

Social-Media Contests Bring In Donations and Enthusiastic Supporters

SOMEWHERE on YouTube, there's a video of a guy named Aaron biking 30 miles from downtown Washington to the suburbs and back in his underwear.

Aaron isn't an exhibitionist; he's an enthusiastic volunteer for a nonprofit group called Atlas Service Corps. He promised to buy a pair of tight white underpants and don them in very public fashion if he could raise 100 gifts of at least \$10 each on Facebook during this year's America's Giving Challenge, a contest sponsored by the Case Foundation.

Atlas Service Corps has dominated competitions like America's Giving Challenge thanks to volunteers like Aaron, who ask their friends to give small amounts. In less than two years, Atlas Service Corps, which provides nonprofit workers from around the world the chance to work for a year at charities in the United States, has raised or won \$150,000 in three contests to see who can best use social-

networking sites to reap donations.

During this year's Giving Challenge, Atlas Service Corps recruited 150 "campaign captains"—people who knew the charity well or had supported it in the past—to help solicit gifts of at least \$10 using the Facebook Causes application. The captains contacted friends through Facebook, of course, but also mailed postcards provided by the charity and held evening events during which they called people they knew as well as donors who had given to the charity in the past.

Atlas Service Corps also set up "giving clubs" for people who were willing to give a small amount every day for 10 or 20 days straight.

"Instead of one full-time development person, we had 150 part-time development people who were out there raising money for us," says Scott Beale, the charity's 33-year-old founder.

Thanks to those efforts, Atlas Service Corps received

2,556 donations totaling more than \$32,000, enabling the group to secure \$10,000 from the contest's sponsors. The charity raised about the same amount in last year's competition, for which it won a \$50,000 prize. It also won a contest earlier this year sponsored by Ideablob, a now-defunct project of the Advanta Corporation that linked small-business owners with one another.

Building a Donor List

For a charity whose budget is just \$500,000, those sums are significant. Mr. Beale says the contests have been important not only for ginning up gifts but for helping to create a list of 2,500 individuals, whom the charity now solicits in more traditional ways.

Mr. Beale says he doesn't think the social-media approach replaces other fundraising tools, but it "provides such a great opportunity to reinforce the ask and, perhaps most importantly, to empower your supporters."



Atlas Service Corps sent postcards to supporters to persuade them to give.

While social-media contests are popular now, they might not always exist as a strategy. So Mr. Beale says he is mulling other ways to create a competitive environment for donors to give on social media, such as asking a foundation to put up a challenge grant.

When the charity isn't involved in a competition, it uses social-networking sites to talk about its work and build a sense of connection among its online fans. Mr. Beale says he's careful not to hit up Facebook fans and Twitter followers too often for money and

has decided against entering several contests out of concern that the timing wasn't right.

After America's Giving Challenge ended in November, he didn't expect to make another round of online pleas until well into 2010. But then J.P. Morgan Chase announced that it would give \$25,000 to 100 small charities that received the most votes on Facebook by December 11, an opportunity Mr. Beale says was "too hard to pass up." Five of those groups will win an additional \$100,000 in a second round of voting; the winner will get \$1-million.

Mr. Beale has met many other young, like-minded charity leaders through past online contests. Now he's working with eight of them to create a common "ballot" to encourage Facebook voters—who can choose up to 20 charities—to select all of their groups. "We think that by working together, we can advance all our programs," he says.

—CAROLINE PRESTON