



## Engagement Strategies to Reach Diverse Donors

The 2020 census revealed some surprising facts about the American population, including the second lowest growth rate in U.S. history and an aging populace. It also confirmed what many people already suspected: America is now more diverse than ever, especially when it comes to race and ethnicity.

For nonprofit leaders, this demographic data is evidence of the need to engage with donors across multiple cultures, generations, and backgrounds to be sure their organizations reflect the diverse communities they are trying to serve. Now and in the future, successful nonprofits need a diverse group of committed supporters to sustain themselves and thrive. Plus, there are other benefits to engaging a wider donor base, including increased funding, improved brand recognition, and access to new perspectives and ideas. By connecting with a broad and varied donor population, nonprofit leaders can also foster a more inclusive philanthropic community at large.

However, it should come as no surprise that simply asking new donors for money does not create a diverse donor population. Authentic donor engagement requires an intentional, strategic, and long-term approach.

### Develop a Strategy

“Reaching new donor groups starts by understanding why the organization wants to make changes in the first place,” says CAPTRUST Financial Advisor [Kevin Yoshida](#). For some nonprofits, the answer lies in a mismatch between their existing donor base and their community demographics. White donors and older generations are often overrepresented compared to their national—and sometimes local—population percentages. The risk here is that population incongruities may create an emotional disconnect between the organization and the community it serves.

Other nonprofits may need diverse donors in order to meet urgent fundraising needs. “When things are going well, it’s easy to become stagnant about your donor population,” says CAPTRUST Financial Advisor [Paul Schreder](#). But as the saying goes, the best time to fix a roof is when it’s



sunny.

To get started, consider performing a benchmark analysis of current donor demographics. Look for strengths and gaps. Which groups does the organization excel at attracting, and which groups are underrepresented compared to local population statistics? Consider not just race and ethnicity but also different genders, ages or generations, socioeconomic groups, and more.

Next, review the internal diversity represented by the organization's board and staff. Then consider how to align internal and external demographics. For instance, Yoshida says, "If the community served is mostly women, but the nonprofit's donor base plus staff and board members are mostly men, it may be smart to consider targeted campaigns to reach more women."

Once the nonprofit has a clear picture of where it is starting from, leaders can begin to develop a specific and achievable vision of their ideal donor base and compose a diverse donor engagement strategy to get there.

## **Diversify the Organization**

For organizations that discover a mismatch between internal demographics and their communities, one next step is to focus on recruiting a more diverse staff and board. "Diverse organizations may be better equipped to understand and engage with donors from various backgrounds," says Schreder. "Plus, diverse leaders can use their personal connections to help the nonprofit create authentic connections."

Yoshida points to one client who has been particularly successful with this approach. "The organization recently appointed a new board chair who is Hispanic," he says. "By using her personal connections, the chair is helping improve the organization's access to events and spaces where Hispanic communities gather."

Another example: Imagine a nonprofit with a board of directors composed entirely of people over age 50 and an average employee age of 45 years old. By adding younger members to its board and younger employees to its staff, this nonprofit stands a greater chance of attracting younger donors as well. When people see themselves reflected in an organization, they are more likely to feel connected and to give.

However, it is important to acknowledge that diversifying an organization will take time. As Schreder says, "Nonprofits often have a hard time finding diverse staff—especially fundraising staff." The pool of candidates is limited, so hiring can be highly competitive. But, he says, "long-term investment in people is almost always worth the effort."

"If the organization is intent on building a diverse team, it can demonstrate that commitment by mentoring and training people who already have a passion for the work, although they may not yet have the necessary level of expertise or experience yet," Schreder says. This applies to board recruitment too. It is beneficial to have a structured board training and onboarding program so that

new members who don't have prior board experience know they can get up to speed.

For more information on how to diversify your endowment or foundation's board of directors, watch this short video: [Building a Diverse Board Pipeline](#).

## Grow Real Relationships

The next step is to build authentic relationship with the various communities the nonprofit has identified in its diverse donor engagement strategy. "Through these relationships, nonprofits can learn about the unique values, habits, and priorities of different demographic groups, then adapt tactics accordingly," says Schreder.

Although it's important to stay attuned to recent data about diverse groups, be careful not to rely too heavily on third-party research and reports, which can create a sense of insincerity in messaging. Remember that even the best surveys are designed to extract generic data from unique individuals, so it's easy to draw false generalizations from oversimplified survey results.

For example, although researchers often try to decipher philanthropic trends by racial group, the Blackbaud [Diversity in Giving](#) study shows that "income and religious engagement are far more significant predictors of giving behavior than race or ethnicity."

It is the combination of research and relationships that creates cultural competency.

But how can nonprofits with limited internal diversity cultivate these authentic relationships? Some ideas include focus groups, volunteer days, and hiring diverse content creators or content reviewers to help with donor engagement campaigns. Or consider partnering with local nonprofits that have diverse leaders and find ways each organization can support the other. Two other ideas are to create an advisory board comprised of diverse individuals who receive the organization's services or ask representatives from the community to serve on your board of directors.

The "Everyday Donors of Colors" report produced by Indiana University's Lilly Family School of Philanthropy gives four additional recommendations:

- support philanthropic efforts led by donors of color;
- provide leadership opportunities for donors of color;
- support wealth creation in communities of color; and
- provide support for additional research into diverse donor habits.

The report emphasizes that supporting wealth creation is especially important because "the capacity for "big gift" philanthropy within some communities of color is constrained by wealth inequality."

Although these recommendations focus specifically on race- and ethnicity-related diversification, they also apply to other demographic groups. For instance, if the organization wants to reach more baby-



boomer donors, consider replacing the phrase “donors of color” in each of these bullet points with “donors from the baby-boomer generation.”

As nonprofit leaders have likely experienced throughout their careers, authentic relationships are the foundation of successful and sustainable donor engagement. By building trust and demonstrating genuine interest in diverse communities, organizations can create lasting connections that lead to long-term support.

## Create Custom Campaigns

Once the organization has developed a diverse donor strategy and increased its cultural competency, it’s time to create personalized campaigns that reach new audiences in new places. One-size-fits-all fundraising campaigns will not resonate with all donors. Instead, nonprofits should consider creating tailored campaigns that speak to the unique interests and values of specific donor communities.

This starts by diversifying the organization’s brand imagery and learning best practices for inclusive language. It’s also a good idea to examine the organization’s current programming calendar to be sure it aligns with diverse holidays. Vary the types of events offered and when they will occur. Tie each piece of programming back to the organization’s donor research and engagement strategy, and make sure to involve people from the targeted community in the event-planning process. For instance, if the organization is pursuing more LGBTQ+ donors, celebrating Pride Month could be a good idea, but only if the celebration authentically benefits the LGBTQ+ community and involves LGBTQ+ community members as organizers and leaders.

Another way to tap new and diverse sources of support is to expand the search for donors beyond traditional advertising channels. By attending local events and leveraging social media platforms, organizations can connect with donors who may not have been reached through print or radio.

As an example, Schreder says he has seen increased interest in reaching younger donors from the Millennial and Gen Z generations. “These donors rarely respond to physical mail and are often more interested in donating time than money, at least at first,” he says. “But by creating connections with them now, nonprofits are building lifelong relationships for the future.”

Read more about connecting with younger donors in this article: [“The Charitable Millennial.”](#)

When deciding which platforms to leverage, remember to meet people where they are. Explore multiple social media apps, try both in-person and virtual events, and don’t be afraid to leverage tried-and-true advertising tools, like word-of-mouth marketing and door-to-door canvassing. Also consider using multiple fundraising software options. Complement organization-wide donor platforms like those offered by Blackbaud or Salesforce with other direct payment options like Venmo or GoFundMe.



By recruiting diverse board members and staff, building authentic relationships, and creating custom campaigns, nonprofits can build lifelong connections with diverse donors across multiple demographic groups. But this won't happen by making small adjustments to existing engagement tactics. Instead, it means embracing a comprehensive strategy that prioritizes genuine connections and long-term support for diverse communities.

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