



# Building and Maintaining Campaign Momentum During Challenging Economic Conditions

by Dennis Prescott and Shawn Vogen

*A fundraising campaign offers organizations the opportunity to showcase the mission and impact, outline the vision for the future, and invite stakeholders to invest in its future success. Times of economic uncertainty can upend the plans, timeline, goals, and case for support and lead to a change in long-term expectations and planning. Organizations currently in an active campaign or planning to launch a campaign can feel particularly vulnerable to achieving the ambitious goals. How our advancement offices pivot to these changing circumstances will impact how our organizations respond to the current situation and use the campaign to accelerate the strategic plans.*

While each situation is unique, a reflection on previous economic disruptions can inform the current approaches and efforts to plan, launch, or sustain a campaign. The current turmoil in the stock market is unprecedented and, as the pandemic reaches its plateau, we are not sure about the length of the economic instability and the time for recovery. As a result, the financial impact on our higher education institutions<sup>1</sup> and healthcare organizations<sup>2</sup> will be enormous and is still unfolding. If past is prologue, we do know that our donors and friends will be there to support our organizations when we have more clarity.

Giving USA Growth Rate compared to S&P500 Index



In previous episodes, the economy regains its momentum—in some cases surprisingly quickly. Philanthropy is also remarkably resilient (see chart 1 above). Those organizations that stayed focused on philanthropy saw the biggest returns on their investment. BWF learned that the institutions that maintained the investment in their advancement offices—from frontline fundraisers to donor relations and engagement to prospect management and research—were well positioned for success when the economy recovered. Donors remain generous and are willing to step into the gap to fill critical needs and support the mission. The needs remain and continue to grow during these unsettling times since our world needs its great organizations even more.

As we navigate the changing economic landscape, the following offers guidance, considerations, and recommendations for each phase of campaign planning and implementation.

## Campaign Planning Phase

For organizations contemplating a campaign or having completed a feasibility study, now may be the time to double down on your planning. When a time of economic uncertainty hits, this may be a good time to step back and evaluate the timeline and next steps. While your needs remain or have multiplied, the launch for your campaign may be delayed.

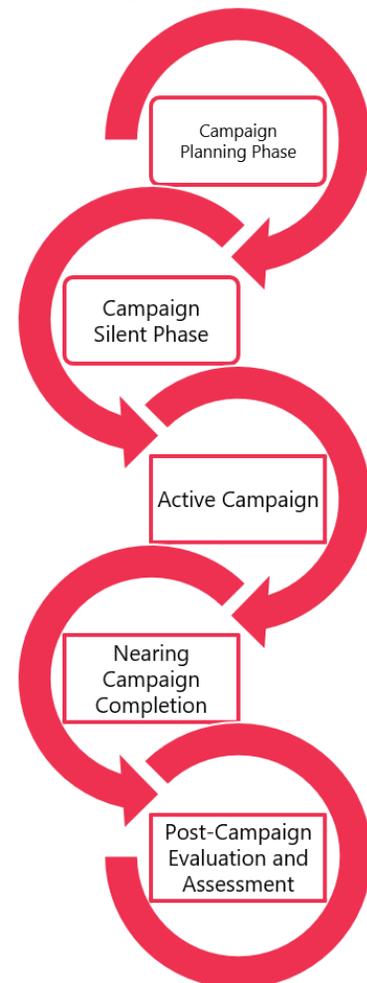
### *If in the initial planning stage:*

- Don't stop the planning. You want to be prepared as soon as the economy makes a positive shift.
- Review prospect strategies. Determine outreach efforts to engage top prospects.
- Elevate stewardship for current top donors to further illustrate impact of past giving.
- Develop concepts and priorities for the case for support.

### *If the feasibility study is completed, but not yet formally in the silent phase:*

- Take what you learned from the feasibility study and strengthen your operation such as frontline fundraiser trainings, stewardship and outreach, communications, prospect research or management, etc.
- Adopt a modest working goal while remaining focused on the aspirational goal.
- Use this time for "spring cleaning." Clean up those portfolios and the database. Review prospect strategies and update next steps.

## Campaign Status



- Review the case to confirm top priorities and make adjustments in the wake of the current situation.
- Review outreach and engagement plans. From annual giving pipeline development outreach to current major, principal, and planned gift donor stewardship, the pause gives the opportunities to build additional connections and learn more about the donor's passions and intent.

## Campaign Silent Phase

In the silent phase of a campaign, the goal is to build the momentum and secure the vast majority of your goal. BWF ordinarily recommends a minimum of 60 percent attainment before the public announcement. It may be prudent to be even more conservative during this time. The step back in the economy may have our organizations delay those key solicitations or slow final commitments by the donors. While you may have a public launch tentatively planned, this is not a time to panic. As noted from past economic downturns, staying focused on mission and engaging new and existing donors will weather the storm. It is not a time to pivot, but it does give the opportunity to reassess priorities, stewardship effort and outreach. These times may require a delay to launch the campaign to give time to secure commitments or build pipeline.

*If your organization plans a public launch in the next eight to ten months:*

- Stay focused. Advancement teams need thoughtful leadership and a steady hand on the tiller. Keep employees paid and contributing to the success. Organizations that maintain or grow staff are better positioned when the economy recovers.

- Review current solicitation strategies to update the pipeline and timing for any anticipated solicitations.
- Consider delaying the campaign launch. You want to be sure that you are launching at a time when donors are ready to celebrate. If they have lost money or been impacted by the pandemic, they may not be ready. You do not want to offend by moving too fast.
- Reevaluate priorities. Asking if the current priorities will resonate when we emerge from the pandemic will be worth exploring.
- Focus on the long-term while addressing the acute needs. Providing an opportunity for support in the short-term to help with the pandemic response may engage current donors to fill the immediate need AND set up for a larger commitment in the long-term.
- Build a case for how your institution responded to the pandemic. Share your stories and engage.
- Evaluate if this is the time to reallocate spending from endowment to support the primary mission.
- Use your board and volunteers to get the pulse on the philanthropic community and local sensitivities.

*If your organization is planning a public launch in January 2021 or later,* stay on course with the original launch plans. The same guidance as listed above applies. Remain focused on your vision and update the outreach, engagement,

and solicitation strategies to reflect the impact of COVID-19 and the economic turmoil. Evaluate on a monthly or quarterly basis and continue to secure campaign support to attain more than 60% of your goal. The eventual public launch may look very different than you originally planned to include a reflection on the impact of the pandemic and a muted tone. With good planning and adjustments, the launch will still offer a time to celebrate the generosity of your constituents the vision for the future.

## Active Campaign

For those organizations already in a campaign and past the public launch, no one will blame you for feeling fortunate. Your organization remains as relevant or even more relevant than before the economic uncertainty. As you look to continue your momentum:

- Be deliberate and thoughtful as to how and when you will announce additional campaign gifts, especially if your organization laid-off or furloughed staff.
- Remain hyper-focused on outstanding solicitations, sensitive to the issues your donors might be facing. Consider adjusting payment schedules or explore bequest intentions to help the donor achieve their philanthropic goals.
- Be sensitive to the timing of new solicitations.
- Remember that not every donor is invested in the stock market, and some sectors of the economy will continue to thrive.
- Ensure that staff are continuing to engage with donors and prospective donors.
- Be aware that your organization's CEO is under intense pressure during the current crises and be prepared to provide additional support and strategy.

## Nearing Campaign Completion: Preparing to Celebrate

If your organization is either nearing attainment of your campaign goal or has already passed it:

- Remain sensitive to the optics and appropriateness of celebration. Similar to institutions planning for the public launch, consider delaying the celebration event by a few months.
- Give extra thanks to those donors who have made this success possible.
- Thank your hard-working staff.
- Prepare for the post-campaign period.

## Post Campaign Evaluation and Assessment

The period between campaigns is a good time to assess what went well and areas for improvement before you undertake the next effort. Conducting a post-campaign assessment including a review of key campaign documents and milestones in conjunction with interviews of volunteer leaders, development leadership, and organizational leadership will provide the honest feedback to identify additional areas of growth. In addition, an in-depth analysis of your database should be conducted in order to assess how involved your most promising prospects were in your campaign and identify where dollars may have been left on the table. Together, the information will be essential to building a framework for a robust plan for future success.

### Summary

Campaigns will continue to remain the biggest needle-mover for nearly any organization. Recent events have introduced a completely new set of planning considerations. Your specific campaign strategy is highly dependent upon where your organization lies on the planning and execution continuum. Over time, philanthropy is resilient. Thoughtful and deliberate adjustments to the strategy, timeline, and planning will position your organization for fundraising success and to emerge even stronger and prepared to make a greater impact. ■

### About BWF

*BWF is an international fundraising consulting and services company headquartered in North America. As both experts in complex philanthropy and the leading innovator in the field, we bring both a global perspective and local know-how, providing deep cross-sector strategic and tactical solutions to advance our clients fundraising abilities. It's why clients turn to us as their trusted partner, expanding their knowledge and abilities through our panoramic view of philanthropy. Not only do we stimulate the industry through thought leadership, but we are an incubator of multidisciplinary "next practices," always testing new ideas and exploring innovative ways of doing things. To learn more visit [bwf.com](http://bwf.com) or email at [info@bwf.com](mailto:info@bwf.com).*

<sup>1</sup>*The Chronicle of Higher Education: Under COVID-19, University Budgets Like We've Never Seen Before, April 2020.*

<sup>2</sup>*HealthcareFinance: In worst-case scenario, COVID-19 coronavirus could cost the U.S. billions in medical expenses. April 2020.*

### Authors

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