

## **In the beginning**

By Mal Warwick

In the 1970s, when I first became involved in direct mail fundraising, I used an IBM Selectric typewriter to draft copy for my clients' appeals—and to retype it again and again and again—until I got it right. Now, as we open our eyes on the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, I move draft copy across the continent via e-mail, giving colleagues and clients alike the opportunity to edit the appeals themselves.

*How can I know what that process will look like twenty or thirty years further along? Will I still "type" on a keyboard? Will sounds and visual images loom larger in conveying an appeal?*

Two decades ago my clients and I relied exclusively on conventional printing processes to reproduce our appeals—fast-moving web presses for large-volume jobs; smaller, sheet-fed presses for specialty items. Nowadays, I have a great many options, including a variety of laser-printed and ink-jetted formats, some of which I can manage in my own office.

*How will we deliver our messages two decades from now? Will printing take place exclusively on the "back end," in the recipient's home or office, if at all? Will every appeal be so custom-tailored to each individual addressee that it will be truly unique?*

When I started in direct response, I had exactly two ways to "involve" donors and prospects through my mailings: (a) through the reply device, sometimes elaborated with a questionnaire, a petition, or postcards; and (b) a front-end premium.

Today, by contrast, just twenty years later, I can encourage responses on a Web site, by e-mail, or via a toll-free telephone number as well as by mail. I can invite major donors to join me in a nationwide conference call. I can stage a live online chat led by the executive director. I can phone donors and offer them the opportunity to be "patched through" to their Congressman's office—or to trigger the delivery of a

personalized fax or e-mail protest. I can offer custom-tailored messages on a toll-free inbound hotline using Interactive Voice Response (without a human operator).

*What will I be able to do twenty years from now?*

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Okay, let's get something straight right off the bat: the answer to all these questions is, nobody knows.

I begin with the premise that it is impossible to predict the future. Yes, you read that right: *impossible*, not merely challenging, or laborious, or just downright hard. For example, consider what we know about the prospects for change in just three of the innumerable variables that may govern the course of human life on this planet in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

- Chances are, you've never heard of it. It's now the subject of increasing attention in scientific and engineering laboratories around the world. "It" is known by the tongue-twisting label "molecular nanotechnology." It's science's new-found way to manipulate matter at the atomic level—to realize the alchemists' dream, creating useful things from such stuff as water, sand, and stone. Molecular nanotechnology is believed to have the potential to spawn self-replicating "machines" so tiny that they can navigate the human bloodstream to combat disease at the molecular level. The field also has the potential to eliminate the need for conventional manufacturing—or, critics say, to unleash uncontrollable forces that will consume all life on Earth.
- There is a scientific consensus that our world is warming and the sea level rising as a result of the cumulative impact of human activity on the Earth. Already, the polar icecaps are melting, the seasons are changing, and wildlife habitats are shifting in response. Who today can predict how early or how successfully our government and corporate leaders will push for the lifestyle changes necessary to slow the advent of global climate change? Perhaps the world's major cities are doomed—after all, eighty percent of them are near a coastline and vulnerable to rising seas.
- Some observers of the computer industry are beginning to speak about the prospects for what author Ray Kurzweil called "spiritual machines"—self-aware

computers with intellectual capacity far surpassing that of the brightest human being . . . and eventually exceeding the collective intelligence of all humans on the planet. Kurzweil asserts that the equivalent of a desktop machine available today for \$1,000 will put human intellectual ability to shame by 2030. What might this portend for our schools, our professional lives, our attempts to govern ourselves?

Which of us would be so brave as to say that the prospects for the nonprofit sector, for philanthropy, and for fundraising will not be radically affected if manufacturing is no longer necessary . . . if we're forced to abandon our cities . . . or if computers surpass human intelligence?

Yet those are just three areas of uncertainty our human species faces as we peer off into the mists of the future—and we habitually view these variables in isolation from one another. Yet developments in any of these areas will surely influence what happens in any other field. And you don't have to stretch your mind very far to come up with a host of other imponderable factors—from overpopulation, to biotechnology, to the emergence of terrifying new diseases, to the growing scarcity of water, to the search for extra-terrestrial intelligence. In any one of these spheres of human endeavor, an unpredictable turn of events might at any time have a profound and irreversible effect on our lives.

So anyone who pretends to know what the future holds in store for us is at least a little bit nuts.

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Now, I've been called much worse than "nuts," so I'm going to take a stab at predicting the future of direct response fundraising, anyway. After all, you paid good money for this book, and you want to get something useful from it, no?

Anyway, I'd prefer not to think all life on earth is doomed, or that computers are destined to outsmart us, or that New York and L.A. will slip under the ocean's waves. And I suspect that private voluntary organizations will have a large role to play throughout the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, regardless of how the future unfolds.

So here, just between the two of us, are the six characteristics I believe direct response fundraising systems will share . . . oh, say twenty years from now:

- **INDIVIDUALIZED.** Our appeals will be “personalized” but “individualized.” By and large, we won't be dealing with donor file “segments” anymore but with individuals—responding to their unique, personal interests and capabilities. We'll know a lot more about our donors, because we'll ask them for more information through frequent surveys and questionnaires—and because our information management systems will be capable of storing much more data than most charities now find it practical to retain.
- **MULTI-SENSORY.** Our appeals will be “multi-sensory,” using forms of what today are called “multimedia” technologies. We won't be limited to paper, or to voice communications, or to pre-recorded sounds or video images. A single fundraising appeal might consist of sights, sounds and data, and be delivered, separately or simultaneously, through several communications channels: a wallscreen, perhaps, with full-motion sound and video; or a pocket communicator bearing a simplified, two-dimensional version; or a hardcopy printout a little like what today we call a “fax.” Donors will choose which method they prefer, and open it up when and where they wish suiting the mood or constraints of the moment, or following long-established preferences for one form or another.
- **INFORMATION-RICH.** Twenty years from now, our appeals will be “information-rich.” On-line databases and super-high-speed data transmission will permit us to make veritable mountains of information available to every prospect or donor—and the demands of competition will force us to do so. Meanwhile, flexible database management software will permit every prospect and every donor to select precisely those bits of information they want—and not one word or one image more. Just as I program my communications system to pre-select news stories I'm likely to find interesting, donors to my clients will teach their own software “agents” to sift through mountains of information—including newsletters, bulletins, annual reports and special appeals from nonprofits—to pick those that match their own interests or circumstances.
- **REAL-TIME.** Within two decades, “real-time” transactions will be common in direct response fundraising. “Real-time” is computer jargon for “right now.” For example, by authorizing a gift in the course of an on-line videoconference with her favorite charity, a donor may instantaneously transmit funds from her bank account to the charity—before the conference is even over. The response curves

we measure today in weeks and months may be viewed in terms of hours or even minutes twenty years from now.

- **INTERACTIVE.** Fundraising thirty years from today will be highly “interactive.” Donors will actively participate, not just in selecting the amount and the format of the information they receive, but the role they’ll play in the life and work of the charities they support. Today’s dedicated donor “hotlines” will become multimedia gateways that offer donors a multitude of new options: to participate in the latter-day equivalent of focus group research, for example, or to share their specialized expertise with program staff, or to integrate what they’re learning from us into ongoing educational programs. Both two-way and small-group communications will be an integral part of the process—freeing fundraisers from the constraints of time and geography, and permitting us to develop rich and rewarding relationships with donors we may never actually meet.
  
- **COMMUNAL.** The nonprofits that flourish in the fast-moving environment of the 21st Century will be those that provide their supporters with the experience of community. Today’s fast-multiplying computer networks, e-mail systems, chat rooms, local-access cable TV, video teleconferencing and E-mail facilities foreshadow the integrated technologies of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Within twenty years, charities will be able to engage thousands of their donors in a profoundly personal and meaningful way—simultaneously, and over great physical distances. Meanwhile, as individuals, many donors will find the nearly instantaneous, broadband communications of the New Age will permit them to turn a shared commitment to a charity’s work into personal relationships with many of their fellow donors. Just as users of today’s converging technologies are forming eleven “virtual communities,” often spanning continents and oceans, donors by the thousands may eventually be able to join with a charity’s other constituents—staff, board, clients, alumni—in shared access to the daily experience of the charity’s work. How? Through a latter-day equivalent to “personals” ads in the newsletters or public forums on the Network of the future. That experience and the personal relationships that result may enrich daily life in the 21st Century for tens of millions of people.

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Will you be ready for the future, no matter what? With all due respect, I don’t think any of us can say that. Because we just don’t know what might occur. However, if you read

the remaining chapters of this book, if you ponder the thoughtful discussion they contain about today's cutting-edge direct response technologies and techniques, at least you can say you'll be ahead of the curve. I hope so. Anyway, as Star Trek's Mr. Spock always says, "Live long and prosper!"