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THIS YEAR TAKE A CHANCE WITH ONLINE GIVING DAYS

↑ Your organization can climb to new heights when you participate in online giving days.

By **JULIE WHELAN CAPELL**

When you hear about online giving days, your mind may immediately go to #GivingTuesday, the national event that occurs annually on the Tuesday after Thanksgiving. But now, there are many other giving days popping up throughout the year, usually organized by local foundations or United Ways. Land trusts around the country have found that participating in giving days can be a major source of funding for their organizations.

HOW DOES AN EXTRA \$100,000 SOUND?

Every August, French Creek Valley Conservancy participates in Erie Gives, an online giving day for nonprofits in Erie County, Pennsylvania. In 2016, the first year it participated, the Conservancy raised just over \$9,000. In 2021, it raised \$110,278—one-third of the organization's total budget.

Beyond the dollars raised, there are other benefits to participating in online giving days, such as access to new donors. Summit Land Conservancy in Park City, Utah, gained 79 new donors during 2021's Live PC Give PC—an online giving day they have participated in for 10 years.

These events can also increase engagement with current donors. During Conserving Carolina's online giving day, donors often call in to ask questions and make sure their gift will count toward the goal. Some even hand-deliver their checks to the office to ensure their donation arrives on time.

Land trusts small and large can benefit from these well-organized giving days. French Creek Valley Conservancy achieves its impressive results with only three full-time staff by leveraging the marketing materials, publicity buzz and online donation platform provided by the event organizer.

HERE ARE SOME TIPS FOR MAKING THE MOST OF ONLINE GIVING DAYS

1. Prepare in Advance

Start planning at least three months ahead of the giving day. Use that time to set goals for dollars raised and new donors. If it's your first time doing an online giving day, base your goals on industry research such as that done by M+R, which publishes annual online giving benchmarks, and Classy, which tracks #GivingTuesday statistics.

Recruit a few volunteers or board members to support the effort and start working on your marketing messages. Create a special donate page on your website just for the giving day to make it as easy as possible for people to make donations. Record a video or two for the campaign. Recruit volunteers to do "peer-to-peer" campaigns on Facebook. Snail-mail a postcard to current donors one month prior to the event. If all of that sounds daunting or too expensive, it's okay to keep it simple by taking the marketing materials prepared by the overall campaign and customizing them for your organization.

2. Secure a Matching Gift

Land trusts with track records of success in online giving days agree that getting a matching donor is the single most important factor in transforming their results from good to great. Most regional giving days have their own sponsors and special hours when donations will be matched. Your messaging should take advantage of those opportunities if available, but you can generate even more excitement from your supporters by finding your own matching gift. Major donors are often willing to provide the match, knowing their gift will be doubled. Local businesses are also good prospects for matches, since they appreciate the publicity generated by these events. On the giving day tell supporters "Your gift will be matched up to \$X,XXX." Don't be shy—you can have more than one match, and if set at aspirational levels, your donors will be challenged to reach deeper into their pocketbooks. One land trust had a donor offer a

\$50,000 match. They didn't meet the goal the first year, but the donor was so impressed by the effort made that he renewed the offer the next year. Pushing further than they thought possible, they met the goal, and their fundraising has only grown since then.

3. Focus Your Message

"Our goal is to not overwhelm people with this. People are inviting us into their inboxes, so we don't want to overstay our welcome or intrude too many times," says Erika Lebling, donor relations manager at the Westerly Land Trust in Rhode Island.

The typical sequence of giving day messages used by the land trusts interviewed for this article is focused and minimal. The day before, send one email to donors to build momentum for the event. An example text: "Tomorrow we're going to announce a really exciting matching opportunity for \$X,XXX, we would love to have you join us."

On giving day, send one email in the morning, one in early evening and one in late evening. It's helpful if each is written by a different person—staff, board, volunteer. On your social media channels, post the same messages accompanied by compelling images.

4. Thank Your Donors and Follow-Up

The online donation platform will send all giving day donors an automatic thank you email, but you should send your own thank you within a day or two. Emails are fine, and consider sending a postcard or letter in the mail. It's also a good idea to email your whole donor list telling them how much you raised and update your website with the results as well. Don't forget to add new donors to your database and plan how to retain them.

HOW TO CREATE YOUR OWN GIVING DAY

Still not confident about jumping into the fray of #GivingTuesday? Consider creating a local giving day by partnering with other land trusts or organizations with compatible missions. It's best to choose a day in spring to balance year-end giving. For instance, land trusts in North Carolina collaborate annually



↑ GivingTuesday is a global event to inspire generosity.



↑ Summit Land Conservancy has participated in its local giving days, Live PC Give PC, for a decade.

on a giving day for National Land Trust Day and National Trails Day, both in June. Or approach your local community foundation about starting a local giving day. By creating your own online giving day, you will open the door for people to be generous and create a new income stream for your land trust. ☺

All land trusts featured in this story are accredited by the Land Trust Accreditation Commission.

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