A photograph of two cyclists in a grassy field at sunset. The cyclist on the left is wearing a blue shirt, a backpack, and a helmet, and is high-fiving the cyclist on the right. The cyclist on the right is wearing a pink shirt, a backpack, and a helmet. Both are standing next to their bicycles. The background shows a sunset sky and some trees.

WHITE PAPER

Best Practices for Retaining & Recruiting Event Participants

DonorDrive[®]

This white paper examines the recruiting and retention problems commonly facing events like walks and runs that fundraise through peer-to-peer software. It shows how one organization has maintained a **retention rate of 70%** for their event and suggests proven best practices for retaining current participants and presents elements of a sound strategy for recruiting new ones.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	4
Retention best practices	7
Success story: Ride Closer to Free	13
Creating a campaign to get lapsed participants back	16
Building a recruitment strategy	19
Conclusion	25

intro

Two problems facing most nonprofits that fundraise through peer-to-peer events today are:

- 1. Losing participants**
- 2. Struggling to find new ones**

While these are having a negative impact on a lot of events, many DonorDrive clients are growing their events. To get to the core of the problem, it's important to understand why these issues happen in the first place.

Why we lose participants

There are many reasons why someone may no longer participate in your event:



It doesn't fit their schedule this year. On your event day, a number of your participants may just not be available.



They've moved out of the area. This is common with younger participants.



They've lost touch with the friend who got them involved. Often team members join an event because a friend was captain. They're likely to leave if the captain does when they don't have a direct connection to the cause.



They're no longer physically able to participate. This type of participant attrition is common if your event has been around for a long time.



Their interest in the cause has waned. Interest in organizations often has a lifespan. If someone participated while a family member was ill, there may not be the same urgency to fundraise once that person gets better. If they joined in honor of someone they've lost, they may lose interest after closure.

Why we can't find new participants

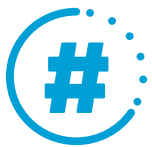
Likewise, there are many reasons you can't find new ones:



It doesn't fit their schedule—anytime. As a society, we've gravitated to on-demand lifestyles. Physical events at a specific date and time just might not be appealing to some who want to help your organization, but want to do it on their own schedule.



The event has lost its cool factor. What appealed to original participants may not be appealing to younger participants.



The cause is not trending anymore. It's a sad truth that causes that are out of sight can become out of mind for participants.

It's good to know that these odds for retention and recruitment are not insurmountable. We see many of our nonprofit clients beat them every year. The purpose of this white paper is to present best practices we've learned from DonorDrive clients that you can follow to improve your event retention and recruitment.

Retention *best practices*

A big cause for loss of event revenue in recent years is poor participant retention. When retention goes down, you have to recruit even more participants than in previous years just to break even. The retention problem is actually worse than many calculate. Research in DonorDrive shows that **returning participants raise 2.5 times as much as new participants**. So for every 100 participants your event loses, you'll need 250 new ones to make up the difference in revenue.

Pointers on creating a retention strategy

Here is a nine-point plan for building your own retention strategy:

1. **Start your retention plan the moment you meet a participant**
2. **Prioritize participants and really give them priority**
3. **Connect those who are not closely connected**
4. **Make event day unforgettable**
5. **Document the event in photographs and video**
6. **Let them know they've made a difference**
7. **"Thanks" should be a constant conversation starter**
8. **Make being an alum cool**
9. **Take your event year round**

1. Start your retention plan the moment you meet a participant

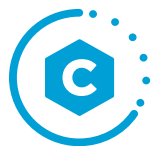
When supporters register to walk this year, it plays into retention for next year. Based on their complete experience with registration, fundraising and participation on event day, they'll decide if they'll be back. Getting them back successfully can depend on how you communicate with them, how you encourage them, how you help them be successful and how you make them feel successful. If they come away with the feeling that they made a difference, they're more likely to come back next year.

2. Prioritize participants and really give them priority

A good place to start is to segment top fundraisers, team captains and those connected to the cause:



Top Fundraisers — Treat them like major donors. Run reports to find the participants that drive the most dollars so you can build a closer relationship with them. And make sure you're not mass marketing to them the way that you would someone who raises \$10. Get to know them by name and take the time to recognize their extra effort.



Team Captains — Losing a captain from your event can mean losing a dozen participants and the thousands of dollars the team brings in. Talk to the team captains and make sure they have the tools they need to keep their team motivated.



The Connected — Those with a strong connection to your mission are also an important segment. Thank them appropriately and recognize that they have a personal connection. Find out who among your participants go really deep with the cause. You can talk to them about deeper subjects that casual donors and participants may not be interested in, like research and long-term plans for your mission.

3. Connect those who are not closely connected

Many participants have no connection with your cause or organization, but signed up because a friend asked. To get them back to your event, you have to connect them to the mission. Thank them, inform them about your organization's progress and let them know you're aware of their efforts, no matter how small. Make sure they know about the people they've helped. Show them how the organization has impacted one person so that they can connect with the mission and better understand the good they've just done.

4. Make event day unforgettable

Every detail you get right on event day contributes to a better experience and makes participants more likely to come back. It's not just the expected things, like having a motivating speaker on stage, it's having a good PA system so everyone can hear them. You have their attention with what you do on stage. If all you're doing is having your executives come up or talk about the logistics of the run, you're not really helping yourself retain those participants.

But if you introduce them all to someone who was helped by your organization, you're more likely to get your participants to feel emotionally attached and to understand the importance of what they're doing.

Beyond making sure the basics go smoothly at your event, you must create a moment. Something should happen on event day that takes your participants' breath away: A surprise, an emotional moment, a burst of fireworks, a collective feeling of joy, the realization that they are a part of something special and powerful. That's where you should set the bar.

5. Document the event in photographs and video

Good event documentation really pays off. If you don't have a volunteer who's a good photographer, hire one. Also, ask your supporters to share the video they've recorded at the event. Tease these out throughout the year to help participants relive the experience. People love looking at pictures of themselves and people they know. That's going to give them a warm feeling about the event they experienced, which is important as you get closer to next year's registration. Put those photos and videos in the context of "Look at what we did together."

6. Let them know they've made a difference

Participants want to know that their efforts paid off, that they did something worthwhile. Tell them how important they are. If they didn't go out and raise that money, your nonprofit wouldn't be able to run your programs and help as many people as you do. If you make them feel successful and feel that they made a difference in the mission, that's going to affect whether they come back next year.

7. “Thanks” should be the constant conversation starter

“Thanks” is a great introduction to further conversation with a participant. After you thank them, you should be telling them what you’re doing with the money they raised. If you don’t, you’re not connecting them with the mission and there’s a bigger likelihood they won’t come back. Noting their personal impact should accompany the thanks, take those opportunities to remind people about the difference their involvement made: Here’s how you moved the needle, here’s what you did to help the mission as a result of your involvement. “Thanks” makes a nice icebreaker for next year’s event.

8. Make being an alum cool

One thing that encourages participants to return is to make your alumni feel like an elite group that others will aspire to join. Giving them something they can be proud of encourages retention, as well as encourages better fundraising from them next year.

For a real-world example: DonorDrive’s Chief Strategy Officer Ed Lord created a participant’s club when he was with the American Cancer Society: *“We had special shirts for anyone that raised over a thousand dollars. So they were recognized in the crowd as frequent fundraisers and everyone at the event knew it by that shirt. We did a different color shirt each year with a date on it. People started collecting these and became determined to earn their shirt again next year.”*

Making your alums feel special gives them something they’ll attach a value to. This could be simple recognition of those who hit milestones in participation and fundraising, like a Five Year Club or noting on stage the people who’ve each raised more than \$10,000 over the years.

9. Take your event year round

Though your event is only one day out of the year, you can keep it top-of-mind all year long. Do something six months away from your event, maybe a gathering in a casual setting. A participant reunion in the middle of the year is great to get people back together just to have some fun. All these people shared in doing your event, so they have a common connection when they meet. It's also useful to ask them to bring a friend to this event, since it can bring new members into the family.

Another aspect of making your event resonate year round is regular communication. A monthly update email with news about what the event money funded, "thank you" discounts from sponsors and revealing next year's celebrity chairperson—will all help keep participants connected.

The continued success of your event depends on a sound retention strategy. While many organizations are struggling with retention, those that have a well-established strategy in place have been able to maintain and grow their events—despite the odds.

success story

How Ride Closer to Free built retention by building a ride community



Ride Closer to Free has an amazing retention rate. On average, 70% of their riders return the next year. Jessica Scheps, Development Event Specialist who heads up communications for Ride Closer to Free points out that their riders are extremely loyal: *“Retention has been fabulous. If people don’t come back it’s usually because they have a wedding or a date conflict.”*

On average, 70% of their riders return the next year.

These returning participants have a clear understanding of what’s expected of them: *“We don’t hear: ‘Oh no, another event. I just raised money a year ago, how am I going to do it again?’ People just say, ‘Oh, it’s time to fundraise again.’ They really go above and beyond. You do have people that struggle, but the majority of our folks are raising double what they’re asked. I think on average our riders last year raised \$1,200 and we asked them to raise \$500.”* Jessica feels the biggest factor that contributes to their high retention rate is the personal connection participants have with the hospital: *“We market our event across New England, but when it’s cancer and it’s your local hospital, that’s why our participants are here.”*



“On average our riders last year raised \$1,200 and we asked them to raise \$500.”

Another contributing factor is all communication—since the birth of the ride—has been through Jessica. She has become the face of the event, the one person every participant knows and trusts they'll get a straight answer from: *"I want folks to have one person to reach out to. So I give everybody my cell phone number and my email. When our event gets to be as big as it is now, I want everybody to get the same answer. I don't want there to be any confusion."*

Over the past two years, they've had a 53% increase in dollars raised with approximately the same number of riders.

Ride Closer to Free's growth continues to be exponential: **Over the past two years they've had a 53% increase in dollars raised** with approximately the same number of riders. Jessica feels the real key to success has been the community they've built: *"We've established a family around the ride and built a culture that values fundraising."* Again, the personal touch plays a big role: *"We've had fabulous growth, but we're small in the sense that I know almost all of our participants. They're all connected with the hospital. Some are patients and former patients. They work here or they have some kind of connection. If I don't know them, then I make it my mission to get to know them, especially if they're raising a lot of money and are doing this because of the care they're receiving here at the hospital. It requires time and effort to get to know everyone, but it goes a long way."*

Creating a campaign to get lapsed participants back

Lapsed participants, those who participated last year but haven't yet this year, require special attention. It's much easier to get these supporters back than to recruit people who don't know you. As we've seen, there are many reasons a participant may not be back, but don't assume you've lost them. A well-formulated campaign to get them back can be a successful part of your retention strategy.

First you must find out who your lapsed participants are. Shortly after you start the registration process, run a report to see who hasn't registered yet. Make sure you include how much they fundraised last year in your numbers so you can rank their value to your organization.

Targeted Email Campaign

Once you know who they are, address them with a targeted email campaign:



Email 1: Ask them back. Start with a friendly reminder noting you haven't seen them sign up yet. Tell them there's still time to register, fundraise and make a difference toward the mission. Include evocative images from last year's event. End with a call-to-action that steers them to your registration page.



Email 2: Ask them why. For those who haven't replied to Email 1, send out a survey and ask them why they're not back.



Email 3: Create a set of emails based on answers from the survey. If they've moved out of the area or can't make it on that date, encourage them to register and fundraise as a virtual participant. If their team captain left, encourage them to start their own team. If they had an issue with your event last year or just don't seem enthused, let them know how you've addressed concerns and improved this year's event. When you target your reply to their answer, you're more likely to eliminate their reason for not participating this year.



Email 4: Ask them again. For those who still haven't registered after Email 3, send one final message letting them know they'll be missed. Again, images or a link to an emotional video might encourage them to register. You might also make the mail dynamic and include data specific to them, like how much they raised last year. Reminding them of the impact they had may bring them back.

Some organizations factor in the fundraising value of lapsed participants, for example scratching last year's zero-dollar fundraisers off the list of participants to try to re-engage. It's also useful to personally address the biggest fundraisers on your lapsed-participant list personally in an email or phone call.

There's no reason why you can't encourage your participants from two or three years ago to register through a similar campaign. But note there can be diminishing returns in that: There will be more bad email addresses, more who have moved and more who are no longer connected with someone close to your organization. **The value of lapsed participants can't be emphasized enough.**

Stats from DonorDrive show that a returning participant raises 2.5 times as much than a new participant.



Building a recruitment *strategy*

There's no way to sugarcoat it: Recruitment is tough for every organization. That's why in this section we're not presenting you with a quick list of easy tips to solve your recruitment issues. This requires a much deeper conversation and a more complex strategy.

If you have a recruiting problem, then you definitely have a retention problem

Recruiting is the downside of retention: the participants you don't retain, you must recruit. **If you can get 80% of past participants back, great: You only have to come up with 20% new faces.** But for most organizations, an 80% retention rate is a distant dream. Having to recruit 50% (or more) of event participants seems common.

Here are what have proven to be the six most important points for developing a recruitment strategy:

1. **Get the word out to your current supporters**
2. **Don't focus on advertising**
3. **Get your event participants to recruit for you with teams**
4. **Nurture high-impact volunteers and have them do the recruiting**
5. **Update your event**
6. **If you're going to grow, you need growth goals**

1. Get the word out to your current supporters

Make sure you're letting every supporter know about your event. Your database is your most valuable tool in recruiting, so email everyone in it. Link to the registration page from your site and blog. Talk about the event on social media. Even if your current supporters have never participated before, they already know your organization and mission and don't need to be convinced of the value of their participation. Since you're already engaged with them, they're the most likely to register and the most likely to be good fundraisers.

2. Don't focus on advertising

Unfortunately, paid advertising to recruit participants often has a poor ROI. If you have a small promotional budget you may be better off spending it to boost social media posts about your event. Boosting a post on Facebook or Twitter can give your event exposure beyond your followers to people who have similar interest to your followers. Facebook and Twitter both offer targeting based on demographics and geography to better get your message into the timelines of those most likely to participate.

3. Get your event participants to recruit for you with teams

DonorDrive stats show our clients who promote teams in their events have an annual average growth of 28%. Teams work because the

recruiting effort by your current participants can be much more successful than those of your organization. They know all about your mission, know all about your event and are already participating themselves. Asking them to go the extra step and invite their friends and coworkers to join with them can be a great driver for recruiting.

If you multiply the number of participants on your registration list by an average of 250 friends in each of their networks, you'll be amazed at how many people that could be asked to participate. Teams are a great way to recruit and are especially valuable since **one team raises 10 times as much as an individual participant.** Here's how to encourage team participation:



Push corporate teams. Corporate teams can be a big piece of the recruiting puzzle for most organizations, since your supporters do the work and you can achieve numbers quickly. A key strategy is to identify that influencer within a company that has a connection to your cause. Once you've found that advocate, train them how to push for people to participate and fundraise. You can be a catalyst by doing things like creating a trophy that travels from office to office for best corporate team. It's part of an experience that encourages ongoing corporate participation within a company.



Push family teams. For some organizations, corporate involvement may not be considered appropriate. In this case, pushing more family teams could be the best way to recruit. Make sure you're doing everything you can to make your event a family-friendly one. If you're relying on friends and families to spread the word, invest heavily in producing event video. That's more important for this group than for corporate. Gaining momentum will be much more word-of-mouth and through social media.



Push captains to recruit bigger teams. Team members raise more than individual participants. If you can get each captain to add one more team member it can be a big boost to event revenue. An award for the biggest or most successful team can be a solid incentive.



Ask participants to team up with friends. Every participant is a potential team captain, but may never think of leading a team unless you ask. Don't make the request overwhelming: Just encourage them to team up with a few friends.

Ed Lord notes the real benefit of a team is that it makes people feel a part of something: *"People are social animals. They're not going to come out to an event by themselves. They're more likely to come with a group of people. So any strategy you have using Facebook or any social networking should be to get one person that's going to gather a group of people to come out to the event. It's not just advertising on Facebook, it's encouraging these people to get together."*

4. Nurture high-impact volunteers and have them do the recruiting

These are not those volunteers that put tablecloths on tables, hang up banners and post route signs. These are people within your organization who can tap into large-team recruitment. These volunteers will reveal themselves in your organization if you have an empowering volunteer structure. When you give your volunteers the power and the authority to achieve things, those people really feel they're making a difference and are much more likely to perform. Any time you spend on volunteer development can ultimately have a big impact on the growth of your event. When you get the right volunteers in the right spots, they'll help you grow exponentially.

5. Update your event

Many organizations with aging events have found ways to appeal to new audiences, as well as to keep current participants engaged:



Add multiple distances. Not everyone is interested in running a half marathon, riding a century or walking 20 miles. Add shorter and longer options to open your event up to those not as athletically inclined, as well as those looking to your event for training.



Add a fun run. Not only will you attract a younger crowd, but you'll also dramatically increase photos and videos of your event on social media.



Add virtual participation. This opens your event to those who've moved away and still want to help, as well as those who can't make it the day of the event. Some organizations have had luck with "sleep-in" campaigns that promote fundraising, but let the fundraiser sleep in on event day.



Shake it up. New event routes, new food vendors, a different kind of finish line party are all things that can add new life to seasoned events.

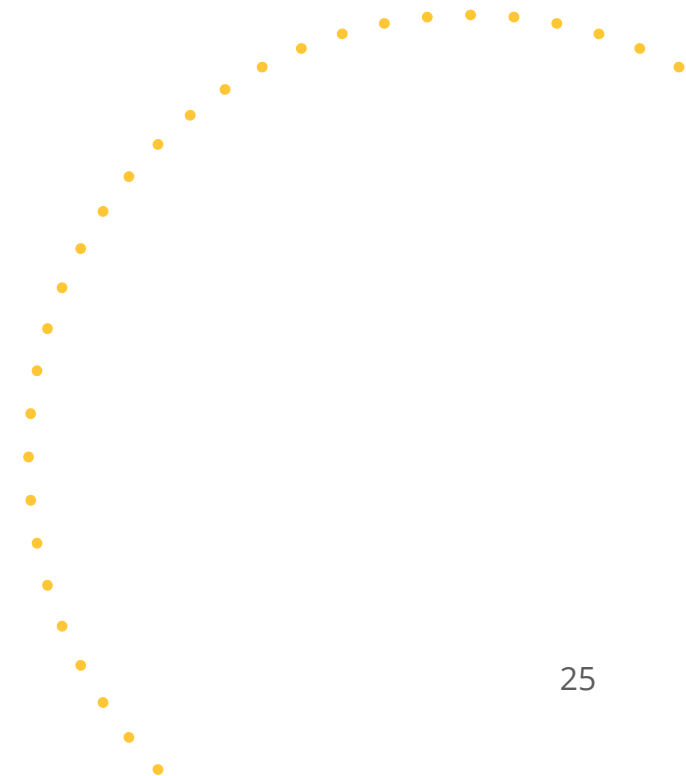
As opposed to offering everything, send out a survey and ask supporters and past supporters what additions they'd like.

6. If you're going to grow, you need growth goals

So far we've addressed recruitment from the aspect of fixing a numbers problem. But recruitment also plays an important role in growing your event. Setting honest and realistic goals is the best way to start. As an organization, people have to step back and ask what the goal is for your walk and be really specific about it. **If you're going to grow in dollars, you need to plan for where those dollars will come from.** Ask yourself if you'll grow the number of participants through teams, or the dollars raised per fundraiser or through sponsorship dollars. Evaluate and then come up with a plan that's realistic to achieve.

conclusion

Sector-wide, we're seeing many organizations faced with sagging or stagnating participant numbers and fundraising totals. But within the ranks for our DonorDrive clients, we're seeing many success stories for both new and older events growing. There really is hope through effective retention and recruiting practices. Creating a sound retention plan that includes realistic recruiting goals will make a positive difference in the future success of your events.



How DonorDrive helps you retain and recruit participants

DonorDrive Peer-to-Peer Fundraising is software that's built to help you retain more participants, to make recruiting easier for team captains, and to coach better fundraising from everyone.

1. **Fast Pass™** makes registration super easy for past participants.
2. **DonorDrive's Fundraiser Coach** encourages new participants to tell their story on their fundraising page and share it with friends. Those who tell their story raise 2.5 times more on average.
3. **Multi-person registration** lets captains and others register themselves and whole team at once.
4. **Achievement Badges** help foster loyalty and a sense of community among fundraisers by publicly recognizing their hard work.
5. **Lapsed, New and Returning participant reports** let you quickly segment supporters.
6. **Scheduled Messages** can target lapsed, new and returning participants with encouraging messages based on their actions or inactions.

To find out more about these and other powerful features that drive better fundraising, visit us at donordrive.com/features



About DonorDrive

DonorDrive helps nonprofits to raise more money through peer-to-peer fundraising software, marketing services, and award-winning websites. For 20 years, DonorDrive has helped organizations like Mothers Against Drunk Driving, Children's Miracle Network Hospitals, American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, and the Arthritis Foundation to raise more than \$1 Billion.

Find out more at [DonorDrive.com](https://www.donor-drive.com)

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