

## The Shifting Landscape

*Public Relations and Philanthropic Fundraising in 2025*

*July 1, 2025, by Robert Hornsby, Founder, Practicum Strategy*

### Executive Summary

This report analyzes the evolving relationship between public relations (PR) and philanthropic fundraising, focusing on trends since January 1, 2025. It examines the impact of US federal funding cuts on nonprofits and highlights strategies employed by resilient entities. PR has become a strategic imperative, directly driving revenue and cultivating donor trust.

The philanthropic landscape is shifting towards digital, personalized, and impact-driven fundraising, accelerated by technology and evolving donor expectations. Federal funding reductions have created a service gap and operational strain. These challenges have, however, catalyzed innovation and diversification, compelling organizations to redefine operations, funding, and stakeholder engagement. The sector is undergoing a rapid redefinition, becoming more agile, data-driven, and donor-centric.

### The Evolving Nexus: Public Relations as a Cornerstone of Philanthropic Fundraising

Public relations is an indispensable strategic asset for nonprofits, moving beyond traditional communication to directly influence fundraising and ensure sustainability. PR is a vital, revenue-generating tool for securing support and cultivating enduring donor relationships.<sup>1</sup> A significant shift in perception elevates PR from a perceived cost center to a strategic investment, yielding tangible returns.

Effective PR strategies amplify a nonprofit's mission, bolster credibility, and generate fundraising momentum.<sup>1</sup> Meticulously crafting compelling narratives and maintaining consistent messaging across all channels achieves this. Nonprofit leaders must integrate public relations deeply into strategic planning and financial models, ensuring PR is adequately resourced and aligned with broader fundraising goals.

Beyond financial contributions, public relations attracts monetary and human resources, such as dedicated volunteers, essential for mission fulfillment.<sup>3</sup> Habitat for Humanity, for instance, leverages PR to recruit volunteers and secure donations, while Big Brothers Big Sisters highlights volunteer experiences to attract new mentors.<sup>3</sup>

### Building Trust and Credibility Through Authentic Communication

Successful fundraising links intrinsically to maintaining a positive public image and cultivating deep trust among donors, volunteers, and the community.<sup>1</sup> In an environment of diminishing resources,

heightened competition, and declining public trust, authenticity, transparency, and mission commitment are foundational.<sup>5</sup> Open communication about successes and challenges, coupled with clear accountability, distinguishes nonprofits. Such an approach fosters a resilient, loyal donor base and directly counters misperceptions about nonprofit efficiency.<sup>8</sup> A well-executed PR strategy positions the nonprofit as a credible partner, crucial for forging relationships and securing vital funding.<sup>2</sup>

### **Amplifying Mission and Impact to Attract Resources**

Nonprofit PR professionals distill complex social issues into compelling, emotionally resonant stories that inspire action and vividly showcase impact.<sup>3</sup> Rather than stating a homeless shelter provides beds, PR highlights how it "transforms lives."<sup>3</sup> Environmental organizations preserve ecosystems, not just plant trees.<sup>3</sup>

Focusing on individual stories and tangible human impact allows nonprofits to bypass abstract budget discussions, appealing directly to empathy and making funding gaps urgent. Such a strategy serves as a powerful fundraising tool and cultivates broader public understanding and advocacy.

Leveraging strong media relations through compelling press releases and journalist relationships boosts visibility and credibility, establishing the organization as a trusted voice.<sup>1</sup> Regular media coverage, as seen with Doctors Without Borders during the Ebola crisis, increases donations and volunteer applications.<sup>3</sup>

Digital platforms, especially social media, are indispensable for real-time connection, sharing success stories, and fostering dynamic dialogue.<sup>1</sup> Short, emotional video content and SMS campaigns prove exceptionally effective, with text messages boasting open rates as high as 98%.<sup>7</sup>

### **Recent Philanthropic Fundraising Trends (Since January 2025)**

The philanthropic landscape has shifted significantly since early 2025, reflecting evolving donor behaviors and technological advancements.

#### **Digital-First and Hyper-Personalized Giving Experiences**

The philanthropic landscape in 2025 is digital-first, with widespread adoption of virtual events, mobile donation platforms, social media campaigns, and QR codes for accessible giving.<sup>9</sup> Evolving donor expectations, particularly among younger generations, drive a transformation towards hyper-personalized experiences.<sup>10</sup> Nonprofits leverage data and AI to deliver tailored communications and giving opportunities reflecting individual interests.<sup>7</sup> Personalized messages correlate directly with higher donor retention.<sup>7</sup> Failure to meet these expectations risks alienating donor segments, necessitating investment in digital infrastructure and data analytics.

## **The Rise of AI and Automation in Fundraising**

Artificial Intelligence (AI) rapidly transforms fundraising efficiency and streamlines nonprofit operations. Organizations leverage AI for content generation, donor journey mapping, predictive analytics, and business simulation.<sup>7</sup> Automating repetitive tasks is a key benefit of AI, freeing staff for strategic initiatives.<sup>10</sup> AI adoption has boosted fundraising revenue; a 2024 study found 30% of nonprofits using AI informally reported increased revenue.<sup>7</sup> AI enables hyper-personalization and operational efficiency, offering a scalable solution to "do more with less." Ethical implications like data privacy and bias must be addressed through clear policies.<sup>10</sup>

## **Impact-Driven Giving and Radical Transparency**

In 2025, donors prioritize witnessing direct, measurable results and tangible differences from their contributions.<sup>9</sup> Economic uncertainty makes donors cautious, seeking assurance their contributions are effectively utilized.<sup>8</sup> Nonprofits intensify focus on quantifiable outcomes, providing clearer data and compelling stories to demonstrate impact.<sup>9</sup> Radical transparency, sharing financial data and program results, builds profound trust and sustained support.<sup>7</sup> Emotional appeal is no longer sufficient; it must couple with concrete evidence. Such a trend necessitates investment in data collection and transparent communication.

## **Micro-Donations, Recurring Gifts, and Peer-to-Peer Campaigns**

The popularity of micro-donations and recurring gift models reshapes individual contributions, enabling consistent support without substantial upfront commitments.<sup>9</sup> Such a model offers predictable revenue and increases donor retention.<sup>11</sup> The rise of these models adapts to economic realities, as rising costs mean fewer individuals can afford large, one-time donations.<sup>8</sup> Micro-donations lower financial barriers, enabling broader participation. The trend also taps into "FOMO," where individuals want to be part of collective change.<sup>11</sup>

Year-round peer-to-peer fundraising campaigns gain traction, leveraging supporters' personal networks to expand reach and engage new donors.<sup>10</sup> An approach like this democratizes giving and is cost-effective for new donor acquisition. Nonprofits should prioritize cultivating a diverse base of consistent, smaller donors for stable revenue. Optimizing digital platforms for recurring giving and empowering supporters as fundraisers is required.

## **Collaborative Philanthropy and Influencer Engagement**

Collaboration emerges as a central theme, with donors, foundations, and nonprofits pooling resources to address systemic issues and maximize collective impact.<sup>9</sup> The scale of societal challenges, often exacerbated by federal cuts, exceeds single organization capacity. Collaboration allows shared resources, diversified expertise, and a comprehensive approach, making initiatives attractive to funders. This reflects a shift from competition to strategic partnerships.

Partnering with influencers, especially micro-influencers with engaged niche audiences, amplifies reach and impact.<sup>10</sup> These collaborations tap into new target audience segments and foster deeper engagement. Influencers provide a cost-effective way to build trust and reach new audiences.

Nonprofits should cultivate strategic partnerships—with other nonprofits, corporations, and influencers—to expand reach, share burdens, and achieve systemic change.

**Table 1: Key Fundraising Trends (January 2025 Onwards)**

Trend Name	Brief Description	Why it Matters	Relevant Sources
<b>Digital-First Fundraising</b>	Widespread adoption of virtual events, mobile platforms, social media-driven campaigns, and QR codes for accessible giving.	Makes giving more flexible and accessible, aligning with digital native donor preferences; essential for reaching younger generations.	9
<b>Hyper-Personalization</b>	Use of data and AI to deliver tailored communications, invitations, and giving opportunities reflecting individual donor interests and values.	Increases donor retention and deeper engagement by making interactions more meaningful; generic messages are no longer effective.	7
<b>AI &amp; Automation</b>	Leveraging AI for content generation, donor journey mapping, predictive analytics, and automating repetitive tasks.	Enhances fundraising efficiency, frees up staff for strategic work, and has shown to boost fundraising revenue.	7
<b>Impact-Driven Giving</b>	Donors prioritize seeing direct, measurable results and tangible differences from their contributions.	Builds trust and encourages sustained support by demonstrating accountability and effective use of funds; shifts focus from good intentions to outcomes.	9
<b>Radical Transparency</b>	Openly sharing financial data, program results, challenges, and lessons learned with stakeholders.	Builds profound trust and fosters loyal, sustained support, especially in times of scrutiny and economic uncertainty; counters public misconceptions.	7
<b>Micro-Donations &amp; Recurring Gifts</b>	Shift towards smaller, consistent, recurring donations rather than large, one-time gifts.	Provides predictable revenue streams, increases donor retention, and lowers financial	9

Trend Name	Brief Description	Why it Matters	Relevant Sources
		barriers for broader donor participation.	
<b>Peer-to-Peer Fundraising</b>	Empowering supporters to fundraise on behalf of the organization by leveraging their personal networks.	Cost-effective way to expand reach, engage new donors, and tap into collective action beyond urgent needs.	10
<b>Collaborative Philanthropy</b>	Donors, foundations, and nonprofits pooling resources to address systemic issues and maximize collective impact.	Allows for shared resources, diversified expertise, and a more comprehensive approach to complex problems, making initiatives more attractive.	9
<b>Influencer Engagement</b>	Partnering with influencers, especially micro-influencers, to amplify reach and impact among niche audiences.	Taps into new segments of target audiences, fosters deeper engagement, and offers a cost-effective way to build trust through authentic endorsements.	10

### Navigating the Headwinds: Impact of US Federal Funding Cuts on Nonprofits

Since early 2025, the US nonprofit sector has grappled with a complex financial landscape due to significant reductions in federal funding.<sup>16</sup> Approximately one-third of US nonprofits receive government support; for over 35,000 organizations, federal grants constitute over half their revenue.<sup>16</sup> Federal budget policy profoundly impacts operational viability. Discretionary domestic spending is projected to decrease by up to 8% in real terms over the next two fiscal years, with severe cuts anticipated in housing, labor, and education.<sup>16</sup>

Agency downsizing and consolidation (e.g., HUD, EPA, HHS, DOE) compound the trend, along with longer grant disbursement delays.<sup>16</sup> Sectors particularly hard-hit include housing, education (e.g., AmeriCorps, Head Start), workforce development, public health (rural healthcare, mental health), food security, and victim services.<sup>16</sup> This dependence exposes the sector to systemic risk. The ripple effect extends beyond financial loss to operational instability and increased administrative burdens.<sup>16</sup> The situation underscores an urgent need for nonprofits to diversify funding and engage in policy advocacy.<sup>24</sup>

## **Operational and Programmatic Challenges Faced by Impacted Organizations**

Federal cuts create compounding financial strain and workforce instability. Organizations experience increased overhead costs due to inflation, affecting food, technology, and wages.<sup>16</sup> A Montana food bank reported food costs as its biggest line item at \$1.6 million, making inflation a significant budgetary impact.<sup>20</sup> Federal cuts result in delayed or reduced grant payments, necessitating robust cash flow planning.<sup>16</sup>

Many organizations, especially those reliant on government reimbursements, implement staff layoffs or hiring freezes.<sup>16</sup> This exacerbates workforce challenges, including retaining talent and offering competitive wages.<sup>12</sup> Some reports indicate three out of four nonprofits eliminated staff and reduced programs.<sup>25</sup> Programs are scaled back or eliminated, leading to increased workloads, burnout, and decreased morale.<sup>25</sup> Rural healthcare clinics, for example, reduce hours, causing staff attrition and limiting patient access.<sup>20</sup> Financial strain and workforce instability undermine human capital and operational capacity, making new funding harder to secure. Addressing the crisis requires alternative funding and strategic investments in workforce resilience.

## **Increased Demand for Services Amidst Diminished Resources**

Despite funding cuts, demand for critical services escalates, particularly from nonprofits serving low-income families.<sup>16</sup> Heightened demand spans food security, housing, healthcare, and mental health.<sup>16</sup> A food bank respondent noted increased demand as inflation raised food prices.<sup>20</sup> AmeriCorps grant terminations, cutting over 32,000 jobs and 1,000 programs, directly impact vulnerable communities.<sup>22</sup> The situation highlights a widening "service gap" and its societal consequences, exposing the nonprofit sector's role as a critical safety net.

Federal cuts shift the burden to local governments and nonprofits. When nonprofits cannot fill this gap, vulnerable populations lack critical support. The human cost is evident in a father whose son's speech program was terminated.<sup>22</sup> Nonprofits struggle to meet surging demand, creating service gaps and exacerbating disparities.<sup>20</sup> Such a crisis poses a long-term societal risk, reinforcing the urgent argument for greater public and private philanthropic investment.

## **Resilience and Adaptation: Strategies for Thriving Amidst Funding Uncertainty**

Despite adverse federal funding cuts, many nonprofits demonstrate remarkable resilience and cope effectively through strategic adaptation.

### **Diversifying Funding Streams**

Resilient nonprofits proactively diversify funding, moving beyond heavy reliance on federal grants. Expanding individual giving, cultivating new foundations, and forging corporate partnerships are included.<sup>16</sup> The abrupt nature of federal cuts highlights the risk of over-reliance on a single funding stream. Diversification is a critical strategy for financial resilience. Key tactics involve revitalizing major donor strategies, hosting impactful events, and cultivating personalized donor journeys.<sup>16</sup> A

forced evolution in nonprofit funding models is reflected, shifting to a proactive, multi-faceted approach. Internal capacity building in individual donor cultivation and CSR partnerships is necessitated.<sup>28</sup> Robust donor relationship management systems are implied to support personalized engagement.

### **Strategic Partnerships and Coalition Building**

Nonprofits actively form coalitions and networks to share resources, expertise, and enhance funding through joint grant applications.<sup>16</sup> The scale of challenges often exceeds individual organization capacity. Partnerships allow shared risk, pooled resources, and a stronger collective voice, attracting funders. Collaborations with corporations, other nonprofits, and state/local governments prove effective in expanding reach and transferring credibility.<sup>3</sup> The advice to "Partner with other nonprofits... instead of seeing them as competition"<sup>8</sup> highlights a shift. A maturation of the nonprofit sector is signified, prioritizing integrated ecosystems. Mergers and strategic partnerships emerge as viable strategies for impacted nonprofits.<sup>18</sup> Nonprofit leaders must cultivate strategic partnerships, formalizing collaborations that leverage complementary strengths.

### **Investing in Workforce Resilience and Internal Capacity**

Resilient organizations invest in workforce resilience, including cross-training staff, upgrading internal systems for flexible service delivery, and promoting a positive culture.<sup>7</sup> Addressing the "talent crunch" and retaining top talent through growth opportunities are critical PR challenges for 2025.<sup>7</sup> A stable, skilled workforce is the bedrock for all organizational functions. Federal cuts exacerbate staffing issues (layoffs, hiring freezes, burnout), making internal resilience a prerequisite for external success. Strong internal communication links to retaining staff; happy teams lead to better external PR.<sup>7</sup> While workforce challenges persist, one report suggests a 15% decrease in organizations with staffing shortages.<sup>25</sup> Organizational resilience is about human capital management. Nonprofits must prioritize internal communications and HR strategies as integral to PR and fundraising.

### **Leveraging Public Concern and Advocacy for Support**

Nonprofits strategically leverage public concern from federal funding cuts and economic shifts to launch targeted appeals.<sup>16</sup> Such an approach frames the crisis as a catalyst for advocacy and direct donor appeals. Directly linking policy changes to human impact (e.g., focusing on "the people being harmed"<sup>6</sup>) galvanizes public and philanthropic support. Organizations taking clear policy positions (e.g., voting rights, environmental deregulation) attract significant, often multi-year, support.<sup>10</sup> A growing trend sees funders viewing advocacy as a high-impact investment. A more proactive and politically engaged nonprofit sector recognizes that influencing the environment is crucial. Nonprofits must be astute in political engagement and vocal about policy consequences.

### **Innovative Fundraising Models and Digital Philanthropy**

Resilient organizations aggressively embrace digital philanthropy, utilizing donor-advised funds (DAFs), monthly giving programs, and crowdfunding.<sup>10</sup> Unreliable traditional funding compels a

more entrepreneurial approach. Beyond traditional donations, organizations explore novel revenue streams: social enterprises, membership models, and facility rentals.<sup>13</sup> Innovative financing models like impact investing are also explored.<sup>28</sup> A fundamental shift in nonprofit business models towards financial independence is signified. Creating "earned income" rather than solely relying on "donated income" is involved. Strategic planning and new business skills are required.

**Table 2: Resilient Nonprofit Archetypes and Their Coping Strategies**

Archetype/Type of Organization	Key Coping Strategies	Why These Strategies are Effective	Relevant Sources
<b>Organizations Diversifying Funding</b>	Aggressively expanding individual giving, cultivating new foundations, forging corporate partnerships, revitalizing major donor strategies.	Reduces over-reliance on single funding sources, builds financial resilience, and taps into broader philanthropic interest.	16
<b>Coalitions &amp; Network Builders</b>	Forming partnerships to share resources (grant writing, operations, infrastructure), engaging in joint grant applications, and exploring mergers.	Shares risk and burden, pools expertise, amplifies collective voice, and increases efficiency in resource-constrained environments.	16
<b>Workforce-Focused Organizations</b>	Investing in cross-training, flexible work models, positive organizational culture, professional development, and strong internal communication.	Enhances versatility, improves staff retention, boosts morale, and ensures operational continuity despite staffing challenges.	7
<b>Advocacy-Prioritizing Nonprofits</b>	Leveraging public concern over federal cuts for targeted appeals, taking clear positions on policy issues (e.g., voting rights, environment, housing).	Galvanizes public and philanthropic support by translating policy impacts into human stories; attracts multi-year institutional funding by demonstrating high-impact investment.	10
<b>Digital Philanthropy Adopters</b>	Utilizing DAFs, monthly giving programs, crowdfunding,	Scales online donations, engages younger donors who prioritize immediacy and	10



Archetype/Type of Organization	Key Coping Strategies	Why These Strategies are Effective	Relevant Sources
	social enterprises, and membership models.	transparency, and creates diversified, sustainable earned income streams.	
<b>Organizations with Strong State/Local Ties</b>	Actively securing funding from state and municipal governments, which are filling federal gaps.	Accesses new waves of funding with faster response cycles and stronger community alignment, leveraging proactive state investments.	16
<b>Organizations in High-Visibility/Crisis-Response Sectors</b>	Mental health, hunger, and disaster relief organizations frequently supported through checkout giving.	Benefit from immediate public empathy and consumer-driven micro-donations during crises or heightened public awareness.	30
<b>Organizations Attracting Major Private Philanthropy</b>	Journalism, climate funding, and medical research organizations attracting significant private foundation support.	Can secure substantial, sometimes multi-year, commitments from foundations actively stepping up to address critical gaps left by federal cuts.	19

### Strategic Recommendations for Sustainable Growth

To navigate persistent uncertainty and achieve sustainable growth, nonprofit leaders and philanthropic strategists must adopt a holistic, proactive approach. Interconnected strategies are crucial, as individual efforts are significantly amplified when integrated into a comprehensive organizational framework.

- 1. Integrate Public Relations as a Core Strategic Function:** Public relations must be elevated from a communications support role to a central strategic function directly driving revenue and building trust. Deep cross-departmental alignment among PR, development, and marketing teams is required, ensuring consistent messaging and shared objectives. Empowering all staff and board members as organizational ambassadors, equipped with clear talking points, can unlock new connections and unexpected funding opportunities.<sup>2</sup>
- 2. Invest in Digital and AI Capabilities:** Prioritize the adoption and optimization of digital-first fundraising platforms, hyper-personalization tools, and strategic AI exploration. AI can enhance efficiency through predictive analytics for donor behavior, content creation for

outreach, and automation of routine tasks, freeing staff for strategic work.<sup>7</sup> Concurrently, developing and adhering to a clear ethical AI policy is essential to maintain donor trust and prevent misuse.<sup>15</sup>

3. **Champion Radical Transparency and Impact Storytelling:** Make transparency a cornerstone of all communications. Openly sharing measurable outcomes, detailed program results, and even organizational challenges and lessons learned is involved. Narratives should focus on the tangible human impact of services, as this deeply resonates with impact-driven donors and builds enduring loyalty. Communicating the direct effects of funding cuts on the people served, rather than just the organization, can galvanize support.<sup>5</sup>
4. **Diversify and Innovate Revenue Streams:** Actively cultivate a broad spectrum of funding sources to reduce reliance on any single stream. Aggressively pursuing individual donors, forging new corporate partnerships, and engaging private foundations are included. Explore and implement innovative models such as recurring giving programs, social enterprises (e.g., mission-aligned businesses), membership models, facility rentals, and impact investing to build a resilient, multi-faceted revenue portfolio.<sup>13</sup>
5. **Strengthen Internal Resilience and Workforce Support:** Proactively address staffing challenges by investing in comprehensive professional development, offering flexible work arrangements (e.g., remote/hybrid options), and fostering a positive organizational culture. Prioritize internal communication and invest in cross-training and robust internal systems to enhance operational efficiency and staff well-being. A stable, skilled, and motivated workforce is foundational for effectively executing all external strategies and delivering on the mission.<sup>7</sup>
6. **Cultivate Strategic Partnerships and Advocacy:** Actively form coalitions and networks with other nonprofits, corporations, and community stakeholders to share resources, leverage complementary strengths, and amplify impact. Seek multi-year grants from foundations to provide greater stability. Engage proactively with state and local governments, which are increasingly filling federal funding gaps. Leveraging public concern over funding cuts can also be a powerful tool to advocate for supportive policies and attract new philanthropic support.<sup>8</sup>

These recommendations underscore that organizational survival and growth in 2025 depend on a strategically integrated approach where public relations and fundraising drive mission impact and financial sustainability.

## **Conclusion: Charting a Resilient Future for the Nonprofit Sector**

This report highlights public relations' critical role in philanthropic fundraising in 2025. PR, through authentic storytelling, builds trust, amplifies mission, and drives resources. Transformative fundraising trends since January 2025 include digital-first, hyper-personalized giving, AI adoption,

and heightened donor demand for impact and transparency. Micro-donations, recurring gifts, peer-to-peer campaigns, and collaborative philanthropy signify a democratization of giving. US federal funding cuts have created operational challenges and increased demand for services, exposing systemic vulnerability. Resilient organizations employ powerful strategies: diversifying funding, strategic partnerships, workforce resilience, advocacy, and innovative digital philanthropy. The current environment demands a comprehensive, integrated strategic response. Technological shifts, evolving donor behaviors, and unpredictable funding necessitate a proactive, adaptive approach. The nonprofit sector, facing headwinds, shows remarkable ingenuity. By strategically integrating public relations, embracing technological advancements, prioritizing transparency and impact, diversifying revenue, and fostering collaborative ecosystems, nonprofits can navigate current challenges and chart a resilient future, ensuring continued vital impact.

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