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5 Real Challenges For Non-Profit Texting Campaigns

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[Geoff Livingston](#) co-founded [Zoetica](#) to focus on cause-related work, and released an award-winning book on new media [Now is Gone](#) in 2007.

[The Haiti crisis](#) brought to light the powerful fundraising possibilities that texting can offer to causes. But while the Red Cross did a fantastic job fundraising, not every non-profit will experience such phenomenal success.



Close examination of texting-based fundraising reveals a wide variety of barriers for 501c3s, including the use of mandatory foundations and ASPs (application service providers) to interact with carriers, a stringent vetting process to become accepted, limited donation amounts of \$5-\$10, limited short codes, and shared costs with partners (in some cases, the wireless carriers). Even after setting up text-based fundraising mechanisms, non-profits face the challenge of limited function integration, and appealing to donors.

"The key is a campaign's ability to raise awareness," said Steve Largent, president and CEO, [CTIA-The Wireless Association](#). "Alicia Keys appeared on American Idol and urged viewers to donate to Keep a Child Alive, and raised about \$500K. When then-candidate Obama urged his constituents to donate to the Red Cross Disaster Relief fund as Hurricane Gustav approached New Orleans in September 2008, the Red Cross realized \$250,000 in donations. Similar campaigns around the Southern California wildfires a year earlier, however, did not fare nearly as well."

Given the many aspects of texting, from technology to communications, non-profits need to consider SMS with their eyes wide open. Causes may even want to consider alternative mobile channels for communications and fundraising.

Here are five things non-profits should consider before pursuing texting.

1. Texting Costs Non-Profits Money



Cellphones Save Lives in Haiti

Text "Haiti" to 90999 and a \$10 donation will be added to your phone bill.

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While all of the carriers and their non-profit texting partners waived fees for Haiti relief, most causes shouldn't expect such treatment. Non-profits have to pay set up fees with wireless partners like [mGive](#) and the [Mobile Giving Foundation](#), which can range [from \\$3,000-\\$10,000 in some cases](#).

There are additional costs for short codes. If a non-profit elects to use a shared code, it can reduce costs. Having a unique short code can be beneficial for branding, such as the Red Cross's 90999 code, but these are more costly.

"Creating a unique shortcode can take several weeks and is the most expensive option," said [FrogLoop's Allyson Kapin](#). "However, it does give non-profits the opportunity to brand themselves around a code as well as launch different types of fundraising appeals and action alerts."

"The non-profit ends up paying roughly 5-10% of the amount raised back to the Foundation and the ASPs for the short code, reporting and messaging costs associated with campaigns," said Kristin Ivie, a [Social Citizens blogger](#). "Just like there are costs for online giving services and direct mail campaigns, text campaigns require some level of effort and funds to run."

2. Non-profits Must Work with a Third Party

It's not as simple as calling one of America's big four carriers and setting up a short code. The wireless industry has set up approved third party vendors to vet non-profits. These third party players have stringent requirements to ensure causes meet state charitable solicitation registration requirements.

"These organizations are instrumental in vetting the charities and non-profits that want to participate in mobile giving campaigns; managing the setup of the actual short codes the charities use for their initiatives; helping the charities market their mobile giving programs to potential donors; and ultimately reducing the costs associated with implementing these programs," said [Sprint Spokesperson Crystal Davis](#).

But there are additional requirements including a \$500,000 minimum of revenues, effectively locking out small non-profits. "Carriers set strict standards for the Foundation to follow with vetting and approving non-profits," said Tony Aiello, CEO of [mGive](#). "Some requirements include 990 tax returns, Letter of Determination, certificate of good standing, bylaws, and in some cases audited financial statements."

3. Limited Capabilities



Texting offers limited capability. Donations are capped at \$10, much less than the average online donation. For example, [Network for Good reported an average donation of \\$92 in 2009](#).

Texting requires an event, such as a celebrity request, a concert, or unfortunately, a catastrophe to compel people to donate en masse. Repeated solicitations in general communications can repel potential donors. Further, other limitations include the ability to interact with texters and garner their contact information.

"The big challenge for non-profits is that they don't get the donor info from the cell companies — the non-profit just gets a check from their text donation provider 30 to 90 days after folks make the donations," said [Lucy Bernholtz](#), principal

author of the [Disrupting Philanthropy: Technology and the Future Social Sector report](#). "This is problematic; as knowing who the donors are and being able to keep in touch with them is as important as the donation. Ironically, many donors will love text donations because they keep the donor's information anonymous."

4. Integrating Texting Into the Larger Mix



There's a lot of excitement about texting as a fundraising mechanism, but it offers more than that. Texting campaigns have been used for all sorts of non-profit activity, including notifying interested Democrats about then candidate [Barack Obama's choice of Senator Joe Biden as Vice President](#).

If discouraged by fundraising options, non-profits can use text messages for other opportunities. While mobile applications are sexy, [SMS marketing offers communications benefits, too](#). Non-profits can push URLs, facts and opportunities to parties who opt in to such lists. The sky (or organizational creativity) is the limit.

"Instead of just focusing on fundraising via mobile, engage members with other meaningful opportunities such as volunteering locally, text breaking news related to your campaigns, launch a poll, etc," said Allyson Kapin. "Because it's text messaging, you can actually engage in some back and fourth conversations rather than just pushing out alerts or appeals and having one-way conversations."

5. Other Options Exist



There are more options than just texting for mobile. The great news about the mobile Internet  revolution is [the certain rise of non-profit applications on the iPhone, Android !\[\]\(66b14d8ba452f6f18b47935355b6120a_img.jpg\)](#), and other platforms. If a non-profit wants to look at creating a mobile opportunity, general applications such as social good based [The Extraordinaries](#) offer powerful choices.

Further, the cost of [making an application](#) has dropped dramatically, with iPhone (and soon Android apps) accessible to any organization for just hundreds of dollars. While these early low-cost applications are RSS

based platforms, increased functionality is coming quickly for non-profits.

"What's been successful for us is opening up the mobile content distribution capability," said Daniel Odio, president of PointAbout, creator of [the AppMakr service](#). "By the end of March, there will be notifications for activism such as rallies or fundraising web pages. The notification pops up as an alert, and the user logs in. It's that simple."

From a fundraising standpoint, some of the same barriers exist for vetting charities. Apple bars organizations from fundraising with apps because they can't verify the authenticity of the organization. Yet it seems like it's only a matter of time before an online solution like [Facebook Causes](#) or [Ammado](#) offers a mobile option for donations.

"The convergence of the mobile handset and the traditional desktop computer is taking place right now so many new solutions are on the horizon," said mGive's Tony Aiello.

More social good resources from Mashable:

- [Why We're In the Age of the Citizen Philanthropist](#)
- [How Social Media Creates Offline Social Good](#)
- [How Non-Profits and Activists Can Leverage Location Based Services](#)
- [Why Social Media Is Vital to Corporate Social Responsibility](#)
- [5 Essential Tips for Promoting Your Charity Using Social Media](#)
- [20 Ways to Change the World in Only 15 Minutes a Day](#)

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