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Page 2: Tell us who you are!

**Q1** Contact Information

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Page 3: Award Categories

**Q2** Select a category. **Membership**

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Page 5: Membership

**Q9** Project Title

Vermont PBS: Growing On-Air Revenue While Maintaining the Integrity of Primetime Programming

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**Q10** What was the overall goal of project, problem it sought to solve or opportunity it sought to leverage? (suggested word count 100-250)

Vermont PBS set out to address a problem many of us share: how could we continue to use on-air fundraising to increase revenue without pledge programming turning off our viewers – and, even worse, risk the chance they might turn us off for good? Like many stations across the country, we experienced the double-edge sword of traditional pledge fundraising: it raises revenue, but overall viewership drops during pledge periods and doesn't fully come back right away. Also, like many stations, we were seeing an overall decline in pledge effectiveness. Between FY16 and FY17 – both years using traditional pledging – our revenue dropped about 24%. With those factors in mind, we decided it was time to try something else.

At Vermont PBS, we pride ourselves for having strategic goals that include agility and experimentation – and core values to collaborate and explore. We took those guideposts to heart and decided it was time to be agile and experiment with our on-air fundraising model. To do so, we collaborated across departments – programming, marketing, and production, joining with development – and explored new ideas, including looking to see what other public television stations were doing. Taking inspiration from WNET, we decided as a station to radically change our on-air fundraising schedule with our own Vermont version of “Giving Back Primetime.”

Our Development staff consulted with WNET and gained a lot of great information about what had worked for them. After gaining our station buy-in, we took the leap in March 2018 and switched from the traditional model of extended “pledge periods” several times a year, to a weekly schedule of limited pledge programs during fewer primetime programs. Our challenge – and opportunity – was to implement this new model in a very different market. We knew from the beginning that what worked in NYC, would not necessarily be successful in Vermont. For example, we quickly learned that Vermont PBS doesn't have a lot of overnight viewers like WNET does – so overnight pledging wasn't a good option for us. We decided to use daytime slots on Saturdays and Sundays for pledge programs (as non-primetime) and allocated only one night a week of primetime fundraising (in our case, we modeled WNET with Thursday nights, leveraging the programming flexibility PBS provides that night). The question for us was – would viewers object to pledge programming every Thursday night? And, just as important, would shorter pledge programming extended over the entire year raise enough revenue? Now, one year into our “experiment” we can happily report it worked.

Following is a description of our strategy and success. We are excited to share our story here so more stations can break from the traditional pledge model and customize their own on-air fundraising to meet the needs of their specific markets and viewers.

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## 2019 Development Awards - Application Form

### **Q11** Describe the activity, what it achieved, and why it was successful. (suggested word count 200-400)

To launch Vermont PBS “Giving Back Primetime,” we needed both the “buy-in” and support stationwide. WNET advised that we might not see positive results right away – that revenue might actually dip in the first few months. They emphasized that it was important not to give up and to stick with it to see the upward trend begin. As a result, across the board our station agreed to give it a full year to test the success of our experiment. We braced ourselves for a revenue dip, but were pleased to see that by the second month our revenue leveled out. We even set very ambitious monthly goals for ourselves and met or exceeded them through November. In December, we did surpass the amount of revenue raised in that month the previous year, but we didn’t quite meet the “stretch goal” we had set for ourselves. We took that opportunity to assess and retool our approach to strengthen our efforts moving forward.

Now the one year mark has passed and we’ve seen tremendous results. In a direct comparison with the previous year (March to February), on-air revenue grew by 15%, on-air acquisition of new/rejoin donors grew by 35%, and on-air acquisition of sustaining donors grew by 45%.

Here’s how we achieved success with “Giving Back Primetime” at Vermont PBS.

First, we promoted the upcoming change for several weeks in advance through on-air spots, our weekly e-newsletter, and in our email with the program schedule for the upcoming month. Our spots emphasized our commitment to our viewers and the primetime programming they love, while also gently reminding viewers that we still depended on their gifts. Our spots featured a warm, positive personal message from multiple staff members – including our station president and CEO. Our community received the message loud and clear that they really are important to us.

Next, we put together a strategy that combined ongoing on-air promotion supported by email messaging, limited pledge at select times, and the use of Vermont-themed premiums and tie-ins. Our pledge schedule was limited to day parts during Saturdays and Sundays and Thursday evenings. Approximately once a month, we increased our on-air fundraising to include the full day schedule on Saturdays and Sundays. Programming and marketing committed to increase on-air promo slots for fundraising to 25% of all station promos. Our rotation of on-air spots included placement during the standard pledge dates as a reminder of what are viewers were NOT missing. Once we were underway, we added in “soft sell” testimonial spots from leadership donors and well-known Vermonters. This provided the additional benefit of engaging important members of our community in new ways. We made sure all of our messaging was upbeat, positive and focused on the reason behind the new format: our viewers.

To support the initiative, Vermont PBS dedicated an increase in the staff time of one of our producers to work closely with membership staff to develop special spots and promos. With the addition of increased production resources, 73 new sustainability spots were created and put into rotation between October and December. Dedicated production staff also meant we could be more creative with our spots – including going on locations that tied-in with programs. For example, during our Sound of Music pledge program, our pledge breaks featured our staff member at the Trapp Family Lodge – the actual location the Von Trapps settled in Vermont. We also had a local premium that tied in directly to the pledge program – tickets to see the live theatrical performance of The Sound of Music during its national tour stop in Vermont.

“Giving Back Primetime” enabled staff across the station to become involved – from our CEO making promo spots, to our programming, marketing, and production departments, who all did their part to support the initiative. In this way, our entire station took ownership of the new effort and became as invested in our fundraising success as we are. And, in the Development office, we were able to pass along to our colleagues the thanks and expressions of gratitude we were receiving from our viewers. At the close of the one-year mark, we can celebrate success: we increased our revenue and we gave our viewers the programs they love – and, right when they want them, during primetime.

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**Q12** Tell us any metrics or benchmarks that show the success of project. Please consider quantitative and qualitative data. (suggested word count 100-250)

An important quantitative benchmark for Vermont PBS was stabilization of our on-air revenue stream. Rather than experiencing the dramatic peaks and valleys of revenue driven by traditional pledge periods, our revenue steadily progressed over the year. In a month-by-month comparison over the previous year, we saw an immediate impact from the reduced on-air pledge fundraising in the first month. Even so, the total raised that month still exceeded the amount raised in most of the other months that year. From there, our revenue remained relatively even for the first six months. During that time, we didn't quite reach two of the revenue spikes from the previous year, but we out-performed all of the revenue dips of the year before and began to see a steady rise in monthly income. By calendar year-end, we were consistently out-performing the previous year's record including several peak levels (graph included with our application). Our overall results in the year-to-year comparison tell the complete story:

- Total on-air revenue grew by 15%;
- New/Rejoin donors (from on-air fundraising) grew by 35%; and
- On-air acquisition of sustaining donors grew by 45%.

From the qualitative standpoint, we were very pleased to receive viewer calls and emails throughout the year expressing their appreciation that we were maintaining the primetime programming schedule they love. We are also very pleased to report that during the whole year we received no complaints! And, among our station colleagues, we are very pleased to share the experiment success: together, we met our goals to increase revenue and keep our viewers happy.

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**Q13** Tell us how the project leveraged national or local content (primetime, KIDS, pop-out, etc). (suggested word count 100-250)

Vermont PBS looks for every opportunity to leverage our local viewers' interests in PBS national programming and Vermont's unique culture and history. An example for "Giving Back Primetime" is how we used one of our viewers' most popular primetime shows – "Masterpiece" – to help raise on-air gifts.

We leveraged "Masterpiece" to benefit "Giving Back Primetime" and timed our effort to coincide with the season finale episode of Poldark and the anticipation for the new season of Victoria. We knew we had a leadership donor who was an especially avid fan of "Masterpiece," so we contacted him to see if he would help us use "Masterpiece" to inspire viewers to give to the station. He enthusiastically agreed – and increased his gift level – to issue a "Masterpiece Challenge." He would match donor gifts up to a total of \$15,000. The donor himself made several promotional spots telling viewers how much he appreciated Vermont PBS and why being a member was so important – and the fundraising challenge was met.

We extended our fundraising efforts around "Masterpiece" with our own locally-produced promotional spot that featured two women in Victorian period dress. Over tea the women discuss how much they enjoy watching "Masterpiece," but one wonders, "is it free to watch?" The handsome young butler explains that while viewers didn't have to "pay" to watch Masterpiece, it wasn't exactly "free" for the station. The woman exclaims her support and enthusiastically asks for her phone to make a gift. The butler complies by serving it up on his tray, revealing to our surprise a contemporary cell phone!

In addition to leveraging national shows, Vermont PBS used our own archival footage from local programs produced in the 1970's and 1980's to complement the pledge programs based in nostalgia. We even showed our own sense of humor by featuring a few of the pledge breaks from those "yesteryears," too.

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**Q14** Do you have any supporting materials or items to upload? (optional) **Yes**

Page 10: Additional Items

**Q31** Please upload all materials as a single document.

**Vermont PBS Giving Back Primetime Snapshot.pdf (123.3KB)**

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Page 11: Tell us more!

**Q32** The Development Awards are a key annual project of the Development Advisory Committee (DAC). Please let us know how else the DAC can serve you, your station or the system as a whole.

Thanks for your support!

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