate entities, but coordinated and timed to work together towards the same things. The integration between organizing and digital tools will continue to deepen as well—making it even more important that nonprofits structure their staff and campaigns in ways that take this convergence into account. Donors increasingly expect to be involved in offline events and volunteer opportunities, and organizations are finding that such engagement can help deepen and enrich the fundraising relationship as well. Volunteer management tools will gain importance in this shift, as the volunteer experience becomes part of the donor journey.

Improving donors' digital experience won't wane in importance—streamlining donation experiences and eliminating barriers and deterrents is a necessity as the space becomes more crowded. Acquisition will also become a more creative endeavor, as nonprofits compete for attention in the digital world, the modes of telling your story have expanded and more organizations are experimenting with social media such as Instagram and other mediums to attract new supporters.

In 2018, political campaigns leaned heavily into distributed, grassroots methods for spreading their message, particularly text-message based communication and peer-to-peer organizing and fundraising. New tools such as distributed canvassing (which allowed campaign supporters anywhere to access the data and information to canvass their neighborhoods) and supporter generated events also changed the game, giving volunteers more and more ability to act independently and saving organizers precious time and effort. In 2019 we expect nonprofits to begin occupying this space as well, exploring the ways that these tools can be used for not only organizing, but for fundraising, volunteer recruitment and more.

While keeping an eye out for new developments that could change the game in 2019, one of the biggest technology areas to watch is voice commands. Voice-based tools like Alexa or Google Home are quickly growing in popularity and already changing the landscape for things like search-based marketing and could also soon begin to be used for fundraising, or even internal processes such as data entry. Time will tell how big the impact on the nonprofit sector will be, but tech-savvy nonprofits should keep their eyes on this technology this year.

Technology Tips for Staying at the Top of the Game in 2019

With coming changes, how can nonprofits make sure to start 2019 strong and prepared for the future? No matter how large or small your organization is, these key steps can be taken to ensure that you're not falling behind the technology curve this year.

EMAIL

• AUTOMATE

Welcome series are only the beginning.

Segmenting and targeting your list, in order to identify events or donor behaviors that can trigger an automated email program is a necessity for successful nonprofit email programs; with inboxes only getting more crowded, supporters expect personalized content that is tailored

toward their interests and type of involvement.

Evaluate your email program at the beginning of the year, to see where you can segment your list and create email series that will automatically deliver content tailored to their interests and needs.

• EXPERIMENT AND TEST

In the same vein, in order to deliver the most engaging and persuasive messages to donors and activists, it is especially important to experiment and test whenever possible. Moving beyond just A/B testing, organizations need to develop a culture of testing that permeates everything they do.

• WATCH YOUR DELIVERABILITY

Bad deliverability can kill even the best designed and messaged email program, and recent trends show an uphill battle for nonprofits. Plan to keep an eye on your deliverability rates, so that you can take action before it's too late if they start to slip.

• PERFECT THE BASIS

Email fundraising continues to dominate the digital giving sphere, and the most important thing nonprofits can do in 2019 is to make sure that your emails, landing pages, and donation forms are all fine-tuned and built to work together seamlessly and quickly.



DIGITAL FUNDRAISING

- Make your donation forms shine: Donors have nearly unlimited options for online giving, so maximizing your donation page's conversions is critical. To stay competitive in 2019, here are the capabilities it's important that your donation pages are optimized for:
 - *Mobile responsive*
 - *Forms must be pre-filled whenever possible*
 - *One-click donations*
 - *Well thought-through sustainer experience (Plot out how you can upsell one-time donors, through pop-ups and other webpage elements)*
 - *As simple, clear, and easy as possible (quick-loading, with no roadblocks that will deter first-time donors)*
 - *Beautiful images and design*
 - *Clearly explained value proposition and communicated urgency*

● PLAN FOR RAPID RESPONSE MOMENTS

In the age of viral social media, it's becoming more and more common for an issue or organization to be catapulted to the front page of national news overnight, increasing the importance of nonprofit staff being able to respond quickly and harness media attention and grassroots support. It's not always possible to be completely prepared for a big moment, but it's extremely helpful to think through possible scenarios beforehand, so that you'll know where to start if the need arises.

- *When walking through different possible scenarios, think about what you would want to quickly have ready to go in case of a viral moment, such as a press statement, a donation page, a way to capture email addresses, perhaps a unique welcome email. What can you prepare ahead of time, or speed up the process for so that it can be accomplished quickly?*
- *Consider your approval processes for these things, and how it can be expedited if necessary. The last thing you want is to be held up waiting on the board while your big moment is happening*

● SET ASIDE A LITTLE TIME TO EXPERIMENT WITH NEW THINGS

The key here is "a little." Don't neglect to experiment and innovate with your programs, but take care not to get sidetracked figuring out how to dominate the world of voice-command fundraising and neglect your staple programs. Roughly 90% of your time should be spent making sure that your organization is doing the basics at a high level, with a little time carved out for trying some new tactics.



PROGRAMS AND ORGANIZING

- **CONSIDER YOUR DATA AND STAFF STRUCTURE**

Invest some time and effort during the beginning of the year in thinking through organizational structure. Ask yourself and your team, do all departments have access to best-in-class digital tools? Are you planning campaigns in a way that the messaging you're pushing out can run throughout all of the outreach that all of those departments are doing? What changes can be made so that information flows through all departments, both internally and externally?

- **GO MOBILE**

While all of the tried and true organizing tactics and strategies should still be utilized in 2019, organizations should take advantage of new tools in the space that allow for making those tactics automated and mobile. For instance, instead of using paper sign-up sheets for tabling or doing registration at an event—use a mobile app on a tablet or phone. New tools allow for a smoother user experience and cut down the need for tedious data entry in many areas.

- **GET A 360-VIEW OF YOUR SUPPORTERS**

People are getting more asks than ever, so consistency in your branding and messaging is important, as is making sure that you're asking them to participate in activities likely to appeal to them. Have the data to understand the breadth of what they're doing for your organization so that your asks can be tailored and effective.

- **SET UP AND DISTRIBUTE PROGRAMS**

It can be a big shift for an organization to go from staff-focused top-down programs to volunteer-led distributed programs, and fully orienting toward this process takes time. Be intentional about it but don't be afraid of it. The key is to empower activists and supporters to work on their own by giving them the tools they need, while also getting the accountability and peace of mind you need through quick and easy reporting.





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