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Are You Kidding Me? Giving in 2009 was down 3.6%. What Has Everyone Been Whining About?

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That's it!!! The jig is up! The votes are in! The pudding has proof in it!!!

The clichés could go on and on to describe my feelings after reviewing the final tally on charitable giving for 2009. These are the numbers that we, who live and work in the field of fundraising and development, eagerly await each year. The publication is Giving USA, published by Giving USA Foundation, researched and written by The Center on Philanthropy at Indiana University.

Let's look at a few of the key statistics from last year and try to reconcile that with what we have all been led to believe. Yes, there was a drop in charitable giving in 2009 compared to 2008. Giving is down a whopping 3.6%! Are you kidding me? Based on the press coverage, special interest stories, and general panic and anxiety expressed by many in the field, I was expecting at least a double digit drop, and perhaps as much as 20%. Once again, for the third year in a row, charitable giving in the US topped \$300 billion.

So what happened to all of the people who couldn't give last year? What happened to the consequences of the worst economic disaster of our lifetime? I'll tell you what happened, people kept on giving regardless of the economy.

When we look deeper into the statistics, we find that there was no drop in giving from individuals. That's right - in 2009 individuals gave almost exactly the same amount as they gave in 2008. According to the Giving USA Report, individual giving in 2009 fell 0.4 percent, 0 percent when adjusted for inflation. I suppose the bad news is that we didn't see growth. Maybe the reason we didn't see growth is because we didn't ask for growth.

There were countless non-profit organizations that either halted or postponed their capital campaigns. Is it reasonable to think that if we refrain from asking, people may not give?

Foundation giving was down 8.9% in 2009. This is the one segment that we should expect to follow the ups and downs of the economy. When the stock market takes a nose dive, foundation and endowment assets shrink proportionately. When the stock market climbs, we all reap the benefit from foundation asset growth. But it is individuals that accounted for about 75% of all charitable giving in the US in 2009, and they are clearly the most resilient source through good and bad economic times.

So what lessons can we learn? Here are a few:

- Never underestimate the hearts and passions of your donor base
- Never postpone plans that are mission critical
- Always take an aggressive position when promoting your mission
- Don't ever use the economy as an excuse not to do something important for your organization

So let's get busy! We have over \$300 billion to raise this year. With a little faith, we might just get back to the consistent growth we experienced leading up to 2009.

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