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When Juggernauts Collide: Email Marketing Meets Video Marketing

Tyler Willis, Apr 07, 2009 02:15 PM

In the face of a tough economic climate, Stanford University's Scott Jahnke started exploring ways to increase donations from alumni. Jahnke is the Director of Student and Young Alumni Development, putting him in charge of generating donations from Stanford's recent graduates -- one of the harder demographics to reach. (Full disclosure: Stanford has been a client of my company.)

Historically, the university had sent fundraising letters and asked for contributions through phone calls. As expected, every year it has been getting more difficult to reach young alumni by snail mail or phone. So, moving to email marketing was an early opportunity to address costs and increase ROI. Recent grads are far more likely to give a valid email address than a number (93% of the captive population vs. 38%), meaning that email marketing gives Stanford a better and more widespread ability to connect.

At the very outset, Jahnke knew that it was crucial to optimize the presentation format of his department's fundraising messages. In his mind, "video-plus-email" seemed to be the most engaging delivery mechanism for his campaigns. In a recent blog post, Scott wrote: "Technology gives us the ability to do so much more than just text. How then, can we most effectively tell our story to thousands of people and inspire them to give? I believe that a combination of using email AND video to answer our three questions (why are we asking you for a gift, what is going to change if you give, and how will our organization make that change happen) is the so-called 'secret sauce.'"

Scott certainly isn't alone in his view. The Obama presidential campaign, for instance, also heavily employed the combination of email and video marketing in the final weeks running up to the election. Obama for America used targeted and highly personalized emails to drive people to landing pages with compelling videos and video calls-to-action. This technique worked because Obama campaign strategists knew that we live in a world of overflowing inboxes and short-attention spans, where plain text just doesn't have the same impact as well-made, short-form video.

At Stanford, the Young Alumni office produced several inspiring videos of students who had directly benefited from alumni contributions and attached a clear call-to-action to the end of each video, delivered via a Flash overlay that asked viewers to donate.

Calling out these videos, and providing a direct link to them in four out of five emails sent during Stanford's fall campaign, helped increase gifts by 23% over the previous year's fall campaign. This increase during a period of economic decline sold Scott on the power of using video marketing in tandem with Young Alumni's emails. And he knows that this is just the tip of the iceberg. Here's the final word from Scott's recent blog post: "By tracking metrics, we can continuously improve our messaging and how many people are making gifts after viewing our videos; A/B testing of multiple variables allows me to try slight variations in content to hone in on what works best. Ultimately, we're still learning, and my hope is that our future campaigns will be even more successful."

If the combination of email and video marketing can put a president in the White House, and bring change to the practices of one of the most respected universities in the United States, what could it do for your organization?

You can view Stanford's Young Alumni campaign videos by visiting <http://youngalumni.stanford.edu>