



SAF board and staff receiving \$100,000 grant from the Blue Cross Blue Shield of NC Foundation in celebration of its 10th anniversary. Photo Credit: BCBSNC Foundation

“Soy Safista”

Turning Community Ownership into Community Dollars

By Heather Yandow & Meredith Emmett

STUDENT ACTION WITH FARMWORKERS (SAF) has a saying: Soy Safista. Everyone is SAF, and everyone can tell the story of SAF. That ethos is at the core of the organization’s successful volunteer fundraising campaign where SAF alumni and Board members share their SAF stories and ask friends and family to support the organization.

SAF developed this campaign after taking a closer look at their fundraising strategies. The organization was in a situation in which many nonprofits find themselves—their fundraising program was doing okay, but not flourishing. The organization had dozens of different fundraising activities spreading themselves thin in their efforts to raise money. SAF needed to streamline their strategies and grow their revenue. So they turned to us at Third Space Studio. Third Space Studio partners with nonprofits around the country to help them become more focused and strategic.

We worked with SAF board and staff to determine the organization’s strengths, analyze their current fundraising strategies, and identify which strategies should be abandoned. After letting

go of labor-intensive events and a few other low-performing strategies, the organization began to think about new strategies that would build on their strengths and efficiently raise money for their work.

Over their 20-year history, SAF has chosen to focus on individual donor contributions to ensure they have ample unrestricted funds to work with undocumented students, engage in advocacy, and organize students to improve conditions for farmworkers. As Melinda Wiggins, Executive Director of SAF says, “We don’t want to be limited as to what we do, who we do it with, and how we do it.”

Given SAF’s focus on individual donors, a large base of alumni, and its “Soy Safista” mantra, a volunteer-driven campaign was a natural fit. Through the campaign, SAF wanted to build relationships with donors who care about the work of the organization as well as work toward its mission by developing the leadership skills of young people and Latinos, two key groups of volunteer fundraisers.

This campaign has been successful for some of the same

reasons SAF began the campaign: a large base of alumni willing to volunteer to fundraise, and the ability of everyone involved to tell good stories about the organization. The campaign also succeeded because of SAF's strong fundraising culture, in which fundraising is an integral part of programmatic work. All program participants—interns, fellows, youth, and student organizers—fundraise as part of their leadership training. SAF also has an evolution mindset, meaning that each year SAF evaluates and changes the campaign, tweaking big and little things about how it worked. As a result, SAF has continually raised more money and found more donors.

The Campaign

SAF's campaign is a short, volunteer-based online fundraising campaign that happens once a year.

- **Short:** The campaign period, including training and online fundraising is only two months. Volunteer fundraisers pick a two-day to one-week period to complete their campaign.
- **Volunteer-based:** 15 to 20 SAF alumni and board members participate, and staff support their work.
- **Online:** SAF uses an online platform that accepts donations and tracks fundraising progress (see more about technology options below).

After several campaigns, SAF has developed a timeline for preparing and carrying out its online fundraising campaign:

- **Two months before the campaign,** SAF focuses on recruiting volunteer fundraisers through both broad appeals and targeted conversations. They also review and update existing materials and create any new materials they will need to train their volunteers, carry out the campaign, and thank donors.
- **One month before the campaign,** SAF confirms their volunteer fundraisers, sets up a date for a group training, and shares materials about the campaign with fundraisers.
- **Two weeks before the campaign,** SAF hosts an in-person training (with online options for those far away) for volunteers that covers the basics of the technology and fundraising skills needed for the campaign. Volunteers are encouraged to set up their online fundraising websites during this training. SAF staff also follow up with those unable to attend the training to provide personalized support.
- **During the campaign,** SAF spends a significant amount of time coordinating the campaign. This includes sending weekly updates to volunteer fundraisers with donation

totals, tips, and success stories. Staff also personally contact each volunteer fundraiser before their individual fundraising period begins. In addition, they work to fix technology glitches and process all donations coming into the organization. This can be a huge task; SAF had as many as 100 gifts come in during a four-day period at the end of 2011.

- **After the campaign,** SAF sends out the final campaign results and asks for feedback on successful strategies and suggested improvements.

The goal of this campaign is not only to increase individual donor funding for the organization, but also to increase the number of people who know about and support the organization. By asking volunteer fundraisers to reach out to their communities, SAF is broadening its reach and increasing the number of people who know about its work and join its mailing list.

The Technology

SAF uses an online database and fundraising tool called NEON by Z2 Systems. Although there were some bumps in getting the database up and running, SAF staff have found this fundraising tool indispensable in their work. In particular, NEON has a feature where volunteers can create personalized fundraising pages that include their stories and fundraising goals. The donations made on these pages are logged directly into SAF's database, making donor tracking extremely simple.

Volunteer fundraisers found the system relatively easy to use once SAF staff trained them. In particular, the ability to create professional looking pages and track their fundraising progress online enabled volunteers to run successful campaigns.

Several other comparable online systems exist that allow organizations to do what is often called peer-to-peer or social fundraising. These tools include:

- CauseVox: causevox.com
- Chip In: chipin.com
- Razoo: razoo.com
- FirstGiving: firstgiving.com

For more information, tips, and suggestions, check out Idealware's article on tools for "friend-to-friend" fundraising: idealware.org/FGTOnlineDistributedFundraising.php.

The Success

SAF has now completed its online fundraising campaign three times, raising more money and finding more new donors each year. In its 2011 campaign, SAF raised \$23,965 through online volunteer fundraising, a 75 percent increase over the

course of three campaigns.

What has caused this growth? While the number of volunteer fundraisers and average gift amount has stayed steady, the volunteer fundraisers have become more effective. The average volunteer fundraiser raised \$1,331 in the 2011 campaign, up 64 percent from the first year. The number of donors secured by each volunteer fundraiser has also grown significantly. In 2011, each volunteer collected gifts from an average of 21 donors, up from 15 in the first year.

“I’m amazed at what our volunteers have been able to accomplish,” says Melinda Wiggins. “Three years ago, an online volunteer-driven fundraising campaign was just an idea. Now, we’ve got a sustainable annual fundraising campaign that brings in significant revenue and supports our mission.”

SAF made a conscious decision to find more effective fundraisers. In particular, they look for people who:

- are close to the organization—mostly alumni and board members;
- have strong connections in their own communities;
- are active online, mainly on Facebook; and
- are comfortable with online technology such as email and donating online.

These four factors make for an ideal online fundraiser who can tell compelling stories about the organization and get those stories out to their community, through online social networks and otherwise. SAF also looked to create a pool of fundraisers with geographic diversity to minimize competition for donors.

Tips for Volunteer Fundraisers

As mentioned above, the online campaign has grown over the years due to volunteer fundraisers becoming more and more effective. If this is a strategy your organization wants to try, here are some tips for your volunteers:

- **Set a stretch goal for yourself.** Set a realistic, yet aspirational goal for your campaign. This goal will help focus your efforts and motivate potential donors. Be sure to mention your goal—and how much you have left to raise—in your online and personal appeals for support.
- **Make your own significant gift.** It’s hard to ask other people for gifts if you have not given. Be the first person to make a gift to your campaign.
- **Create your story.** Donors will be motivated by the story of why you care about the organization’s work. Wiggins says this story can often be found through three questions: 1) What is your first memory of the organization? 2) What is your connection with the mission? 3) What difference has the work of the

organization made in your life? SAF alumnae Michelle Lozano Villegas stated, “I was really nervous about fundraising at the beginning, but I got really excited remembering the work I did with SAF. I know that donors aren’t giving money just for me, but because SAF deserves it!”

- **Get creative about your pool of potential donors.** Think about all of the social connections you have: friends, family, co-workers (current and former), teachers (current and former), mentors, members of your faith community, neighbors, gym buddies, etc. “You never know who is going to give,” said SAF Board member Andrea Kells. “I got a donation from a friend I hadn’t seen since high school and from someone I’d only met once through Facebook.”
- **Do the math on your asks.** Once you have determined your fundraising goal and list of potential donors (or at least groups of donors), you can start to identify the number and size of gifts you need. To raise \$500, you could find five gifts of \$100 or 100 gifts of \$5—whichever is right for you. One great tool for this is the donor pyramid—a simple table of how many gifts you need at each gift level.
- **Communicate regularly with your potential donors.** The most successful volunteer fundraisers posted on Facebook at least once a day and sent at least one email a day to all their potential donors, including those that had already given during the campaign. These emails included updates on progress toward the campaign goal as well as stories about the organization’s work. Because you are keeping the campaign short (under a week), the emails and Facebook posts are unlikely to become overwhelming for your potential donors.
- **Make a personal ask to your potential donors.** The old fundraising adage is still true: people give to people, even online. Email, call, or meet in-person with donors to make a personal ask. Be sure this ask includes the amount you are requesting (as determined by your planning) and a story that is relevant to what you know about the potential donor. You may choose to focus on different aspects of the organization or your work with them depending on the potential donor’s interests or your connection with them. For example, one alumnae of SAF focused on how her internship taught her to be a better nonprofit staffer when she asked former co-workers for donations. “My personal connection to SAF was what motivated my donors. They really wanted to support

something I was working on,” says Lyndsey Beutin.

- **Unrelated rewards generally are not worth it.** Several volunteer fundraisers used rewards unrelated to SAF’s mission, such as a silly prize for the biggest donation or an embarrassing task for the volunteer fundraiser if they reached their goal. These activities usually took a lot of work and didn’t make a big difference in the volunteer’s success. However, rewards that are directly related to the work of the organization can have a significant impact. Board member Irene Godinez talked a lot about food—and the farmworkers that helped to grow it—during her fundraising campaign. The granddaughter of farmers in Mexico, Godinez’s reward was rooted in her personal connection to SAF’s work and was directly related to food. “My best strategy for recruiting donors was to offer a homemade Mexican meal at my mother’s house for the biggest donor,” says Godinez. “Within a couple of hours, I had lots of new donors. The winner and his family came to a huge gathering at my mother’s house and it was wonderful to be able to tell everyone why they were there. My mother loved it and wants to do something else for SAF now. She had never been a donor before.”

Lessons Learned

- **Online fundraising requires a unique set of skills and trainings to develop those skills.** At first, SAF’s volunteer fundraising campaign included both online and offline activities, but they realized after the first year that the two needed different kinds of support. Now, the campaign is solely focused on online fundraising. The training for volunteer fundraisers includes not only how

to use the technology, but more basic training on how to make the ask for support and build relationships with potential donors.

- **Keep the timeline of the campaign short.** In the first year, volunteer fundraisers had campaigns that lasted as long as two months. SAF learned that it was hard to build and sustain excitement over that period—and donations suffered because of it. They also learned that most people gave at the beginning and end of the campaign, no matter how many days the campaign lasted. Now, volunteer fundraisers are encouraged to keep their campaigns to a week or less.
- **Work one-on-one with volunteer fundraisers.** SAF provides training and support for volunteer fundraisers as a large group and then reaches out to volunteers individually to check on their progress and help troubleshoot. It is this one-on-one support that has paid off over the years.
- **Include staff as fundraisers.** Staff can model best practices for volunteer fundraisers, reach out to lapsed organizational donors, or strengthen relationships with current donors. SAF’s executive director participates in each campaign, reaching out to her contacts and to the organization’s donors. “It’s a great way for me to engage our current donors to give more or move to online giving,” says Wiggins. “And I get to work alongside board members and alumni and build my connection with them at the same time.”
- **Track and share what works.** SAF collects feedback from volunteer fundraisers after each year’s campaign. The best fundraising strategies, as well as tips from past volunteer fundraisers, are shared with each new crop of volunteers.

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