THE BEST Giving Days



KIM LEESON/NORTH TEXAS GIVING DAY

The Loser Ate Mealworms

Though regional giving days are gaining momentum, the seven-year-old North Texas Giving Day (above) remains tops in the field. Last September's event brought in $33.1 million for 2,022 nonprofits, up nearly $7 million from the year prior and an eight-fold increase since its inception.

REGIONAL GIVING DAY
North Texas Giving Day

Clever marketing and user-friendly technology helped the event reach new heights, says Susan Swan Smith, chief relationship officer at the Communities Foundation of Texas, which organizes the 24-hour extravaganza. Giving was fueled by social media, email, and events like happy hours, coffee giveaways, and musical performances at five donation stations. "It's become a communitywide effort," Ms. Smith says.

A prime example of the creativity at work: A pet-food bank and a bat sanctuary competed to see which could net the most donors. The two groups posted playful videos and social-media updates ahead of the event and throughout the day. When the sanctuary won, the food bank's leader lived up to her bet and dutifully dined on mealworms, a bat favorite.

Participation by nonprofits was up about 25 percent in 2015, and more than a third of last year's 118,000-plus donations came from people giving for the first time to their chosen charity. The event's overall success is due in part to its donors being used to digging deep; its coverage area centers on the Dallas and Fort Worth regions, residents of which give to charity at rates well above the national average.

Don't Underestimate the Small Ones

The University of Michigan set the standard for giving days in higher education in 2015, when it raised $4.4 million in 24 hours. But the College of the Holy Cross proved smaller institutions can get it done, too.

On its first try at a philanthropy marathon, the small Catholic liberal-arts college racked up more than $1.9 million during the Give Purple Challenge a 43-hour event in February. (The length, stretching over a Friday and Saturday, echoed the college's 1843 founding date, says Tracy Barlok, vice president for advancement.)

COLLEGE GIVING DAY
The College of the Holy Cross

Holy Cross focused less on dollars than on boosting donor participation, seeking to get 2,500 people to contribute to earn a $500,000 challenge gift. Driven by alumni advocates who had been prepped weeks in advance, shout-outs during a televised homecoming hoops game against Bucknell, and lots of social-media shares, participation blew the doors off: The drive wound up with 6,226 donors — 249 percent of the original goal. They gave more than $700,000, triggering an eventual $1.2 million in challenge gifts. Nearly one in three donors gave via a mobile device, and 29 percent donated via social media.

The Best of Online Fundraising was written by Heather Joslyn, Timothy Sandoval, and Eden Stiffman.

A Double Win

Sikh Coalition fundraisers came up with a winning formula to compete on Giving Tuesday last year: matching gifts, a carefully timed series of emails, and an appeal to supporters' communal spirit.

The tiny group, formed after the September 11 terrorist attacks to advocate for Sikh Americans facing abuse and violence, first prepped donors Sunday morning with an email that explained Giving Tuesday. The note also stressed the multiplier effect of every dollar: The coalition had lined up $55,000 in matching pledges, and it wanted to win online-gift processor Network for Good's contest for most money raised.

GIVING TUESDAY STRATEGY
Sikh Coalition

On the big day, an early-morning email featured an appeal from a hate-crime victim helped by the coalition. He closed with a reminder of his fellow Sikhs' shared vulnerability: "They need your support today so they can continue to protect you tomorrow." Hours later, the coalition's leader, Sapreet Kaur, stressed the deadline in another email. In the evening, staff worked the phones, nudging key donors.

The result: The group raised $127,000 beyond the matches, more than any other charity using Network for Good. Early Wednesday, Ms. Kaur says, supporters checked in to learn how the coalition fared in the contest. "They asked, did we win?' recalls the nonprofit leader. "Did *we* win — meaning them, too."