

Acting fast in a crisis

Yuliya Kosko shares fundraising lessons learned through Svitlo Education's crisis campaigning

The online learning community platform for Ukrainian children and young people, Svitlo Education, did not start with a strategy, a fundraising plan or even a team of experienced fundraisers. It started with a crisis, one person's vision and many caring volunteers.

In the first days following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, there was an immediate need to support children whose education had been completely disrupted. Schools were closed, families displaced and uncertainty was everywhere. The response that eventually became UK-based charity Svitlo Education was put together out of necessity rather than design.

At that point, there was no bank account, let alone a fundraising infrastructure in place. As a founder, I had to rely almost entirely on the goodwill of others. Friends, colleagues, educators and wider networks stepped in, often without being asked twice.

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In those early weeks, much of the work was done for free. Volunteers taught lessons, coordinated timetables, managed communications and supported the enrolment of new students looking for any distraction from the war and access to education.



There was no guarantee of funding, just a shared belief that what we were building mattered.

That sense of purpose carried the organisation through the most uncertain phase. It also shaped how fundraising happened. People did not respond to a polished campaign. They responded to something real, urgent and human. Looking back, I can say with certainty that beginning offers some of the clearest lessons about how fundraising works in a crisis.

We started before we felt ready

If we had waited until everything was in place, we would have missed the moment and hundreds of children would have been lost.

There is always a temptation to get things right first: build a proper website, refine messaging, align stakeholders. In a crisis, that instinct slows you down. We had to accept that what we were putting out into the world was imperfect.

Our first fundraising efforts were simple. A clear message about what we do and why we need the support, a basic way to donate and direct outreach to people we knew. What mattered was being present while people were paying attention. Donors were not expecting perfection; they were looking for something credible. Everything was driven by turning sad emotions into positive impact.

We relied on people first, because we had no other option

At the very beginning, fundraising wasn't about strategy, it was about survival.

The first funds came from people who knew us. Friends, family, clients of my business and a handful of individuals who had the capacity to give more and believed in what we were trying to do. Those early contributions were critical. Not just financially, but psychologically, they gave us reassurance and something to build on.

Once we had that initial support, we could start approaching organisations. Without it, those conversations would have been much harder. Early funding creates credibility; it shows that someone else has already trusted you.

Then the reality for new charities becomes very clear. Most institutional funders require at least two or three

years of financial history with audited accounts and established governance. At that time, we had none of that and a large proportion of available funding in the UK was being directed towards supporting Ukrainians who had arrived in the UK. That is, of course, also important but more than 85% of our students are in Ukraine, often in the most difficult and disrupted conditions. The rest are all over Europe.

That made fundraising more complex. We tried reaching out to Ukrainian networks, but it was not straightforward. At that stage of the war, most people and businesses were understandably focused on supporting the army. Education felt like a longer-term need, not an immediate priority and it was hard to ask for support in the context where people needed immediate medical support and somewhere to live.

Eventually, we secured our first regular financial contribution from a Ukrainian company. It was not a large grant, but it was consistent and it allowed us to pay two members of the team. That was a turning point, which showed that the model could be supported, not just emotionally, but financially.

Behind the scenes, the reality was less visible. As the founder, I continued to rely on my own income and worked on building Svitlo without pay for the first two years. Many others around me were also giving their time for free.

That is often the hidden layer of crisis fundraising. The early stages are held together by belief, unpaid work and a few dedicated people.

Looking back, I see that the system is not designed for organisations that appear overnight, even when the need demands it. In a crisis, you are building credibility at the same time as delivering impact. In our case, it started with people who were willing to believe in us before we had the evidence.

Mentors matter

We didn't have time to develop layered messaging and in hindsight, that helped. People needed to understand quickly what was happening and why it mattered. The most effective messages were very straightforward:

- This is what is happening in Ukrainian education.
- This is what we are doing as a global team.
- This is how it helps children, their families and eventually all of society.

But while the messaging stayed simple, building the organisation itself was not something I could figure out alone. One of the most important factors in that early stage was asking for mentoring from people in the field.

I was lucky to receive support from Action Tutoring, and in particular from CEO Jen Fox. We first connected at a tutoring event, and that conversation turned into something much more valuable. Through regular mentoring meetings, I was able to learn from her and her wider team about fundraising as well.

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Those conversations gave me clarity at moments when everything felt uncertain. They helped me make decisions faster, avoid common mistakes and think more strategically about how Svitlo could grow.

Momentum can quickly fade

The early response was strong. There was urgency, attention and a willingness to act. As an educational charity, we connected with schools in the UK; some of them fundraised for us or collected books, or organised joined projects.

Soon the landscape became more crowded. Other causes needed support and people who had already given were less likely to give again immediately. We had to not only attract new attention but also stay visible to those who already knew us. It also became clear that meeting people in person makes a real difference.

With encouragement from one of our trustees, we organised our first Svitlo Education anniversary event. At the time, it felt like a big step for a young organisation but it turned out to be incredibly valuable. It helped us build partnerships, brought in individual donations and, just as importantly, gave people the chance to understand who we are beyond emails and social media.





Partnerships helped build trust faster

As a new organisation, credibility was one of our biggest challenges. People wanted to help, but they also wanted to be sure their money was going somewhere reliable. We had to get some big names on the website. Having offers of free places in online schools such as Harrow and Pearson helped the academic credibility.

Finding connections in banks and corporations who could fundraise and get a matching amount from their employer was also very positive.

In the end, crisis fundraising is not about having the perfect plan. It's about having the courage to start, keep on asking and to keep going. You rely on people before you rely on systems. And if you're willing to show up consistently, ask for help and be clear about why your work matters, support will come.

Looking back, I didn't have all the answers and I still don't. But I learned that you don't need to. What you need is to start, because in the end, people do want to help. You just have to give them a reason and sometimes, simply the opportunity to do so.

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