

7 Surprising Barriers Preventing People from Supporting Your Nonprofit



Learn the science-backed keys to what keeps most nonprofits in a cycle of poverty — and the simple way to break free.

Includes the #1 mistake hurting 95% of nonprofits.



Wild guess: You didn't get into nonprofit work to spend your life worrying about fundraising, marketing, and budgets. If you're like most leaders we meet, you're doing this work because you want to help others. Champion a worthy cause. Change the world for the better.

Alas, that's impossible without backing from others. Solving big problems takes money and a network of committed supporters. Yet instead of leading a movement, you're likely stuck in a cycle of scarcity, dreading the next board meeting and scrambling for support.

You know the work you do is important. So why do you have to waste so much time and energy trying to help other people understand that, too?

Why is it so hard to get more people to support your cause?

If your marketing and fundraising efforts:

- Feel overwhelming and complicated...
- Fail to help your supporter base grow...
- Rely on the latest social media trend or a sink-hole ad budget...

...you may be accidentally preventing others from joining your cause.

After 20+ years of nonprofit experience and 15 years studying behavioral science, we've identified 7 common mistakes that we see organizations make again and again.

Tired of feeling under-resourced? Read on to learn what's keeping you from attracting an army of supporters your nonprofit can count on.



1

You're paralyzing people with choice overload.

You may be making this mistake if:

- You get lots of hits on your website but see little conversion.
- People double-tap your social posts but don't join the cause.

“What looks like resistance is often a lack of clarity. Change accelerates when people understand — in specific, behavioral terms — how to reach their goals.”

— Chip and Dan Heath, *Switch*

Giving people lots of options for getting involved with your nonprofit may *seem* helpful. But the more choices someone has, the more likely they are to get overwhelmed and not decide at all. (This phenomenon is called “the paradox of choice.”)

If the TAKE ACTION or GET INVOLVED section of your website is cluttered with 5-10+ different ways to help, most people aren't going to get excited and engage. They're going to get overwhelmed and bounce. The only decision they'll make is to “think about it” and “decide later” (which translates to “probably never do anything, ever.”) That's a disaster when you need supporters *right now*.

We see about 95% of nonprofits making this mistake. Instead, do the hard work for people and lead them to the *one best option* for getting involved. We call this your Vital Move — the key unlocking step to get someone engaged in your cause. Take time to work as a team and identify the ONE call to action to rule them all (hint: “donate now” usually isn't it). This simple starting point eliminates “choice overload” and increases the chances that someone will decide to act.



PRO TIP:

Don't assume you *already* have a clear call to action. It's hard to assess objectively when you're so close to the situation. Put it to the test by asking 3 people unfamiliar with your cause to look at your website for 30 seconds and tell you what they think your call to action is.

2

You're asking for a donation on the first date.

You may be making this mistake if:

- “Donate now” is the only call to action on your website.
- You think of those who give as “donors” and not “supporters.”

Most nonprofits generally have a clear DONATE button on their websites. But starting a new relationship with a donation request (or worse, a request for a recurring donation) is like asking a stranger to marry you before even having a first date. If you want a commitment, you need to work your way up to it.

According to *The Happiness of Giving: The Time-Ask Effect* by Wendy Liu and Jennifer Aaker, volunteers who are first asked to donate their time (instead of their money end up contributing more money over the long run. Volunteering time triggers emotional meaning. When people develop an emotional connection, they find more joy in the act of giving.

Meanwhile, donating money right off the bat triggers thoughts about economic utility. Anytime there's a monetary exchange, we're all trained to ask ourselves, “What am I getting in return?” Planting this thought right away undermines the relationship before it starts.

When someone finds joy in giving to your organization by getting involved in other ways first, you've got a supporter for life. Now *that's* a happy marriage.



PRO TIP:

If you want to build genuine long-term relationships, it's essential to think of people not as “donors” but as “supporters.” A donor mindset sees people as ATMs you go to when you're trying to raise money. A supporter mindset invites others to partner with you and leads to a relationship with mutual benefits.

3

You talk about yourself — a lot.

You may be making this mistake if:

- You talk about the good *you're* doing all the time.
- You're not inviting potential supporters into a story about them.

Building a growing base of active supporters requires thinking more about them than about yourself.

Don't just talk about the good *you're* doing. Keeping the focus on you turns a potential supporter into an outside observer of the work *you're* doing. Observers aren't emotionally connected, and they don't engage.

Instead, connect the dots and tell people how joining your cause will add value to *their* lives. Show them how their efforts can lead to great success stories for those being helped — and why that achieves something that the potential supporter might find meaningful.

If your message makes someone feel like they can become a better person by partnering with you (even subconsciously), you're more likely to win them over.



PRO TIP:

Check out the book “Building a StoryBrand” by Donald Miller to learn about a powerful framework for inviting supporters into a story about them.

StoryBrand does [powerful live training events](#) that will change the way you think about all of your messaging. Vital Moves is a StoryBrand Certified Guide and can often invite a guest to join these Livestreams at no charge (spaces are limited).

[Schedule a call with us](#) to discuss this option.

4

You keep talking to the same people.

You may be making this mistake if:

- You've been using the same email list for the last 20 years.
- Most of your donations come from the same handful of people.

Organizational sustainability requires supplementing your current “core believers” with new people.

While there's no quick fix for growing an email list, a steady, strategic plan can help build an engaged community of supporters *over time*. And it's one of the most powerful investments you can make to build an army of supporters you can count on.

If the process feels slow, don't worry. It's not just you. Expanding and diversifying your community takes time. That's just the way it works.

The solution isn't to chase the latest shiny new marketing tactic. Without a strategy, the money you spend on random ads, boosted posts, and trying to “go viral” isn't doing much good.

Instead, consider using an SEO-focused content marketing strategy to pull in new visitors to your website when they are searching for things your organization is an authority on, with the ultimate goal of converting people to your email list.

This approach will educate your current audiences on your issues while also expanding and diversifying your community too. The best part? This strategy doesn't require ad spending to be effective. It does require clear strategy, consistent execution, and a website that efficiently converts visitors to supporters.



5

You run campaigns with the sole purpose of “getting the word out.”

You may be making this mistake if:

- You don't have a ladder of engagement for potential supporters to climb.
- You don't clearly tell people how they can help.

Building awareness of your cause is a key first step in good marketing, but for this to pay dividends, you have to turn awareness into action.

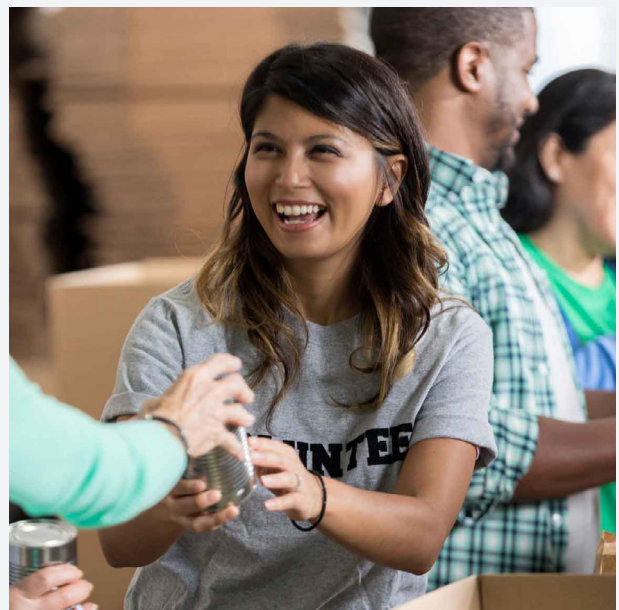
Most people assume awareness *automatically* turns into action, and this is simply not true. At all.

What if people DO understand what you do and why it's important?

What if they haven't taken action yet because they're confused about HOW you want them to help?

If you want a well-trodden path connecting awareness and action, people shouldn't have to work too hard to figure out which way to go.

Define the journey and give people a clear map that leads them from vague mental awareness toward concrete first steps. At Vital Moves, we call this the **Supporter Engagement Journey** and it's the heart of our clear roadmap for cultivating a growing base of supporters that donate regularly.



PRO TIP:

Good first steps are small, low-risk, easy to do, and easy to understand.

“Providing information alone to people does not change their behavior.”

— Victor Strecher, professor at University of Michigan's School of Public Health.

6

You're getting the timing wrong.

You may be making this mistake if:

- You run time-bound campaigns.
- You don't have a way to capture the contact info of those interested but not ready to commit.

It's easy to misinterpret a lack of engagement *right* now as proof that people are not interested at all. But that's not always the case. Sometimes, what looks like resistance may be bad timing.

Time-bound campaigns only capture people ready to act during your campaign window. But people don't operate on your schedule. Maybe they're busy. Or right now is a bad time financially to give. Not everyone will be ready to click the donate button, but that doesn't mean they don't care about the cause.

Create opportunities for people to take action when things align in *their* world, not yours. (Remember, your marketing is about your supporters, not you.)

When you focus on building a community instead of a campaign, you create a place for those who are *interested* but not quite ready to take action.

Offer these people something of value in exchange for their email addresses. Once you've captured someone's email address, stay in touch using smart and consistent email marketing.

Use this sequence to remind people of the good they could do with their time or money if they partner with you. Always point back to the gateway action — the Vital Move that's the first step to engagement (see Mistake #1).

With consistent communication, you open the door for people to engage when the timing is right for *them*.



7

You're not clear enough on your marketing goals.

You may be making this mistake if:

- Marketing reports made to the board are long and rambling.
- You have no data to prove if your marketing is actually effective.
- You see marketing as an expense, not an investment.

What's the main goal of your marketing efforts?

If you only have a vague notion of “we want more people to help us,” marketing probably feels complicated and frustrating — both symptoms of unfocused efforts.

To be effective, your marketing needs to follow a strategic plan that's simple, clear, and focused.

Most nonprofits run campaigns with a sense of urgency, panic, and no strategic plan. With no strategy in place, it's no surprise the results are often less than stellar.

Without answers to these questions, your marketing is wasting valuable resources you and your team could use elsewhere.

When done right, marketing becomes an investment you consistently make to grow your base of engaged supporters and your funding from donations.



You deserve to have the resources you need to **grow your nonprofit.**

And you shouldn't have to waste time figuring out how to do that on your own.

If you think you may be making some of these mistakes, don't worry. It's actually quite simple to build your community of reliable backers, if you're taking the right steps based on behavioral science and proven marketing frameworks.

Need some help? That's easy.

- 1 Schedule a call today.** If fundraising and supporter cultivation feel like a distraction, it's time to get help. **Click here** to book a free, no-pressure 25-minute discovery call and to get to know our team.
- 2 Pinpoint your Vital Move.** Starting with a half-day workshop, we'll uncover the gateway call-to-action that builds a true community around your cause. Then we'll amplify it far and wide with smart digital marketing.
- 3 Watch the momentum build.** Your mission gets easier with the right support. Get ready to celebrate as you smash your donation goals, sell out your next gala, or start a waitlist for your volunteer projects.

Schedule a Call

Stop feeling under-resourced and stressed. We'll help build an army of supporters so you can focus on your mission.

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