

SUCCESS STORY

For Iowa PBS, Sustainers Donating from Bank Accounts Make a ‘Huge Impact’

There’s no mistaking how much Iowa PBS appreciates its sustaining donors—especially those giving by electronic bank transfer.

“Ideally, if everyone at the same time wanted to switch to paying with their bank account that would be awesome,” said Annelise Tarnowski, Sustaining Membership Manager at the Iowa PBS Foundation. Iowa PBS serves viewers statewide and in portions of neighboring states.

Of its more than 20,200 sustainers, nearly 53% give by electronic bank transfer. While the Iowa PBS Foundation calls it “EFT” in the office, Tarnowski said it’s promoted to viewers as “banks or bank accounts, to try to make it a little clearer to the donors that it’s coming from something they recognize.” And they’re not shy about it.

“A lot of our forms, whether they be online or in the mail, the first option is to join as a sustainer, and the second part is to join as an EFT or bank sustainer. Regardless of how you join there’s always a bank option clearly and first,” said Tarnowski. That includes sign-ups during a public television staple, the pledge drive.

“That’s one of the best times to offer EFT to our donors, because people are already there, they’re excited,” said Tarnowski. Volunteers answering calls have a script that first encourages becoming a sustainer. If the caller agrees, the next part of the script cites using a bank account as the best way to give.

As for the 47% of sustainers still using cards, checks and even cash, Tarnowski considers them a work in progress—never missing an opportunity to convert.

“Just this morning I had someone call in to say, ‘My card got stolen so I need to switch cards.’ And I said, ‘You know, if you switch to your bank account you won’t have to

worry about that.’ And after a 10-second pause, she said, ‘That’s a great idea.’”

Another message that hits home with sustainers is the extra money going to the Iowa PBS Foundation.

“It means someone who grew up watching ‘Sesame Street’ is now able to watch it with their grandkids. During COVID we were able to show travel shows for people whose trips might have been canceled or are already homebound,” said Tarnowski. It also affords the ability to create more local programming.

“It means everything just to be able to save a small amount in fees in receiving the donations, because there’s so many donors, and they’re so passionate about the mission,” said Tarnowski, adding that sustainers using bank accounts are a bit more generous.

“On average, our EFT donors give about \$5 more every month than our credit card donors. It shows us a couple of things. I think partly, a lot of those donors have been with us for a long time, so there’s a trust factor,” said Tarnowski. Also, when sustainers switch to EFT, the form offers the option to upgrade their donation.

“A lot of the times they say, ‘Yes. I’m increasing my commitment by giving straight from my bank account, and while I’m here I’m going to increase what I’m giving by a couple of dollars every month,’” said Tarnowski. “It’s a huge impact.”

Nacha’s Nonprofit Toolkit has everything necessary to begin or expand a program to encourage donations by electronic bank transfer.

Download it for free at Nacha.org/nonprofits.



Annelise Tarnowski
Sustaining Membership Manager

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