



# LET DONORS GIVE AND GO

The Decline of Civic Ritual and the Myth of Engagement  
in the Era of Crowdfunding



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## Executive Summary

Nonprofits are confronting an uncomfortable paradox. Events that once seemed essential, including galas, luncheons, and black-tie fundraisers, no longer generate the loyalty, revenue, or engagement they once did. Many leaders sense that something has shifted but struggle to explain why.

The explanation is simpler than most organizations realize: **galas were never true engines of donor engagement.** They were civic rituals.

For decades, these events provided a structured social space where generosity could be performed publicly. Donors attended less to build relationships with the hosting nonprofit and more to signal support within their own social and professional networks. The widely held belief that galas created a pipeline of new donors was largely a myth.

Over time, the conditions that sustained this ritual weakened. Donors now guard their time more carefully. Awareness of fundraising costs has increased. And digital platforms have changed how generosity is publicly signaled. Today a donor can support a cause through a crowdfunding link and instantly share that support across their social network without attending an event or participating in institutional rituals.

The Covid 19 pandemic accelerated this shift. When in-person events stopped, many nonprofits expected a major loss of support. In many cases that loss did not occur. Organizations lost their parties but retained their most committed donors.

Crowdfunding and peer-to-peer fundraising have stepped into the role that galas once played. These tools allow donors to support friends and causes quickly, visibly, and on their own terms.

This shift exposes a difficult truth for the sector: not every donor wants a relationship. Many donors are happy to give generously without seeking ongoing engagement with the organization itself.

Recognizing this reality can be liberating. Instead of chasing engagement where it is not desired, nonprofits can focus their time and relationship building on the



supporters who truly want it. Crowdfunding is not a threat to philanthropy. It is a clearer reflection of how many donors have always preferred to give.

The challenge for nonprofit leaders is not to revive past rituals or force deeper engagement. It is to design fundraising strategies that reflect how donors actually behave, and to accept that some giving is meant to be fast, visible, and transactional by design.

## Galas Were Civic Rituals, Not Acquisition Engines

For decades, nonprofit galas were treated as essential infrastructure. Boards expected them. Society expected them. Executives relied on them. And fundraisers sold them as the gateway to new supporters.

But let's be honest: very few people ever attended galas to discover or commit to a cause. Most went to see and be seen, to honor a friend who was on the board, or to enjoy a party under the moral cover of charity.

The myth that galas built a donor pipeline is just that: a myth. Galas were civic rituals. They primarily reaffirmed existing networks, reinforced social status, and allowed the wealthy to signal virtue publicly.

A civic ritual has a few defining traits:

- **Repetition** – it occurs regularly enough to be socially expected
- **Visibility** – it communicates participation to the community
- **Shared rules** – there's a recognized way to perform, dress, or behave
- **Legitimacy production** – attendance translates to social or moral standing

Galas checked these boxes, but only for the wealthy, mostly white, and socially connected. Their value was never in converting casual attendees into loyal donors. It was in creating a moral stage where the upper echelons of society could perform generosity.



## Why the Civic Ritual Cannot Sustain Itself Today

Galas were once powerful civic rituals because they offered a clear, structured way for supporters to signal generosity, reinforce social bonds, and demonstrate institutional legitimacy. Over time, however, several factors have made sustaining that power increasingly difficult:

1. **Shifts in donor priorities and attention** – Donors' social and personal time is more scarce than ever. People make intentional choices about how to spend two hours with friends or colleagues, and formal events compete directly with those personal relationships. The gala's structure, which once offered a socially sanctioned way to give, now often feels like an imposition on already limited time.
2. **Awareness of fundraising costs** – Donors are increasingly conscious of the overhead associated with large events. Ticket prices, table sales, and sponsorships fund logistics as much as charitable impact, which can create discomfort. What was once unquestioned spectacle now feels transactional, and donors are more likely to ask themselves: "Could this money go straight to the cause instead?"
3. **Changes in social signaling** – Historically, if a donor wanted to be seen as generous, their options were limited:
  - Attend a gala and be publicly visible for photographers to document
  - Have their name listed in an annual report or honor roll
  - Announce their gift personally, which could feel awkward or performative

Today, giving and visibility have been disintermediated. A donor can give to a crowdfunding campaign, and their friends (and their friends' networks) see it instantly. There's no formal event, no awkward self-promotion, no need for institutional orchestration. Social signaling now occurs on donors' terms, outside the nonprofit's control, reducing the necessity of formal civic rituals.

4. **The rise of alternative pathways and digital visibility** – Crowdfunding, peer-to-peer campaigns, and social media allow donors to contribute in ways that are immediate, lightweight, and socially visible. Digital visibility also



changes the meaning of exclusivity: the aura of scarcity that once made galas compelling is diluted when everyone can see photos or updates online.

And on top of all this, we had a global pandemic. The global pause on in-person events removed both expectation and habit. Without recurring gatherings, there was no “fear of missing out,” and donors grew accustomed to supporting causes outside formal events. Many institutions are still adjusting to the rhythm of this new donor behavior.

When these factors converge, galas begin to feel more performative than participatory, and transactional elements such as sponsorships, table sales, and perks start to overshadow the civic or social experience. The ritual itself doesn't disappear entirely, but its power and predictability weaken, leaving institutions with the structure intact but the meaning more eroded than ever.

## Crowdfunding Answers a Longstanding Donor Need

If galas collapsed because the ritual lost legitimacy, what fills the void? Crowdfunding does. And here's the thing: it works because it **meets donors where they are**, not where nonprofits wish they were.

Crowdfunding is transactional by design. It allows donors to:

- Support friends and causes quickly
- Give without lengthy engagement or institutional obligation
- Control how much time, attention, and identity they invest

This isn't a new urge or trend. Donors have always wanted to support others while protecting the limited bandwidth of their personal lives. Crowdfunding simply removes the pretense that a formal event or ongoing “engagement” is necessary.

## The Engagement Myth

This is hard to say and hard to accept, but we're going to rip the band-aid off: **Not every donor wants a relationship.** Not every gift requires cultivation. Not every attendance at a gala indicated meaningful commitment.

Fundraisers have been operating under the assumption that more touchpoints equals more loyalty, and even predictive modeling algorithms assume this to be true. Crowdfunding exposes this myth.

Donors can be generous, committed, and loyal without performing a relationship on the nonprofit's schedule.

When leaders recognize this, the ramifications are clear: chasing transactional donors for engagement is wasted energy. Crowdfunding allows institutions to segment their relationships, focusing effort where engagement is desired and reciprocated.

### What Leaders Should Take Away

1. **Let go of the engagement illusion** – Not all giving needs to be nurtured into a multi-touch relationship. Some donors just want to chip in and move on.
2. **Stop forcing events as moral leverage** – Galas are not gateways to new donors, and the civic legitimacy they once conferred is gone.
3. **Use crowdfunding strategically** – It's not a panacea, but it is a permission slip for institutions to embrace donor autonomy.
4. **Focus relational energy on the engaged** – Reserve time and attention for the donors who want it and let transactional donors operate transactionally.
5. **Consider the broader civic context** – If nonprofits want to rebuild meaningful social rituals, they must do so inclusively, outside of historical elite models, and not as a default expectation of philanthropy.

## Conclusion: The Permission Slip

Crowdfunding isn't a problem. All the handwringing we've read over the years indicating that it is the headwinds of the end of philanthropic society as we know it is wrong.

Crowdfunding reflects how donors actually operate: they want to be generous without sacrificing time, intimacy, or agency.

Galas were a historical workaround, now largely obsolete. Executives and fundraisers can breathe. The sector doesn't need to rescue every donor or force participation into rituals that no longer resonate.

The challenge going forward is not making galas work again—they won't—nor lamenting the transactional nature of small gifts. It's learning to design engagement around reality, not fantasy, and to accept that some giving is meant to be light, fast, and transactional by design.

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