Flexible Digital Marketing Software for Nonprofits

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Alice Hendricks
CEO

CEOCFO: Ms. Hendricks, what is the idea behind Jackson River?
Ms. Hendricks: The main idea behind Jackson River is that non-profit organizations need more flexible, customizable, cutting-edge ways to achieve success with their digital fundraising and marketing efforts. I come from the technology space working with for-profit companies like Blackbaud, which provide all-in-one fundraising software to nonprofit organizations. These are often good enough tools, but they don't give cause-driven organizations the power that corporate tools designed for the for-profit space offer — products like email service provider tools, modern CRM and ecommerce technology, and the newer analytics and business intelligence products. The non-profit sector isn't able to leverage these new technologies and the strategies and methodologies they inspire to connect prospective supporters with a cause.

Our idea with Jackson River was to take those state-of-the-art corporate technologies, rework them a little bit and apply them to the non-profit space. It's an innovative, best-of-breed approach to solving the lack-of-flexibility problem that all-in-one software systems inevitably create. With our digital marketing software, Springboard, nonprofits get a very powerful platform that easily integrates with other digital marketing tools that our non-profit clients use. And in addition to software, Jackson River offers services to help our clients actually use these tools to achieve more success with their digital fundraising and marketing.
CEOCFO: What are some of the challenges in creating an offering for non-profits that would be different than creating for a commercial business?
Ms. Hendricks: The biggest challenge is the need to educate the non-profit sector that they have choices, that there are other ways to do things. What we are offering is a completely different model using a more modern strategic and technical approach, which many caused-based organizations haven’t yet encountered. We are not just saying “here is a competitive product and you should consider it.” Instead, our marketing must educate the sector around the “whys” — why you would need or want something different? How can you be more successful, how can your strategy for engaging supporters evolve, as a result of having more modern technology? Luckily, many nonprofits really seem to get the value — they have ambitious ideas, and they want better technology to support more robust online engagement strategies.

CEOCFO: What are the biggest misconceptions?
Ms. Hendricks: The biggest misconception is that organizations have to choose a single, one-size-fits-all solution, because there’s still a pervasive belief that software integration has to be difficult -- especially data integration. In the old days, technology was built as closed systems, and many legacy technologies do make integration difficult. But in the era of open source and open API technology, we’ve found that it is not difficult to, for example, integrate an email service provider (ESP), an ecommerce technology, or online marketing tools with a CRM. Springboard, our flagship product, natively integrates with Salesforce.com and other CRMs. Organizations can choose different CRMs, different solutions that are a best fit for their goals, and the integration isn’t nearly as hard as it used to be, because the platform is built with the assumption that there will need to be integrations with other technology.

CEOCFO: Do you find that non-profits miss the point?
Ms. Hendricks: No, non-profits acutely feel the pain of the gap between their hopes and expectations for engaging their constituents and the realities of inflexible technologies. The history of the non-profit space is a much longer story that I’ll save for another day.

What I find satisfying is seeing how Springboard allows causes that I care about to do so much more with their fundraising and marketing. We’ve built it to allow for an incredibly customizable donor experience, as that alone can make or break a conversion. Springboard also offers extensive analytics and testing, allowing non-profits to learn and grow the sophistication of their campaign techniques. Our clients have seen quite a lift because of the testing and targeting Springboard allows, also thanks to built-in marketing automation tools and sophisticated targeting and behavioral marketing.

CEOCFO: Are there typical types of non-profits that will turn to you?
Mr. Hendricks: I think that our best clients, the ones that like Jackson River the most, are the ones that have already found that the all-in-one tools are limited. These are the organizations asking themselves how they can implement a marketing strategy that will uniquely target their supports and allow them to raise more money online. Fundraising campaigns can be made or broken based on the limitations of a technology. We particularly appreciate organizations who want to do
something creative that is outside of the box, or who want to know more about their supporters and offer more targeted content or relevant experiences based on behavioral data. Our best clients are the ones that have grown out of the other tools and want to do something new, learn and know more about their supporter base, and have the ability to run campaigns that extend the boundaries of what is possible.

CEOCFO: Are clients coming to you for advice and development of campaigns in addition to the tools or is it more that they know what they want and they want you to implement it?
Ms. Hendricks: Both. Most clients want strategic advice and they want help setting up their tools, or help with techniques they want to implement like multivariate testing. We like to work hand-in-hand with our clients and are often providing some level of handholding, at least in the beginning. While they’re getting their new technology off the ground, many organizations are experimenting with a new engagement model, and they are more powerful when they have someone helping them with that. Our services approach is strategic and very consultative, seeking to make sure that our clients are empowered on the platform that they have chosen. We layer that approach into our overall offerings and into our technical support. All of our client interactions are about the most effective and creative ways of using our technology to achieve their digital marketing goals.

CEOCFO: When you are talking with a prospective client, do they understand the different levels on which you work?
Ms. Hendricks: I think that the answer is yes. We are a service-first business. We try to make sure that people know that the most important thing to us is that they are successful. Our business is almost 100 percent grown from existing client referrals. I’m extremely proud of my team. Springboard makes people happy. It’s an easy-to-use tool with beautiful administrative functions, but honestly, I think the services are the thing that makes our clients remark about us to their peers and helps our business grow.

CEOCFO: When you are working with a client and assessing how to help them, how do you factor in technology along with type of organization?
Ms. Hendricks: I have to say that this is largely due to experience. I have been doing this and working with non-profits for about 15 years, and all of our client-facing staff have done a stint in a non-profit. When we consider working with a new client, we run through a process of looking at the whole organization holistically and assessing what is happening in that organization, not just what technology they are using or what campaigns they are running, but who are their people, what are the skills of those people, and what processes are they using internally that are making or breaking what they are doing.

While technology is at the core of our business, it’s almost the least important part of the whole spectrum. We know the many different organizational models that non-profits have, and we think of what we do as digital capacity building. We assess an organization’s ability to be successful online. We help hire, train and make sure the right people are in the right jobs and are organized and managed well according to effective processes, so that their good work can actually happen effectively. Tools are important, but at the end of the day, people are what matters – the staff, the supporters they’re trying to reach people.
CEOCFO: How do you vet potential clients to be sure they are on the up an up and they are really using the money raised in the way they promise?
Ms. Hendricks: I vet clients extensively because I want to make sure that they are the right fit for our company. I will not sell something or begin a relationship with an organization if it is not the right fit. We are purposeful about our growth as a company, attempting to grow slow and steadily, and we only take on projects that we know we can deliver. Our clients’ experience with us is the most important thing to me. If we pick the wrong client with the wrong staff or needs that aren’t a match for us, it is not going to be good for either one of us, so I am very careful about that.

In regard to the second part of your question about how they are using the money they raise – sure, I look at accountability, but I’m much more interested in the impact the organization has and the way Jackson River’s tools and services support that impact. Contrary to common wisdom, it’s actually a problem for organizations when donations or grants go primarily toward program areas instead of the infrastructure and operating costs of a non-profit. That can really hurt an organization, because operational expenses – like supporting technology and supporting staff who are using technology to engage the public around a cause - are really important to how effective the programmatic work can be. When we look at reviews like Charity Navigator that say that this is a four-star charity and they are measured because they spend most of their money on program and not on other things, that is a not necessarily a good thing. It is important to spend money efficiently and prudently, but it is also important that donors realize that supporting the institution and their operating expenses are equally important. Overhead is necessary for programs to be effective: having strong and secure infrastructure, paying a living wage, and providing for the employees’ professional development and benefits is an often-overlooked cost in the mind of the donor I am not saying that you should overpay your CEO or waste money, but it is important to look at the whole picture of what it takes to run a successful organization.

CEOCFO: Is security an issue for non-profits?
Ms. Hendricks: I find that we do have to do a significant amount of education around security even though it is in the news all the time. I would agree with your other interviewees that this is something people hear about but think it is never going to happen to them or it might be too expensive. We took a gamble on betting that security is going to be increasingly important very soon, so we have started developing an incredibly secure infrastructure. We have gone through the levels of PCI compliance for our server technology, and we have brought in third-party security consultants to analyze our systems.

CEOCFO: Jackson River has been recognized by the Inc. 5000, so clearly business is good. What might be different a year or two down the road?
Ms. Hendricks: You’re right, business is great. There is a proliferation of new tools and strategies happening in the digital marketing space, and the more agile responsive we can be to this digital transformation, the better we will be. Non-profits have to respond to the online and mobile experience that their supporters are having as consumers – as supporters get used to sophisticated digital experiences offered by other
sectors, like mobile commerce and other purchasing cycles, non-profits will be expected to match that level of sophistication, and quickly.

**CEOCFO: Why is Jackson River a noteworthy company?**

**Ms. Hendricks:** Jackson River is noteworthy because we're completely different. We have a different model of technology and a different model of services and support than any of our competitors. Our clients get to take advantage of the most modern tools and strategies being pioneered in the for-profit world, reworked and made easy to use specifically for supporter engagement. Our clients don't ever get an entry-level “tech support person” on the line: we are small and cohesive, so the team that built a client’s digital presence is the team that supports them. We’re small, we’re selective, and we take on only what we know we can deliver. We’re deeply partnered with our clients, and we’re in it for their success.

Interview conducted by: Lynn Fosse, Senior Editor, CEOCFO Magazine