



## Brackets for Good

### *The Need for Creative and Competitive Online Giving*

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For many Americans, this past weekend marked the major religious celebrations of Passover and Easter. For those of us living in Indianapolis, we have just concluded the celebration of a third religious tradition: The Final Four. Over 72,000 fans descended on Lucas Oil Stadium in hopes of watching their teams win the NCAA Men's College Basketball Championship. But the reach goes far beyond the fans in the stadium. March Madness may be the best championship in sports because it captures heart-felt stories, Cinderella teams, and the thrill of competition. You do not have to be a basketball fan to enjoy the drama. This year about 40 million people filled out over 70 million brackets.<sup>1</sup> That's more people than voted in the last presidential election.

### **“I wonder if that energy and excitement could be bottled and put to good use.” – Matt McIntyre**

Three local social entrepreneurs asked this exact question in 2011. The result was [Brackets for Good](#). Launched in 2012 with eight charities, this year's tournament pits sixty-four local Indianapolis charities in competition with one another. The enterprise has expanded to include another sixty-four local charities competing in Louisville.

The design is simple. Each year, nonprofits apply to compete. Those selected are sorted into divisions by size and then compete with one another head-to-head to see who can raise the most funds through Brackets for Good's online platform. Nonprofits are either eliminated or move on to continue after each round. The winner is announced just before the actual Final Four. With low overhead and corporate sponsorships, Brackets for Good not only awards a \$10,000 top prize to the winner, but it also allows each of the nonprofits to keep all the money they raised, even if eliminated in the First Round. As the vision and interest spreads, the organization plans to expand to five cities in 2016.



An important caveat to note is that funding is only part of the mission. Co-founder Mark McIntyre recently told the *Indianapolis Star*, “Brackets for Good is an awareness vehicle first, a fund-raising vehicle second.... What we've built is a marketing platform for nonprofits to tell their story in a unique way, but also to learn things that allow them to continue to tell their story.”<sup>2</sup>

McIntyre realized that not only can nonprofits capitalize on the popularity of March Madness, but the majority need help in framing their story or establishing an online giving presence. In a low pressure environment, these local non-profits can develop a social media campaign, viral



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marketing plan, and grassroots appeals. At Lake Institute on Faith & Giving, our research indicates that most faith-based nonprofits overwhelmingly depend on a single form of fundraising - whether that is weekly offerings, foundation support, or a handful of extremely generous donors. Diversifying funding streams is important and building online capacity and a social media presence is vital.

McIntyre points to the necessity of new forms of giving, but he also highlights the importance of the message. Our research also indicates that faith-based non-profits and religious communities often focus their field of vision on a single core audience and therefore limit their language and potential reach. For a faith-based non-profit to succeed in a Brackets for Good competition (or similarly in a crowd-sourced funding site like [Kickstarter](#)), it must have a compelling message that connects with a number of diverse audiences while also not diluting their faith identity or mission. Studying how peers organizations (both faith-based and secular) tell their stories as well as capturing and framing those stories in new ways are key avenues for all non-profits, and even more so for these online platforms.

In past *Insights* articles, we have highlighted other online giving trends such as #GivingTuesday. This October 14-15, Lake Institute is hosting Henry Timms, Executive Director of the 92<sup>nd</sup> Street Y and founder of the #GivingTuesday movement. Leading up to the event and in the months after, we hope to spark a conversation around faith-based nonprofits, diversifying funding streams, and online giving.

1. What are the funding streams where you need to learn more?
2. What success stories can you share?
3. What have you learned about your organization through diversifying your fundraising?
4. What questions do you have about faith-based online giving?

SHARE YOUR RESPONSE

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<sup>1</sup> Wartenberg, S. (2015). *How many people will fill out March Madness brackets?* The Columbus Dispatch. Online: <http://www.dispatch.com/content/blogs/the-bottom-line/2015/03/how-many-people-will-fill-out-march-madness-brackets.html>

<sup>2</sup> Gilmer, M. (2015). *Nonprofits play to win in Brackets for Good.* The Indy Star. Online: <http://www.indystar.com/story/life/2015/03/03/nonprofits-play-win-brackets-good/24332017/>



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