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## Technology, branding help smaller charities stand out

### Massachusetts' crowded nonprofit field makes it harder to get noticed

BY KEITH REGAN  
SPECIAL TO THE JOURNAL

Getting people to donate to a cause is never an easy task, and it may be particularly daunting in Massachusetts, where there are more nonprofits per capita than in any other state and where studies often show residents' generosity falls short compared with some other regions.

The challenge can be especially great for smaller nonprofits, those that rely on small staffs or bands of volunteers to raise funds, organize events and keep supporters informed on organizational work.

"It makes for an incredibly competitive environment," says Roger Sametz, president of Sametz Blackstone Associates, a Boston-based strategic communications firm whose nonprofit clients include the AIDS Action Committee and Massachusetts Audubon Society. "A lot of times we find charities think their organizations are intrinsically valuable and worth donating to. That doesn't mean it will be compelling to donors."

For small charities, creating a strong brand, a professional image and an organization in which everyone realizes their role in fund raising can level the playing field with larger groups that have massive development budgets.

"In some ways, the challenges are the same," Sametz says. "It's about finding new ways to get a message across, reaching new audiences."

Eileen Jones, founder and president of the Boston-based Gift of Hearing Foundation, which raises money to buy cochlear implants for people who become suddenly deaf, says she has relied largely on her own time and that of a dedicated advisory board and a board of directors.

The foundation plans to hold a gala in September at the estate of the Collings Foundation in Stow. Rarely opened to the public, the estate houses a rare car collection and the event will feature items donated by professional auto racer Tomas Scheckter, a member of the foundation's board. Jones hopes the event will raise enough to hire the first full-time staff.

"We're at the point where we need to bump up the levels of what we're doing to a larger scale," Jones says. "In order to reach those corporate donors that are outside the cochlear implant industry, we need to have that in place. You can't really run an organization without full-time people."

Many small charities find technology can help level the playing field.

Cambridge-based cMarket works with dozens of area nonprofits to get annual fund-raising auctions — often the most important event for a group's bottom line — more exposure by putting them online. CEO Jon Carson says

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fund-raising auctions raise \$16 billion annually and for good reason. "It's the single most pleasurable way a donor can give," he says.

In fact, when bidding ensues, donors even get a gaming-style rush out of the competition of trying to win an item. cMarket's goal is to evolve those fund-raising auctions from an art — one often plied by volunteers — to a science backed with the data that can be captured when bidding is taking place online.

Online auctions can quickly become the onramp to a wider online presence, Carson says, and because it uses a back-end approach in which users pay a percentage of their sales, small groups can afford an online presence, including listing in cMarket's Bidding for Good site, which can help even a local organization draw bidders from around the country to its auction.

"We hear all the time that people

want a professional external face on the Web for their organization, but that can be expensive to build from scratch.”

#### Quincy-based **Cradles to Crayons**

(C2C) couldn't do what it does without the Internet and related technology, says founder **Lynn Margherio**.

Five years ago, when the organization, which connects needy children with donated items such as school supplies, was getting started, it relied on fax machines to take orders. “We were getting swamped,” she recalls. “We'd get illegible handwriting and have to spend time calling back to be sure we had the right order.”

When a technology firm donated an

e-commerce system customized for the organization, it was able to increase dramatically what it could handle, both in terms of demand for its items and in terms of getting the most value out of the volunteers who work with the group. Last year, it moved 8,000 volunteers through its warehouse to help fill orders.

“I look at philanthropy as people giving time, treasures and talents — and technology plays a role in each,” says Margherio. C2C also uses e-newsletters from **Constant Contact** to keep volunteers and donors in the loop. “Without technology we couldn't do what we do. It's absolutely core to our mission.”



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Eileen Jones, founder of the Gift of Hearing Foundation, herself the recipient of a cochlear implant, relies heavily on her own time and her boards of advisers and directors.