



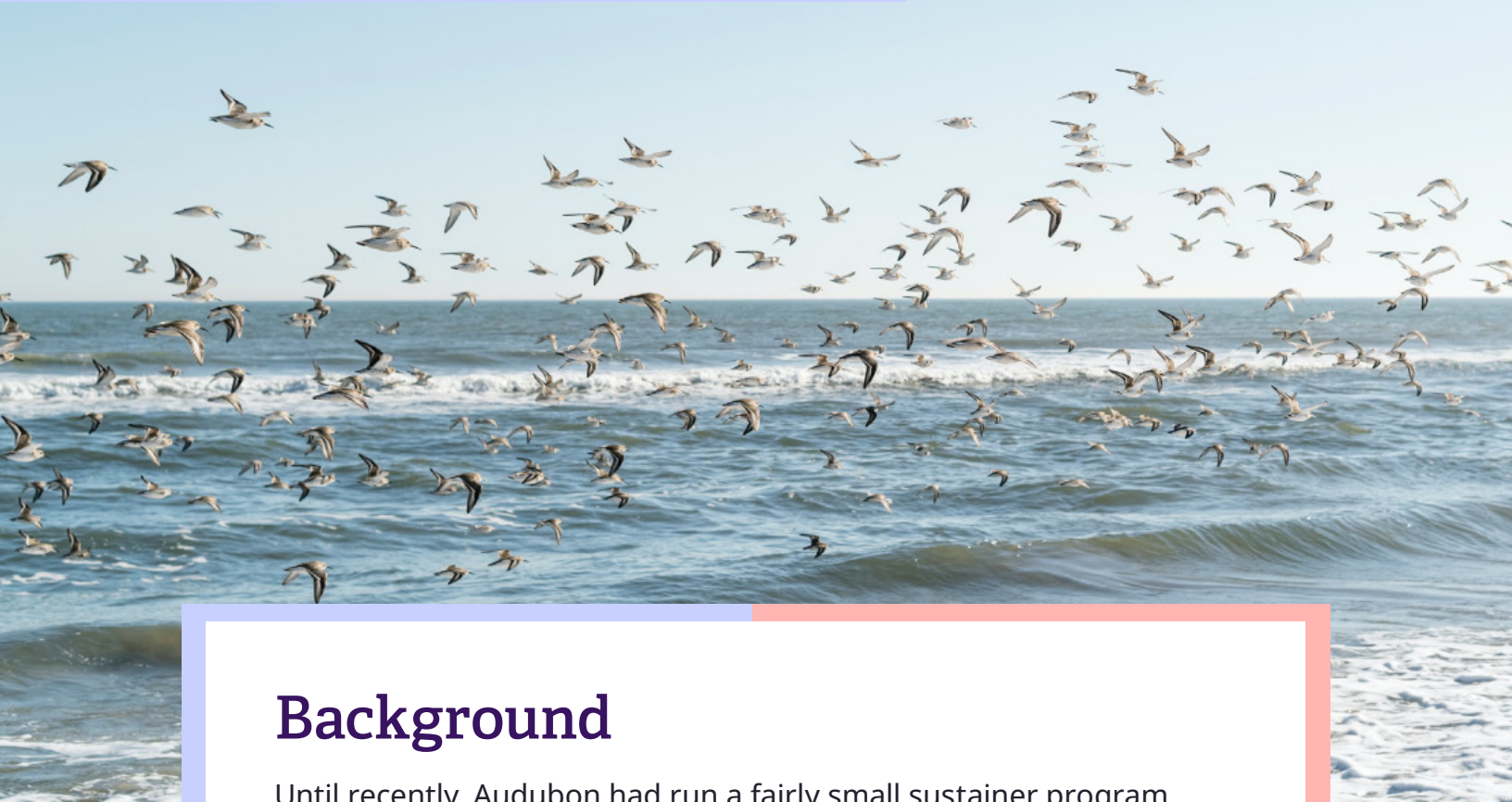
CASE STUDY

Audubon goes sustainer-first with Bonterra Development and Digital.



ABOUT

The National Audubon Society protects birds and the places they need, today and tomorrow, throughout the Americas using science, advocacy, education, and on-the-ground conservation.



Background

Until recently, Audubon had run a fairly small sustainer program, consisting primarily of donor conversions through telemarketing and later canvassing as well. In conjunction with their migration to the Bonterra Donor Engagement solution (formerly EveryAction,) they began to significantly increase their focus on sustainer marketing through digital channels.

Objectives

Betting on the fact that sustainers would have a higher lifetime donor value than one-time donors, Audubon set out to increase overall long-term fundraising by growing their sustainer base.

To achieve this goal, they identified a key initiative: Going sustainer-first in their digital fundraising, including eventually running a sustainer-first GivingTuesday campaign.

Initiatives

Transitioning to a sustainer-first digital marketing program wasn't an overnight switch. Audubon started first with email, and slowly transitioned into leading with monthly donation asks. Next, they optimized the donation forms on their website for sustainer conversions.

All was going well in early 2020, and they planned for a large sustainer campaign around Earth Day in late April. As was the case for most spring-2020 plans, the advisability of their campaign was quickly thrown into question by the COVID-19 pandemic. In the face of something so unprecedented, they made the decision to carefully keep going forward, while implementing extra measures to thank and check in with donors through mail and digital channels. After conducting successful sustainer fundraising tests in March, they felt confident going ahead with a strong Earth Day campaign.



“ If you’ve built up a good relationship with your donors, trust your donors. If they care about your organization and your work, they’ll be with you, even in times of crisis, they’ll see that your work is important.”

- Steven Abrahamson, vice president of direct response at The National Audubon Society.



Throughout the year, Audubon optimized their sustainer program with technology that ensures they are able to prioritize conversions and retention at every opportunity. These solutions included:

- Optimizing for quick and easy conversion by offering **one-click donations** through Bonterra's FastAction network of saved donor profiles.
- Increasing sustainer retention by using an automatic credit card updater to ensure that donors aren't lost when credit cards expire or are lost or stolen. Steven remarks, **"I wish we had the technology ten years ago for the credit card updater—that is such a life-changer for these programs. There were times where we lost tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of dollars in a month because of a major credit card breach issue, and that hasn't been a problem in the past couple of years with the credit card updater."**
- In addition to a monthly donation button, Audubon also included an annual donation button, allowing one-time donors to sign up for auto-renewal on a yearly basis. In the same way that consumers are used to signing up for monthly charges for things like streaming services and gym memberships, they are also generally very familiar with automatic annual renewals, and they often appreciate the convenience of processing their nonprofit donations in the same way.



“What I’ve seen and learned is that it really is okay to lead and to acquire with sustainers first. When we started our digital program, we weren’t focused on doing monthly-first, I wish we had moved more quickly and more thoroughly into monthly-first. Every month those extra gifts add up.”

“I wish we had the technology 10 years ago for credit card updater—that is such a life-changer for these programs... The annual renewal button is also really great because it’s mirroring consumer changes. Anything that is going to improve first-year retention that dramatically—that’s like magic.”

Outcome

**27k
sustainers**

Audubon’s total number of sustainers grew from around 3k sustainers to 27k sustainers

**4.5
million**

Sustainer revenue has gone from 300k per year to 4.5 million per year

50-50

Sustainer acquisition has run around 50-50 between brand new donors and converted one-time donors

In 2020, Audubon ran their first sustainer-first GivingTuesday campaign, predicting that, though they would likely lose some one-time revenue, it would be made up for within a year. Ultimately, they broke even within three months and acquired more than 2,000 sustainers in the month of December.

As for donors who signed up for an annual renewal rather than monthly, when the first cohort hit their 12-month mark Audubon saw around a 90% renewal rate, a dramatic increase from the industry average for first-year donor retention of around 30%.

And, Steven notes, they're not finished. Future plans for their sustainer program involve building out strong cultivation and stewardship programs, and integrating new channels like mobile messaging to round out their outreach. With a lot of sustainers already reaching their mid-level giving threshold, they'll also consider putting more effort into growing that cohort.

“ Don't forget to put something larger on your ask string for sustainers, start at \$12-15 but maybe go to \$50 as well.”

Run powerful, optimized sustainer programs with industry-leading digital fundraising solutions. [Contact us today.](#)