

# blue state digital

## Executive Summary

### Communications Assessment 2009

October 1, 2009

In June 2009, Blue State Digital was engaged to undertake a Strategic Assessment of the online fundraising and communications programs of the UJC and the Federations. The engagement has resulted in an Assessment Report (of which this is a summary) and a Guidebook for Online Engagement.

#### What's working well in the Federation system?

The UJC and the Federation system has a unique set of assets, including exceptionally loyal major donors, a deeply engaged broader constituency, and an unquestioned community enthusiasm for collective philanthropy in North America, in Israel, and wherever in the world Jews are found.

We believe — and we have repeatedly said, to people both inside and outside the Federation system — that you probably do a better job of activating mid-level and major donors than any comparable community-driven philanthropy in the world.

Due to your exceptional personal stewardship of mid-level and high donors, and to your strong affinity programs, Federations are very effective fundraisers at the middle and the top of the donor range — and you've been able to maintain your effectiveness system wide, more or less, despite rough economic times.

#### Common challenges across the system

What we have found in the Federation system are organizations that, despite highly successful development programs, are eager to evolve in ways that will give them exposure to donor constituencies beyond their traditional base.

As we moved around the UJC and the Federation system, we were surprised to hear the same concerns, anxieties, and hopes expressed over and over by person after person and Federation after Federation. It surprised us that Federations of such disparate sizes, with such different histories and scopes and local concerns, raised so many of the same issues.

Across the system, deeply committed staff are struggling with technology and infrastructure issues; struggling to find and mobilize the appropriate internal resources to recruit and serve low-dollar donors more effectively; and struggling to integrate online and offline activities in a way that would help raise more money faster.

As a result, fundraising goals are at risk, pledges are being postponed, and Annual Campaign revenue seems to be reaching a plateau. To be sure, because of your disproportionate reliance on mid-level donors and the strong community ties that bind those donors to their local Federations, you are performing better in these economic times than many other philanthropies. (And the fact that so much of the budgets of so many Federations get disbursed to fund basic human needs helps strengthen your case for giving even in a recession.)

But many of the UJC and Federation staff we spoke with seem eager to open up new donor communities online, and to serve them online in a way that ties them to the system and induces them to affiliate and give. Our task is to help you navigate the philosophical, tactical, and technological challenges that stand in the way.

### Embracing the small-donor opportunity

The third plank of the collaborative model — in addition to a Major-Gift strategy and an Affinity group program — is a strong community campaign that appeals to donors at all levels. It is in this area that we believe the Federation system is most in need of improvement.

In many Federations, the current Annual Campaign strategy provides a one-size-fits-all message that, while successful with perennial high-dollar givers and a segment of low donors, is certainly leaving money on the table. And with some exceptions, the Federations do a middling job of intake, cultivation, and stewardship with respect to low-dollar donors.

We believe that changing this — that making the Federation system more effective at the small-dollar or “retail” level, as a counterpart to your very effective high-dollar and affinity programs — is the simplest way to help engineer positive change. To achieve this, Federations must develop specific campaigns and message tracks for small donors, acknowledging that successful low-dollar online engagement strategies speak to their audiences in ways entirely unfamiliar to high-dollar fundraising programs.

The report details a number of tactical changes that we recommend to move this strategy forward. They are actionable by both individual Federations and the UJC, and touch on issues of email acquisition, content development and messaging strategy, appeal program structure, calendaring, testing, and more.

Separately, we have recommended a path forward for technology development across the system, after a detailed analysis of your current technology and what we think the UJC and Federations need in order to be successful online.

We recognize that the success of the program we recommend depends in large part on the resources at local Federations, and it is our hope that UJC will continue to provide extra assistance to small and intermediate Federations to help them multiply their impact.

### For more information

Please contact Vincent Mota, Director of Online Philanthropy for copies of the report and the UJC Guidebook for Online Engagement.