

What We've Learned: Boosting Best Practices



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As I sit on my screened porch writing this, I hear the laughter and chatter of families at the community pool located behind my house. Those sounds were absent last summer, so it’s thrilling to hear them again. There are so many activities those of us who are vaccinated are now able to do again and it is in many ways a return to “normal.” Yet, for some of us there lingers a nagging anxiety that we cannot explain—and that we should not ignore—as we rebuild our personal schedules and our plans for engaging our donors.

Fully vaccinated, I took my first business trip last month...the first since February 2020. It was an overnight visit relatively close to home, but I found myself flummoxed as I tried to pack. I had forgotten my routine and it took me far longer than it should have to pull all my items together. Being in-person in an office again was wonderful—seeing people in 3D instead of flat images on Zoom, being able to read body language—and I felt safe and part of a team. After the two-day visit, I stopped on my way home to see my 98-year-old great-aunt in her retirement facility, and spent the weekend catching up with friends over in-person dinners and lunches. By Sunday night, a strange phenomenon occurred. I expected to feel exhilarated from all my personal interactions and getting back into the pace of my pre-COVID life. Instead, I felt exhausted and irritable. I couldn’t put my finger on it until I remembered a recent Los Angeles Times article about the return to post-COVID life and how it may not be as easy as we think it’s going to be. I realized I was suffering from “cave syndrome.” Coined by a psychiatrist in Florida, the term

describes people who are feeling scared or unwilling to reenter post-pandemic society—even after being vaccinated—because they have grown too accustomed to isolation.¹

I'm not here to make a case for or against continued isolation. I personally have missed seeing my family, friends and colleagues in person and feel it's not healthy to be separated from other humans for extended periods of time. What I am recognizing in myself, however, is that I do not want to return to the frenetic pace I was living prior to the pandemic. I'm apparently not alone. One of my favorite columnists, Petula Dvorak from The Washington Post says, "It's not only the introverts, the ones who finally got the world to move on their terms, who are reluctant to jump back in. Even the extroverts—and especially the ambiverts—are hearing the metabolic scream of a return to society's pre-pandemic pace."² The aforementioned LA Times article says, "Some now dread resuming their soul-killing commute, or putting on an outfit for work and being judged for it, or simply reentering the rat race."³ As I considered this, I began to understand how this translates to what our donors are feeling and what they may want from the organizations they support. We cannot ignore the facts before us...people may never choose to return to life as it was in early 2020. This isn't necessarily a bad thing.

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In my opinion, this shift in how society wishes to return to socializing will give those of us in fund development the opportunity to boost our best practices. We must use this time to make our best practices better. We know what brings our donors closer to us—meaningful conversations focused on their passions and the legacies they want to leave in their communities. Accordant believes in “True North” conversations to determine what donors wish to accomplish with their philanthropy and then finding alignment within your health care organization’s priorities.⁴ Keeping interactions one-on-one or in small, intimate groups allows for those critical conversations to take place. “Schmoozing has become more or less a foreign concept...people just want good, meaty connections.”⁵ Resources should be shifted to advance more personal engagement rather than the large galas that exhaust staff and budgets. Virtual events have been welcomed by many donors for their convenience, and philanthropy executives love the low-cost benefits. The downside has been the lack of interaction within the hospital campus where we can demonstrate impact and share vision; however, with ongoing creative approaches, this can still be accomplished virtually.

It is time to understand the importance of a donor's desire to make an impact and to have purpose in their lives. Regardless of faith and religious beliefs, we all yearn to make a difference in the world. Lynn Cowell of Proverbs31 Ministries wonders, "It's possible God doesn't want some of us to go back to the hustle of normal, but instead He has been using this season to reveal a part of life we were missing before."⁶ Now, more than ever, donors want to do something positively consequential with their time and their investments. It's possible the pandemic has handed us a silver lining of better understanding the need for personal interaction between humans and not just rushed busyness. The Greater Good Institute suggests, "The pandemic might teach us 'how absolutely sacred our best relationships are' and that the value of these relationships would be much higher in the post-pandemic world."⁷ As philanthropy officers, it is our duty to respond to these needs of our donors and boost best practices in this post-COVID world to deepen our relationships and engagement tactics.

We should not just consider what our individual donors want but should also apply these findings to our corporate donors. The issues of social justice, health disparities and cultural inequities we have faced over the past year have created new philanthropy opportunities for corporations. Businesses now realize the benefits to philanthropy, that it's no longer just something nice to do, like buying a table at the local hospital gala. Progressive executives know consumers will look for examples of good social responsibility, and health care initiatives remain a very attractive priority for corporations wishing to make a difference in their communities. "There's an opportunity [for hospitals and health systems] to have a voice in this conversation and to serve as an expert to companies that are looking to begin new partnerships focused on equitable access to care."⁸ It is up to us, as health care leaders, to demonstrate ways we can help these corporations enact the change they seek through corporate gifts.

Each of us will react differently to the return to post-COVID life, and it's not clear what "normal" will look like in our communities. What is clear is our ongoing commitment to our donors and their needs. Strengthening those relationships through best practices is a failsafe strategy to success for our donors and our philanthropic missions. How can you boost your best practices?

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¹ <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2021-04-11/cave-syndrome-reentry-after-covid>

² https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/the-world-is-reopening-but-not-all-of-us-are-ready-for-normal/2021/06/07/782bbef2-c7b4-11eb-afd0-9726f7ec0ba6_story.html

³ Ibid.

⁴ Accordant White Paper, *Advancing Major Gifts in the New Normal*, Heather Wiley Starankovic, 2020

⁵ Chronicle of Philanthropy, *After a Year of Zoom Galas, are Charities and Donors Ready to Party – and Attend Other Events – in Person?*, Emily Haynes, May 26, 2021

⁶ Proverbs31 Ministries, *Our Reluctance to Return to Normal*, Lynn Cowell, 2021

⁷ https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how_life_could_get_better_or_worse_after_covid

⁸ AHP, *It's Time to Rethink Your Corporate Philanthropy Partnerships*, Samantha Hunter, April 21, 2021