



Internet makes fundraising easier for nonprofits

Mike Faulk; Special to The Star
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Tammy Stone said she's always been a giver. The 44-year-old Munford resident said she tries helping people in different ways, by donating small sums, directing people to charities or buying stickers and birthday cards for children whose parents can't always afford the simple pleasures.

But over the last year and a half, Stone hasn't been able to get out as much after being diagnosed with high blood pressure and suffering a heart attack in May 2007. Stone, like many individuals and organizations have done in recent years, now turns to the Internet to do charitable work.

Stone is a member of WishUponaHero.com, a networking site that lets people in need post "wishes" that registered users can then try to grant. The site was started by a New Jersey man after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, and is one of many grassroots online charity efforts that have flourished in the last decade.

Mark Sutton is the CEO of Massachusetts-based Firstgiving.com, a company that provides Web-based fundraising services for people who want to help nonprofit organizations. He said members join for free and then can start a fundraising page for any of the more than 1.5 million nonprofit organizations registered with the Internal Revenue Service.

He said there are 30,000 active pages on Firstgiving.com, and since its advent in 2003, the site has overseen more than 1 million donations. Sutton said online nonprofit fundraising is growing rapidly, and his site alone is on track this year to double the 5,000 to 6,000 pages created in 2007.

"The Internet has really opened [fundraising] opportunities," Sutton said.

Sutton said the Internet has created an audience for nonprofit organizations that never existed before, thanks particularly to blogs and social networking sites. Sutton said many organizations now take online donations and, like his company, make the links available for sharing on popular sites like Facebook.com through small programs called widgets.

The biggest effect the Internet has had on nonprofit fundraising is that it puts power in the hands of individuals, Sutton said. Whereas in the past organizations had to seek out donations or individuals wanted to donate but didn't know where to go, the Internet may be a way to solve both of those problems, he said.

Local nonprofit groups have also begun incorporating the Internet with their fundraising and awareness efforts.

Relay For Life of Calhoun County has been able to raise more money in the three years since it began taking Internet donations, said Relay For Life online chairwoman Kelli Greenwood. About \$7,000 to \$8,000 was raised on the Internet in 2006, she said, and as of the afternoon of May 9, \$17,000 had been raised online through credit card donations. Event organizers said May 11 the county's Relay for Life campaign had raised nearly \$626,500 this year.

She said many people use the Web page to pass along information on how to donate to family and friends who otherwise wouldn't know. In general, she said passing the word about fundraising is more far-reaching yet simple with the Internet.

"Simplicity is key in running a nonprofit," Greenwood said.

She said some worry about the security of using their credit cards online to donate, but that it is secure and they shouldn't be deterred.

"Everybody should be online," Greenwood said.

The organization also allows teams to sign up online. Greenwood said slightly less than half of the approximately 150 teams in this year's race signed up on the Web site. She said letting teams have pages also increases fundraising because each can see how much money the other has raised and they can compete by donating more.

Wayne Carmello-Harper, president of the Community Foundation of Calhoun County, another local nonprofit organization, said it recently added a donor link to its Web site.

He said anything that makes giving easier for donors is something that nonprofits must consider implementing. He said the Internet in particular encourages younger people to get involved, and that the growing popularity of the Internet along with greater credit card use made it crucial to add an online donor link.

"That's something that is expected of nonprofit organizations today," Carmello-Harper said.

As for Stone, she said the Internet helped her join a community of people who care. Those she has come to know through granting wishes and receiving gifts speak with her often. Stone said some of the people she met on Wish Upon a Hero called to check on her health after she had an operation last week.

"You can just tell by talking to these people they're heroes. They're angels," she said.