

2026

FUNDRAISING SIGNALS REPORT

Predictions, watchpoints, and decision
rules for nonprofit growth

Published by VeraData and shaped by our strategists and data experts, with specialized expertise from our partner agencies Faircom New York and Teal Media.



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OUR SYSTEM

Predictability is more than a gut feeling or pithy forecast. It's an interpretation of signals and behaviors we've learned from, ultimately yielding actionable intelligence. We use that intelligence to build new strategies, earn trust, and help mission-driven organizations change lives.

Most fundraising advice often fails by treating data, messaging, and channels as separate projects. Leaders end up making high-stakes calls based on instinct because the system isn't built to translate signals into predictable action.

VeraData connects three disciplines that are typically siloed — donor truth, message clarity, and channel discipline — into one operating system for growth. Our partner companies, Faircom New York and Teal Media, bring specialized expertise inside that system: performance-first fundraising execution and creative strategy that earns trust.

Donor Science™ makes decisions that are provable by grounding plans in donor behavior — retention drivers, upgrade readiness, recoverability, and the early signals that often precede revenue moves. Creative Science turns that truth into messaging and experiences donors can quickly believe: clear promises, specific proof, and emotional accuracy without asking donors to connect the dots. Media Science ensures the work is delivered with discipline: channel roles, sequencing, and optimization that protect learning rather than create noise.

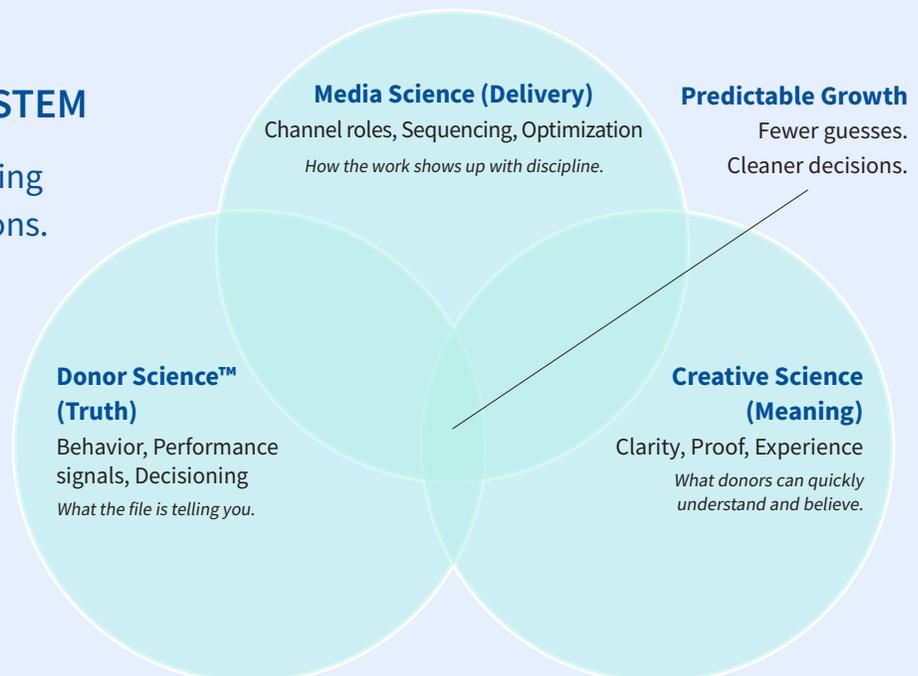
This report is informed by what we observed across real programs in 2025 as costs, platforms, and attention shifted — how donors acquired, retained, lapsed, re-engaged, and upgraded — and shaped by our day-to-day work across data, campaigns, strategy, and creative. We tested what held up in performance reality and translated the usable signal into the following: what's changing in 2026, what to watch, and decision rules teams can use to reduce waste without shrinking revenue.

Truth → Meaning → Delivery

THE PREDICTABILITY SYSTEM

Three disciplines. One operating system for fundraising decisions.

When truth, meaning, and delivery stay connected, teams make faster decisions on acquisition, retention, upgrading, and reactivation without adding noise.



Truth → Meaning → Delivery. Break one link, and performance dwindles.

SIGNAL VS. NOISE:

THE DECISIONS YOU'LL WANT TO MAKE IN 2026.

Fundraising leaders aren't short on advice. But sometimes, they might be short on decision-grade clarity that shows up in budgets, campaigns, and calendars. Every platform shift, attribution debate, and best practice creates more activity and more opinions, while the same expensive choices keep coming back: how hard to push acquisition, where to protect retention, when to upgrade, what to do with lapsed donors, and which channels deserve investment.

This report is designed to support those decisions and to reduce the cost of guessing. Each prediction is a directional call, paired with the signals you can monitor in your own performance and the decision rules that tell you what to change next.

What You'll Get On Every Prediction Page

- The prediction and what's changing: the directional shift we believe is becoming true in 2026.
- Watchpoints: the early signals to check in your recent performance data.
- Decision rules: the donor-first standards that tell you what to change next (audience, offer, cadence, creative, budget, or measurement).

How You Can Use This Report

Start with the predictions that map to your highest-stakes choices right now, and then:

- ① Check the watchpoints against your performance data from the last 60–120 days.
- ② Apply the decision rules to set priorities for the next 30–90 days.
- ③ Lock in the changes across operations — audience, offer, creative, channels, cadence, proof, and measurement — so the program becomes more consistent and defensible.

WE TRIED
TO STOP
AT TEN. WE
COULDN'T.

“Eleven. Exactly.
One louder.”

— *Nigel Tufnel (Christopher Guest),
Spinal Tap*

11 PREDICTIONS, WATCHPOINTS, & DECISION RULES

PREDICTION 1

Proof design beats storytelling
when trust is the constraint



By Lindsay Marino Long, Vice President of Donor
Engagement & Retention, Faircom New York

Ferris Bueller was right. *Life moves pretty fast.*

That was true in 1986. It's truer now. Donors still care — but they decide faster, with less patience for vague claims and fewer chances to “wait and see.” We all do. We skim. We scroll. We make up our minds before the full explanation ever arrives.

As trust in institutions erodes, belief has to be earned early — or it isn't earned at all. Donors who can't quickly assess credibility move on and rarely return. In 2026, proof design is how organizations efficiently earn credibility, protect trust, and enable story to do its work. Storytelling still matters, but without proof, it erodes belief, which is difficult to recover later.

The Shift

For years, fundraising optimized for empathy: build emotion, establish connection, then explain impact. That sequencing made sense when attention could be held long enough for meaning to accumulate. It breaks down when decisions are made before the explanation arrives.

As channels become more crowded, emotional language has converged across organizations. While emotion can be critical to opening the door, what differentiates is whether trust is established quickly and credibly.

Proof fills that role, doing the work to establish donor belief that narrative buildup once did. As time shrinks, proof that's early and repeatable makes the story viable at all.

What This Changes

- ① Proof moves earlier. Impact is stated and evidenced up front, not saved for later paragraphs. The structure shifts from “story builds to proof” to “proof enables story.”
- ② Specificity matters more than polish. Vague claims are fixed before refreshing creative or testing new narratives. A plain, credible claim in clear language outperforms a polished, rich story built on abstraction.
- ③ Proof placement becomes a primary performance lever. Where proof appears determines whether it does any work at all. Late proof doesn’t just underperform — it gets missed entirely or signals weak evidence, increasing donor doubt.
- ④ Differentiation comes from what you can prove. When multiple organizations make emotionally similar appeals in the same inbox or feed, proof is what allows donors to choose with confidence.

Illustrative Example

A donor scrolling on mobile receives an email about food insecurity. One version opens with a story: a family struggling to afford groceries, the weight of choosing between rent and food. Two paragraphs in, the letter mentions that the organization runs a food distribution program. The impact line is broad: “helping families put food on the table.”

A proof-designed version flips the order:

“Your \$50 provides seven days of groceries for a family of four. Last year, we distributed 2.3 million meals through 40 partner sites, with 89% of families reporting consistent food access within 60 days.”

The story then illustrates what that system looks like for one family.

Same mission. Same emotion. But the second version earns trust and builds it fast — it doesn’t ask donors to wait or connect the dots themselves.

What to Watch

- Drop-off where impact language is abstract or unspecific.
- Lift when proof moves earlier in the experience.
- Donor questions that signal doubt (“How does this actually help?”).
- Save/share behavior on proof-first assets.

Decision Rules

- If you can’t state impact in one sentence plus one proof point, rewrite the offer.
- If the proof is late, move it earlier before making any other changes.
- If urgency is doing the heavy lifting, fix proof first.

System Actions

- Donor Science™: Validate claims, identify which proof signals correlate with response, and map where belief breaks in the funnel.
- Creative Science: Design proof systems that are specific, repeatable, and portable across channels.
- Media Science: Test proof placement cleanly and protect controls so learning compounds.

PREDICTION 2

Donor-First Becomes the Operating Standard for Audience-First Fundraising



By Kent Grove, Chief Relationship Officer, VeraData

This year, “audience-first fundraising” will mature. The fundraising programs that keep growing will stop treating donors like a reachable audience and start treating them like a relationship with rules — continuity, restraint, proof discipline, and donor agency. Donor-first becomes a named operating standard because it’s the most reliable way to protect trust, reduce waste, and keep fundraising coherent as channels multiply and teams stay constrained.

Audience-first stays the strategy for relevance. Donor-first becomes the standard for the relationship.

The Shift

Audience-first answers, “What will be relevant to this person right now?” Donor-first answers, “What does this relationship require next?”

That change sounds subtle. It isn’t. It shifts the frame from “reach and convert” to “earn the next chapter,” and it forces decisions most programs avoid: continuity across touches, contact restraint, proof discipline, and giving donors real agency over frequency and intent.

This is where waste first shows up: fragmented experiences, overlapping requests, weak evidence, and programs that optimize engagement while relationship health quietly declines.

Donor-first is governance — standards your team can defend.

What This Changes

- ① Planning moves from campaigns to relationships. The donor experience becomes the unit of work and not the channel calendar. Campaigns still exist, but they’re accountable to the relationship.
- ② Restraint becomes a performance lever. Suppression and frequency caps are no longer optional. They become how you protect renewal and prevent churn.
- ③ Stewardship is not separate from performance. Post-gift experience (confirmation, thank-you, proof, expectations, next step) becomes part of fundraising economics because it shapes second gift, renewal, and upgrade readiness.
- ④ Relevance gets stricter. If you can’t explain why this donor, why this message, why now, you don’t send it.

Illustrative Example

A donor gives during a high-urgency moment. Over the next two weeks, they receive: a thank-you, a second appeal, a newsletter ask, a peer-to-peer invite, and paid retargeting impressions — all from different teams, all technically “audience-first.” The donor doesn’t feel seen; they feel processed.

A donor-first program does something different:

- It suppresses overlapping asks for a defined window to protect the relationship.
- It delivers one coherent post-gift sequence that answers: what changed because of your gift, what happens next, and what we’ll ask you for later (and why).
- It routes future outreach based on readiness signals and relationship stage, not the next campaign on the calendar.

Same channels. Same ambition. Far less leakage — because the relationship is governed.

What to Watch

- Net revenue per touch (fast indicator of over-contacting or weak relevance).
- Pressure signals: unsubscribes, spam complaints, opt-downs, preference changes.
- Relationship leakage: second-gift softness, renewal softness, early sustainer churn.
- Misalignment flags: strong clicks/opens paired with weak giving or weak renewal.

Decision Rules

- If net revenue per touch falls, reduce pressure first; then rebuild relevance and continuity before adding volume.
- If your team can’t explain the donor’s “why now,” you need donor-first standards (timing, suppression, message hierarchy) before you need new creative.
- If stewardship is treated as separate from fundraising, rebuild the journey so post-gift experience is a performance driver, not an afterthought.

System Actions

- Donor Science™: Operationalize donor-first governance (pressure caps, suppression logic, next-best-action rules).
- Creative Science: Build continuity and proof discipline across the journey (promise → proof → next step).
- Media Science: Assign channel roles and sequencing so donors experience one relationship, not competing asks.

PREDICTION 3

The Two-Lane Content System Will Be a Growth Requirement



By Joey Mechelle Farque, Head of Content, VeraData

In 2026, nonprofits will run content like an operating system: one lane for fundraising, one lane for marketing — shared spine, different jobs.

Content strategy and content operations will become a growth requirement. Nonprofits will learn to stop treating content as a stream of posts and start running it like a disciplined media company: clear audiences, repeatable formats, planned distribution, and measurement that connects content to trust and fundraising outcomes.

Fundraising content and marketing content cannot be the same strategy. They can share a story spine and proof standards, but they need different jobs, cadences, and success metrics.

The Shift

Most nonprofits are already doing audience-first marketing — personas, relevance, platform behavior, community. That's good. The problem is operational: content often collapses into a single calendar, tone, and set of goals.

The more nonprofits think of content marketing as a discipline, the more they will learn to adopt a two-lane model:

- Fundraising lane (donor-first): content designed to move a donor to the next step (give, renew, upgrade, sustain, reactivate).
- Marketing lane (audience-first): content designed to earn attention and trust (explain, prove, clarify, build belonging, increase recall).

Same organization. Same mission. Different jobs. One coherent experience.

What This Changes

- ① You stop asking one calendar to do two jobs. Fundraising content gets measured on donor action and relationship health. Marketing content gets measured on trust and intent signals that compound over time.
- ② Your team ships more consistently without burning out. Operations matter: fewer one-offs, more repeatable formats, more reuse. Content becomes a system, not a scramble.
- ③ Your social starts feeding your owned assets again. Publishing isn't the finish line. Social and email route people into web-first "anchor" assets that build authority, get found, and get reused.
- ④ Fundraising gets better because marketing stops competing with it. Instead of random "brand content" interrupting asks (or appeals trying to do brand work), each lane strengthens the other with shared proof and continuity.

Illustrative Example

A nonprofit's social media content is thoughtful and human, but fundraising appeals feel transactional — different voice, different proof, different point of view. Engagement is fine; revenue and retention aren't.

A two-lane shift fixes structure, not just copy:

- Marketing runs a weekly “make the work understandable” series built around donor questions (how it works, what it costs, why it's credible).
- Fundraising reuses that proof and voice inside donor journeys with timing and next steps based on donor readiness.
- The website becomes the archive: each post routes back to an anchor page that's built to be shared, searched, and reused.

Content stops being disposable. It starts compounding — built once, reused everywhere with intention. However, it's crucial to maintain a running content audit to determine whether your content remains true, relevant, and resonant. (Read Prediction 4 to learn more about what content to keep and what to retire, and why that matters.)

Fractal content: one core asset at a time, intentionally reshaped into multiple formats and channel roles without losing the story spine.

What to Watch

- Content-to-file signals: email subscriber growth and return visitors driven by non-appeal content.
- Intent signals: branded search and direct traffic trend (credibility + recall).
- Conversion assistance: stronger conversion or stronger second-gift readiness among content-engaged supporters.
- Operational signals: higher reuse rate (repurposing) and lower production thrash (fewer one-offs).
- Mismatch signals: strong engagement paired with weak giving/renewal (voice/proof discontinuity).

Decision Rules

- If you can't clearly separate marketing jobs from fundraising jobs, rebuild into two lanes before publishing more.
- If engagement rises while giving/renewal stays soft, fix continuity (voice, proof, next-step logic) before refreshing formats.
- If you can't name the primary persona + job for a piece of content, don't ship it.
- If a piece of content can't be reused and redistributed (anchored on your site and cut into multiple formats), it's an expense, not an asset that compounds.

System Actions

- Donor Science™: Tie personas and donor states to content jobs and measurable outcomes.
- Creative Science: Build a shared story spine and proof system that carries across lanes.
- Media Science: Build distribution discipline so content travels across channels and stays in circulation.

PREDICTION 4

Your Website Becomes the Only Channel You Truly Own, and AI Raises the Standard for What Lives There



By Jessica Teal, Principal, Teal Media

People aren't getting information online the way they used to; instead, they're getting answers in AI summaries and previews, then deciding whether your organization is worth the click. That makes your website more important, not less. It's still fundraising's front door, and it may be the only place you fully control what's true, what's current, and what happens next.

In 2026, protecting revenue and authority requires running the website as owned infrastructure: a clear structure, up-to-date information, and pages that are easy for people and systems to understand and summarize your work.

The Shift

- Discovery happens before the visit. Donors (and journalists, partners, and grantmakers) first encounter your organization through summaries and snippets. The click is earned after the first impression.
- The website is the hub of the ecosystem. Social, email, SEO, and on-the-ground work all point somewhere. Without a strong hub, those channels become one-and-done moments instead of compounding assets.
- Old pages don't quietly fade, but they keep speaking. If outdated information remains live, it will still be found and repeated, even if it's wrong.
- SEO cannibalization gets more costly. When multiple pages cover the same topic, authority is split, and clarity is diluted, making it harder for any single page to rank or be referenced.

What This Changes

- ① The website becomes a source-of-truth system, not a pile of pages. This is an operating discipline: what stays live, what gets updated, what gets consolidated, and what gets retired. If it's public, it has to be accurate and intentional.
- ② The hub must perform two functions simultaneously: explain and route. Supporters land with a question, not patience. A page needs to answer quickly (what you do, what changed, why it matters) and route people cleanly to the next step (donate, join, learn, share) without detours.
- ③ Don't make supporters hunt for the point. Key facts, evidence, and the next step should be prominent on the page and not buried under a long story, trapped in PDFs, or scattered across five similar posts competing for attention (and rankings).
- ④ Consistency across the ecosystem becomes a revenue issue. If a summary says one thing and the landing page says another, confidence drops. Confusion creates a barrier to giving, and barriers kill response.
- ⑤ Content lifecycle replaces "publish and forget." Evergreen topics need a single canonical home that is refreshed. Time-bound content needs an expiration plan (update, redirect, retire). A website that's treated like a living system protects the mission and prevents unforced errors.

Illustrative Example

A donor searches for a social justice organization's impact and finds three pages that contradict each other: an old blog post from 2019, a newer "thought leadership" article, and a program page that hasn't been updated since last year. A summary pulls language from the oldest page. The donor lands on the site, sees different framing, and hesitates because the organization doesn't feel coherent.

A cleaner approach consolidates the topic into one current, authoritative page: updated facts, a single proof standard, clear headings, and a donation path that aligns with the promise.

What to Watch

- Outdated pages still getting traffic (or showing up in search) despite being wrong or irrelevant.
- "Seen more than visited" patterns: impressions rise while click-through stalls.
- Message mismatch between what people see in previews/summaries and what the landing page actually says.
- High intent, low completion: supporters land on key pages but don't take the next step (confusion, complexity, weak proof).
- Critical watchpoint: SEO cannibalization.
- Tell: multiple URLs appear for the same query and rankings/CTR bounce.
- Fix: choose one canonical, updated page and merge, redirect, or retire the rest.

Decision Rules

- If a page contains outdated facts or positioning, update it, consolidate it, or remove it. Don't let the internet keep quoting your past.
- If multiple pages compete for the same topic, pick one canonical page and merge the rest (redirect, republish, simplify).
- If a donor can't understand the point of a page in 10 seconds, rewrite the top: clear promise, specific proof, visible next step.
- If the donation path doesn't match the page promise, fix the message match before increasing traffic.

System Actions

- Donor Science™: Identify the highest-value journeys (entry pages → conversion paths) and prioritize fixes by revenue impact.
- Creative Science: Set a truth-first web standard: what's current, what's provable, what's clear at the top, and what the next step is.
- Media Science: Route traffic to canonical pages, reduce overlap, and align channel roles so the website hub compounds what social and email start.

PREDICTION 5

Transparency Is the New Currency: Real-Time Data is Key



By Dina Fanelli, Chief Customer Officer, VeraData

In 2026, one thing is clear: donors, specifically younger donors, are no longer satisfied with vague success stories or once-a-year impact reports. They want to see how their dollars are making a difference — clearly, quickly, and in ways that feel personal. Transparency, accountability, and real-time insight need to be standard practice.

For nonprofit leaders, this means impact reporting is no longer just a nice-to-have. It is becoming a core strategy for building trust, strengthening relationships, and securing long-term support.

The Shift

More data, shared more often.

Instead of waiting for an annual report, many organizations are moving toward quarterly — or even real-time — impact updates. These “mini-reports” provide donors with a steady stream of progress, helping them stay connected to the mission throughout the year. Simple, visual dashboards that show key metrics — people served, programs funded, outcomes achieved — make it easier for donors to understand where their money is going and what it’s accomplishing. These tools turn data into stories donors can quickly grasp.

Personalized updates powered by AI.

The days of mass marketing and blanket appeals are over. Engagement needs to be intentional and authentic. With AI, nonprofits can segment audiences and tailor updates and messaging to individual donors.

Program-level metrics at your fingertips.

Donors increasingly want to know exactly what programs and services their contribution funds support; they want to see tangible results. They are donating to a cause that is very personal to them, not to a big business or a bureaucracy. Getting money to where it needs to go quickly and efficiently is most important. Tying data directly to the specific programs or initiatives supports clarity and reinforces confidence in your organization’s effectiveness.

What This Changes

- ① Impact reporting becomes trust infrastructure. Transparency moves beyond an annual reporting cycle and becomes a core trust mechanism that donors experience throughout the year.
- ② The cadence accelerates. Updates move from yearly to quarterly and increasingly toward “as it happens” reporting. Because donors want reassurance that progress is real and ongoing.
- ③ Data becomes a story arc. Simple, visual dashboards (people served, programs funded, outcomes achieved) are a primary way donors quickly understand impact. Data doesn’t replace storytelling; it makes the story easier to believe and repeat.

- ④ Program-level clarity becomes the expectation. Donors increasingly want to know exactly how their contributions are used. Tying gifts to specific initiatives and showing results at the program level reinforces confidence and reduces perceptions of bureaucracy.
- ⑤ Personalization becomes part of accountability. As segmentation improves (including with the help of AI), donors will expect impact updates that feel relevant to why they gave. The update itself becomes a relationship touchpoint.

What to Watch

- More donor questions that demand specificity (“What did my gift fund?” “What changed?”).
- Strong engagement but soft giving/renewal (interest is there; belief/clarity is missing).
- Retention or sustainer softness when donors go for extended periods without clear progress updates.
- Operational bottlenecks: program metrics are difficult to retrieve, slow to publish, or manually compiled.

Decision Rules

- If impact reporting is still annual-only, move toward quarterly or real-time impact updates.
- If donors can’t quickly understand where their money is going and what it’s accomplishing, use simple, visual dashboards that show key metrics.
- If engagement is mass marketing and blanket appeals, segment audiences and tailor updates and messaging for individual donors.
- If donors want tangible results, tie data directly to the specific programs or initiatives.

System Actions

- Donor Science™: Invest in better tracking tools and program-level metrics so you can share progress more frequently.
- Creative Science: Tell your impact story through data as well as words — turning data into visual stories that donors can quickly grasp.
- Media Science: Build a consistent distribution cadence for updates and deliver personalized messaging across channels.

Bottom line: If donors can’t see progress clearly and frequently, trust decays — and renewal, upgrading, and sustainers follow. Build a repeatable impact cadence now so transparency becomes an operating standard, not an annual scramble.

PREDICTION 6

“AI Slop” Raises the Standard — Proof and Decision Discipline Become the Edge



By Brooke Sconyers, VP of Marketing, VeraData

By now, you’ve heard the phrase “AI slop.” Merriam-Webster even named slop its 2025 Word of the Year, defining it as low-quality digital content produced in bulk by AI.

That’s the point: AI is already flooding every channel with “good enough.” In 2026, the messages that break through will make impact easy to understand, and they’ll be built on decisions and claims donors can stand behind.

The Shift

- Generic is now a visible problem, not a subtle one. As soon as donors sense templated language or “polite robot” tone — neutral, safe, boring — they tune out.
- AI amplifies sameness. If the inputs are generic, the output becomes more generic, very quickly.
- Truth + context + authenticity is the upgrade. That’s what turns AI from a content factory into a tool for better stewardship of a mission.

This is one shift with two sides:

- Internal: AI creates an advantage when it improves decisions (who to contact, what to suppress, what to test, what to scale).
- External: Attention is increasingly drawn to content that feels real, specific, contextual, and hard to replicate.

What This Changes

- ① AI moves upstream, before it moves outward. Use AI first to sharpen prioritization, suppression, forecasting, and next-best-action. Better outreach starts with better choices, not better adjectives.
- ② Proof becomes a performance asset. The true content differentiator is what you can say *specifically* and support quickly. Think: what changed, what it cost, what happened next, what the donor made possible.
- ③ Templates become an own-goal. A syndicated production model (the same half-dozen direct mail packages, the same copy blocks, the same digital concepts with colors swapped) saves time but ultimately erodes belief in authenticity. When creative is interchangeable, donors treat the mission as interchangeable.
- ④ Customization becomes the responsible use of AI. And not rote cosmetic personalization. Real tailoring: proof, examples, and next steps matched to donor context without inventing facts or inflating impact.

Illustrative Example

A donor supports an animal organization, then sees three different messages in two weeks: a mail pack built from a standard template that sounds like every other nonprofit, and paid ads that repeat the same generic claims. Nothing is wrong, exactly; it just doesn’t feel specific to this work.

Now imagine the same program using AI differently:

- Mail and email share a clear throughline and one proof standard (no vague claims).
- Donors receive fewer overlapping touches because suppression rules are enforced.
- The follow-up content answers the donor's real questions fast: *what changed, where the dollars went, and what happens next.*

What to Watch

- “Sameness” signals: content that could be swapped with another org and still fits.
- Proof stress: more donor questions that challenge specificity (“How do you know?” “What did my gift do?”).
- Tone drift: default AI voice creeping in — polite, neutral, high-gloss, buzzwordy, low-substance.
- Decision lag: production increases, but teams still can't answer what to stop doing.
- Inconsistency: message and proof change by channel or team, creating a fragmented experience.

Decision Rules

- If AI output doesn't change a decision, don't ship it.
- If you can't support a claim in plain language, remove it.
- If creative could be swapped with another organization's and still works, rebuild around what only you can say: specific proof, specific context, specific choices.
- If volume rises while response quality declines, reduce pressure and fix relevance before producing more.

System Actions

- Donor Science™: Use AI to tighten prioritization, suppression, forecasting, and next-best-action decisions humans can explain.
- Creative Science: Set proof and voice standards so specificity survives every channel and every version.
- Media Science: Assign channel roles and pacing so optimization doesn't create overlap, whiplash, or noise.

Building for What's Next: Inside VeraData, we're building in this direction: AI that improves decision-making and stewardship before increasing output. The point isn't to publish more. It's to make every touch more specific, more coherent, and easier to defend so your fundraising doesn't get swallowed by the “good enough” flood.

Bonus Prediction: AI Search Will Reward Proof

AI answer engines surface content that maintains its original proof, even in an AI summary. Generic messaging will underperform and not show up.

- AEO (Answer Engine Optimization) is structuring content so that answer engines can lift it as a direct answer: clear headings, plain language, and proof that can survive a summary.
- GEO (Generative Engine Optimization) is gaining traction and citations in AI-generated responses by publishing original, specific, verifiable information that models can reference with confidence.

Signal to Watch: Impressions rise while clicks stall.

Decision Rule: If an AI summary makes your work sound like everyone else's, your proof isn't doing its job.

PREDICTION 7

Direct Mail Stays Strong, but “Mail Everyone” Gets Harder to Defend



By Shaun Petersen, Vice President, Data Integration,
Faircom New York

Direct mail is still a revenue driver. What’s getting harder to justify is mailing the entire file on habit, especially when costs rise, and net margin is carried by a relatively small share of donors.

In 2026, the mail programs that make the biggest difference will consistently do two things: mail more selectively and build digital to complete the job (confirm the promise, reinforce proof, remove barriers, convert cleanly).

The Shift

Costs are forcing margin discipline at the segment level, not the file-average level, because averages hide the long tail that quietly erodes net. That’s why “mail underperformance” often isn’t a package problem at all; it’s selection waste plus digital leakage. The package can be fine, but the wrong universe and a broken landing or form experience can still sink results. As integration becomes more important, it’s less about matching graphics and more about meaning continuity: when the promise shifts between the mailbox and the landing page, donors notice and hesitate.

What This Changes

- ① Mail universes tighten, and suppression becomes normal. Because waste is expensive, selectivity protects net and reduces fatigue.
- ② Seasonality tracking is becoming more important than simple RFM. Recency/frequency/monetary value still help, but they miss a growing reality: many donors have personal giving rhythms. Tracking individual seasonality and trendlines (when they typically deliver, and how that pattern is shifting) provides a stronger guide for who to mail, when to mail, and when to hold.
- ③ Optimization shifts from constant creative refresh to offer, selection, and alignment. When response stalls, the first question shouldn’t be “new package?” They should be: who got this, what job it had, whether the offer was right, and whether the landing carried the same meaning.
- ④ Landing and form performance becomes part of mail performance. Mail doesn’t end at the mailbox. If the landing page breaks the promise or the form causes drop-off, the mail piece didn’t fail; the donor journey did.

Illustrative Example

A renewal package starts trending flat. The instinct is to refresh creative and keep mailing the same universe. A closer look reveals two issues: the long tail is losing money at today’s costs, and the landing page doesn’t align with the appeal’s core promise. The fix is not “better copy.” It’s a tighter universe, a cleaner offer-to-segment match, and a landing/form flow that finishes what the mail started — plus seasonality-aware timing for donors who consistently respond in specific windows.

What to Watch

- Segment-level response and net (not blended file averages)
- Cost per net dollar by segment (margin tells the truth)
- Mail → landing → form continuity (promise, proof, and next step stay aligned)
- Fatigue concentrated in low-value segments (declining response tied to over-mailing)

Decision Rules

- If a small slice carries response, stop mailing the long tail until you can justify it by margin.
- If landing pages break the organization's promise, fix alignment before changing packages.
- If creative churn doesn't move results, treat selection and offer as the primary levers.
- If donors show consistent giving windows, use seasonality and trends to time outreach, not just RFM.

System Actions

- Donor Science™: Select mail universes by margin and recoverability; incorporate seasonality and trend signals into selection and timing.
- Creative Science: Align package-to-landing continuity with a proof-led structure and a clear next step.
- Media Science: Run integrated cadence and clean cross-channel tests so changes teach you something (without creating noise).

PREDICTION 8

Testing Gets Smaller, Cleaner, and More Valuable



By Pam Schlagter, Senior Account Director,
Faircom New York

In 2026, the best fundraisers will be running the right tests: fewer, cleaner, and tied directly to decisions that move revenue. Testing is becoming more disciplined because teams don't have the time (or budget) to "try stuff," and noisy results are worse than no results at all.

The Shift

When the control keeps changing, you lose the only thing that makes testing useful: a stable baseline. Instead of learning, you end up chasing a moving target, and that's how teams burn time "optimizing" without ever knowing what actually worked. The fix is simple but strict: isolate variables. If you change the offer, audience, timing, and creative within the same test, the results might shift, but they won't teach you anything you can reuse. Clean tests change one lever at a time, so you can say, with confidence, what caused what. And then there's the part most programs skip: documentation. The value of testing shows up next quarter: learning that's captured clearly, reused confidently, and applied to real decisions, and not just lost when the campaign ends.

What This Changes

- ① Tests get chosen for consequence, not curiosity.
- ② A test earns a slot only if it could reasonably change a decision: scale, stop, shift budget, change a donor path, rewrite an offer, adjust cadence.
- ③ Controls become stable; learning compounds.
- ④ Instead of constant churn, teams protect what's working and run targeted tests around it. Results become comparable. Decisions get faster.
- ⑤ Creative systems become modular.
- ⑥ Creative isn't a one-off asset; it's a set of components (headline, proof block, ask string, story module, CTA) designed so you can swap one element without accidentally changing five.

Illustrative Example

A team runs an email test: new subject line, new header image, new story, new ask string, and a new send time. It "wins," but nobody can say why — and next month the result doesn't repeat.

A cleaner approach tests one lever: keep the audience, offer, timing, and template stable, and test a single proof block placement (or a single ask ladder). The result is smaller, but it teaches something you can apply across channels — including mail, landing pages, and paid retargeting.

What to Watch

- % of tests that lead to a decision (scale/stop/change)
- Contamination (too many changes at once)
- Control stability vs constant churn
- Documentation quality (can learning be reused next quarter?)

Decision Rules

- If it won't change a decision, don't test it.
- If offer + audience + timing change together, you learned nothing.
- If you're testing creative to fix strategy, pause and fix offer/segmentation first.
- If the control can't stay stable for a meaningful window, protect revenue first, and then test.

System Actions

- Donor Science™: Design clean tests, set thresholds, and maintain decision logs so learning compounds.
- Creative Science: Modularize creative so one variable changes at a time without breaking continuity.
- Media Science: Protect controls with pacing and change discipline; avoid mid-flight "optimization" that destroys learning.

PREDICTION 9

Omnichannel Stops Meaning “Everywhere” and Starts Meaning “Assigned Jobs”



By Madiha Ahmed Watson, Associate Vice President,
Digital Integration, Faircom New York

Omnichannel isn't everywhere, contrary to what some marketers believe. It's whether your donor feels like they're being spoken to by one organization or three competing teams. When channels repeat the same ask, collide in the same window, or change the story midstream, response drops and fatigue rises, even if each channel “performs” on paper. The next step is simple and hard: assign jobs to channels, design sequences that build on each other, and optimize without blowing up the control.

The Shift

- Donors experience one relationship, not channel silos. They don't grade you on email performance versus mail performance. They feel coherence (or the lack of it): one promise, consistent proof, and next steps that make sense.
- Overlap and internal competition create pressure. Parallel asks aren't omnichannel. They're collision. When teams optimize their own lane without governing the donor experience, supporters feel the load, and you'll see response soften.
- Sequencing becomes the performance lever. Touch 2 has a job: make Touch 1 work harder, reinforce the proof, remove doubt, and move the donor to the next step. If a later touch doesn't improve the earlier one, it's just added pressure.

What This Changes

- ① Planning shifts to channel roles and sequences, and not parallel asks. Instead of “run the appeal everywhere,” you design the journey: which channel earns attention, which reinforces proof, which converts, which thanks, which sets up the next step.
- ② Suppression and pacing become cross-channel. Frequency caps and suppression rules can't sit inside one channel's calendar. They must govern the supporter experience across all touchpoints.
- ③ Optimization becomes disciplined, so learning survives. Real omnichannel work protects baselines and sets boundaries for in-flight changes. Otherwise, you optimize your way into not knowing what caused the result.

Illustrative Example

A donor receives a direct mail appeal, two emails, a retargeting ad, and an SMS in the same ten-day window. Each was built by a different team, each with slightly different proof and a slightly different ask. No single touch is disastrous. Together, they feel messy. The donor hesitates or tunes out.

An assigned-jobs approach tightens the design: mail earns attention with the core story and proof; email reinforces that proof and routes to the right landing page; retargeting acts as a reminder (not a new ask); SMS is reserved for donors who have shown readiness and consent. Same channels. Fewer collisions. A clearer sequence. Cleaner learning.

What to Watch

- Sequence lift: Does Touch 2 measurably improve Touch 1 outcomes?
- Overlap pressure: Multiple asks landing in the same donor window.
- Leakage points by source/channel: Where supporters click but don't complete, or give but don't come back.
- Internal competition signals: Teams optimizing channel metrics at the expense of journey outcomes.

Decision Rules

- If you can't state the job of each touch, you don't have an omnichannel plan.
- If channels compete in the same window, response drops, so reduce overlap before adding volume.
- If you change too much mid-flight, you destroy learning; therefore, always protect the control and define what can change safely.
- If Touch 2 doesn't improve Touch 1, redesign the sequence instead of adding another touch.

System Actions

- Donor Science™: Measure sequence lift, set cross-channel suppression, and define readiness signals that govern pacing.
- Creative Science: Maintain message hierarchy and continuity across formats so supporters experience one coherent story.
- Media Science: Assign channel jobs, set pacing rules, and optimize safely inside boundaries that preserve learning.

PREDICTION 10

“Most Important Donors” Stops Meaning “Biggest Last Gift”



By Heather Foye, Associate Vice President,
Faircom New York

“Most important donors” has become shorthand for “largest last gift.” That’s understandable because it’s visible, it’s easy to sort, and it feels safe. But it’s also how programs miss growth that’s already in the file.

In 2026, “most important” will be defined by growth probability: donors with momentum, donors poised for a second gift, donors with an upgrade runway, and donors who are realistically recoverable. Last gift size still matters, but it won’t be the best predictor of what happens next.

The Shift

Value is concentrated in donors with trajectory, not just donors with history. Early behavior, especially the first-to-second gift conversion, predicts durable value better than last-gift size because it reveals intent, fit, and whether the relationship is forming. Reactivation can still be powerful, but only when “recoverable” is defined with discipline; otherwise, teams waste touches chasing sentiment instead of return.

What This Changes

- ① Stewardship shifts from a “top donors” list to a growth portfolio. The goal isn’t to ignore high-dollar donors. It’s to stop over-investing in the familiar and under-investing in donors who are actually on an upward path.
- ② Early donor experience becomes a core growth lever. The welcome, confirmation, first update, and second-gift path stop being courtesy touches. They become the system that determines whether acquisition turns into retention.
- ③ Reactivation becomes targeted, not sentimental. “Lapsed” is not a segment. Some donors are winnable. Some are not. Programs that treat all lapses the same pay for it in cost, deliverability, and donor fatigue.
- ④ Upgrading gets built, not hoped for. If upgrades only come from a tiny slice of the file, the answer isn’t broader asks. The answer is to expand the upgrade-ready pool at the right time, with the right proof and next-step structure.

Illustrative Example

A file review shows that “top donors” receive the most touches because they gave large amounts last year. Meanwhile, new donors from a strong campaign are quietly stalling after their first gift. The program feels like it’s investing in value — but it’s actually investing in familiarity.

A growth-probability view changes the priorities: the team protects early donors with a tighter second-gift path, identifies upgrade-ready donors based on behavior and timing (not just last gift), and reactivation focuses only on donors with realistic recoverability. The result is less wasted effort and more durable revenue.

What to Watch

- Second-gift rate by source and segment (the early warning system)
- Upgrade concentration (how narrow the upgrade pool is)
- Recoverable lapse pool: size + yield (who is realistically winnable)
- Sustainer performance: conversion and early churn (who sticks vs who drops fast)

Decision Rules

- If the second gift is soft, fix onboarding and the second-gift path before adding acquisition volume.
- If reactivation yield falls, tighten recoverable definitions and suppress the rest.
- If upgrades are concentrated in a narrow slice, expand the upgrade-ready pool before raising asks broadly.
- If “top donors” are driving most touches but not most growth, re-balance effort toward trajectory segments.

System Actions

- Donor Science™: Model donor trajectory, second-gift readiness, upgrade runway, and recoverability so effort follows probability.
- Creative Science: Build early-donor proof that earns belief quickly — clear impact, specific outcomes, and a next step that makes sense.
- Media Science: Set cadence and channel roles that protect learning, reduce wasted pressure, and support the next-best action for each donor state.

PREDICTION 11

Acquisition Becomes a Probability Business



By Barbra Schulman, Vice President, Client Strategic Growth,
Faircom New York

Acquisition has become a probability business. The work now is ranked audiences, payback guardrails, and early value signals that tell you quickly whether a source is building a donor file or renting short-term revenue. Scale still matters — but only after early value proves out.

The Shift

- Marginal acquisition gets more expensive and less predictable. The first dollars often work. The next dollars get weird. Expanding reach into the long tail quietly changes donor quality, not just cost.
- Early value (30–90 days) matters more than surface conversion. A “conversion” is not a donor yet. The first real truth quickly emerges: second-gift behavior, early engagement, and whether donors respond to a next-step path.
- Measurement discipline becomes a competitive advantage. When reporting becomes a debate, teams lose time, blow up baselines, and chase attribution stories. The edge is clean measurement that answers one question: did this actually add incremental donors and net value?

What This Changes

- ① Spend tightens into ranked segments; the long tail stops getting subsidized. Instead of more reach, acquisition plans focus on the right reach. Teams watch the cost curve as they expand and stop before the edge turns negative.
- ② Welcome, and the second gift path gets fixed before buying more names. If you can’t convert first-time donors into second-time donors, buying more first-time donors is just buying more leakage.
- ③ “Working” gets defined by net value, not attribution arguments. Acquisition performance is judged by payback and downstream value, and not the prettiest dashboard.

Illustrative Example

A paid acquisition campaign reports strong front-end conversions at a stable CPA. Everyone wants to scale. But 60 days in, the second gift is soft, and the welcome series isn’t moving donors toward a clear next step. The program is acquiring transactions, not building a file.

A probability-based approach changes the decision: the budget concentrates on the top-ranked audience slices that show early value, the long tail is paused, and the welcome/second-gift path is rebuilt before scaling. The acquisition machine becomes cleaner.

What to Watch

- Ranked deciles: top 10–20% performance vs. the long tail (watch the drop-off curve).
- Early value signals (30–90 days): second gift readiness, meaningful engagement, and early upgrade behavior.
- Marginal cost at the edge: what it costs to add the “next” donor as you expand reach.
- Stability: whether results hold across channels/sources or swing based on measurement noise.

Decision Rules

- If the long tail collapses, tighten audiences before expanding reach.
- If acquisition converts but early value is weak, fix the welcome/second gift path before scaling.
- If reporting creates debate instead of decisions, run an incrementality check and move on.
- If you can't state your payback guardrail in one sentence, you don't have a scaling plan.

System Actions

- Donor Science™: Rank audiences, monitor early value, and enforce payback guardrails tied to net value (not just CPA).
- Creative Science: Build “relevance fast” acquisition creative that sets up the second gift (clear promise, credible proof, obvious next step).
- Media Science: Pace fewer, cleaner drops; protect baselines; optimize without changing so many variables that learning disappears.

WANT THESE INSIGHTS AND ACTIONS TO BE MAPPED TO YOUR PROGRAM USING DONOR SCIENCE™, CREATIVE SCIENCE, AND MEDIA SCIENCE?

The predictions are only useful if they change what you do next. If you want help translating the signals into priorities for your donor file, messaging, and channel mix, we offer no-cost starting points inside the VeraData system: a data-led modeling conversation (VeraData), a fundraising performance overview (Faircom New York), and a website + donation flow audit (Teal Media). Each one is designed to turn watchpoints into a practical 30–90 day plan.



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