

**QUESTIONS FOR PARIJAT DESAI:
CROWDFUNDING AND INDIVIDUAL FUNDRAISING**



Parijat Desai's Artist Websites:

www.parijatdesai.org

www.facebook.com/ParijatDesaiDanceCompany

Parijat Desai's successful 2011 IndieGogo Campaign:

www.indiegogo.com/Parijat-Desai-Dance-Company

Raised: \$9,794.00

Goal: \$8,500.00

Crowdfunding has become an increasingly common and successful platform for artists to fundraise from individuals. In 2012, LMCC asked two NYC-based artists questions on their opinions and experience using crowdfunding platforms including Kickstarter and IndieGogo to raise funds to support their artistic projects.

1. Briefly describe your work and professional background as an artist

I am a contemporary dancer and choreographer, and artistic director of Parijat Desai Dance Company, which creates and performs a kinetic blend of Indian classical and Western contemporary dance. The *NYT* called our work "fresh ... bold" and a "seamless blending of the new and old." From 2009-2012, I was an artist in residence at Tribeca Performing Arts Center, developing contemporary dance vocabularies, experimenting with incorporating visual and theatrical elements into dance, and dialoguing with musicians. In 2011, PDDC completed a six-city tour of India, and I had the honor of being invited to the White House. My choreography has been presented by venues including Danspace Project, La Mama ETC, and Asia Society (NY); Skirball Cultural Center (LA); ODC Theater (SF); Northwestern University (Chicago); The Dance Centre (Vancouver, BC); and National Centre for the Performing Arts (Mumbai, India).

2. When and how did you start using crowdfunding platforms? How did you select the platform you ultimately used? Had you carried out an individual fundraising campaign in the past, either online or by other means? Did you have any reservations about crowdfunding?

I used Kickstarter to help raise funds for my company's September 2011 tour of India. Because the presenter was only covering domestic travel, food and accommodations and a small artistic fee, I knew I would have to raise funds for international travel, artist fees, rehearsal costs, and production costs.

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I began planning for ways to raise funds from the moment I agreed to participate. Earlier in my career I had applied for touring grants managed by Arts International and won them twice. However, by 2011, I had applied three times to USArtists International, a program of Mid Atlantic Foundation that is currently the primary source for travel support for U.S. artists performing abroad, to tour my company, but was not funded each time. It was clear the economic environment for artists had shifted.

During other phases, I had obtained grants, income through teaching, and/or in-kind labor/support. But because grants required a great deal of time and thought, yet could yield nothing, I knew I have to try other approaches. I educated myself about corporate sponsorship by reading and by talking to a manager who handles that work for a major company, and developed/shopped material to airlines and to friends who were at corporations in New York. As I was one person trying to dance, prepare choreography, and also handle admin/production work, I couldn't be comprehensive with the sponsor search.

However, I put most of my focus on an individual donor campaign. I've had reasonable success with individual donor campaigns in the past and raised about \$6K–\$8K each time for a couple of years. I also knew I could connect with supporters as people. So I felt there was a better chance of getting a return on my efforts raising funds from individuals rather than other types of funders. Also what I was fundraising for was really exciting! I was taking my company abroad to an unprecedented 6 major cities in India for its first tour ever!

I've seen others' successes with Kickstarter and had begun to understand the concept of crowdfunding from media-savvy/journalist friends. I went with Indiegogo over Kickstarter for two reasons: 1) My fiscal sponsor Fractured Atlas has a partnership with IGG so I would only be charged one smaller percentage fee for each dollar raised, versus Kickstarter's two separate fees. 2) If I didn't reach my goal I'd get a penalty fee, but would still get most of the money, versus nothing if I used Kickstarter.

My primary concerns were whether I'd be able to handle the challenge of creating a really good video pitch and coming up with/distributing good gifts. In the end the effort proved very rewarding, both financially and in terms of morale. One of my dance students turned out to be a very talented cinematographer, and shot the pitch. I also enlisted a few dancers to brainstorm the premium levels and language. But rest was all me: selecting the best dance footage, editing tons of video/audio down to a good 5 minutes, setting up the IGG page, uploading video, responding to donors, linking to FB/website, and posting progress. It was a TON of work for someone operating without administrative/organizational support. But on the other hand, once the raw materials were obtained, it was a big thing to be able to do primarily by yourself with a computer.

3. Please describe your process of planning the crowdfunding campaign, including timing, outreach methods, strategies to reach your goal, etc. What were the most challenging aspects?

It was clear that an effective video pitch was critical. I brainstormed with fellow dancers about what the most important info was, and what ideas needed to be communicated to get the viewer excited about the trip. It took a lot of winnowing down to keep language short. I didn't speak off the cuff; we scripted it. But we also had fun with it.

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I tried to give the editing to someone else, but only someone who knew the range of my work could really find the best footage. I tried to find the best clips of the works we were taking to India, but also good examples of previous work to show the track record and to say, "Look how far we've come and this is an amazing milestone!" Only I could sort through it all. In the end I had to do the editing. I had to figure out not only the mechanics of editing on clunky iMovie, but also filetypes, ripping, importing, and rendering. But in the end, again it was worth it because it was a strong representative piece that I felt motivated to share.

It did get people excited and we got great comments on the IGG and FB pages.

To promote the campaign, I sent newsletters via our e-mail service (Constant Contact); the newsletters had lots of images and specific but not wordy text (also a combo of self-taught effort and in-kind advice from savvy friends). I posted on our Facebook page, website, and Twitter. I also embedded the IGG "badge," which says how much has been raised, onto our website calendar. I did my best to respond to donors as quickly as possible and posted frequently.

Identifying the right gifts and levels was tricky and challenging. Also pulling together the actual gifts was also a huge endeavor and did not get completed until much much later. So think carefully about what you promise and make sure you get help!

4. Briefly describe the size and characteristics of network you reached out to (ie friends, colleagues, past supporters, new contacts), and how often during the campaign.

- Total of ~2,200 on our mailing list about twice. Then I eliminated VIPs (like presenters whom I didn't want to bug) and e-mailed the rest (fans, friends, family) of ~2,000 about 4 times: "It's coming up!" "It's here!" "This is how it's going!" "It's almost over!"
- Facebook fans (of PDDC's page): 300, with 3-4 messages
- Personal Facebook friends of ~800, 3 individual messages
- Posted on my personal and PDDC's walls 4-5 times each

5. Why do you think it was successful? Were there any lessons learned or things you would do differently on your next campaign?

The video was compelling and fun, reflected what we've done and what we do, explained the upcoming events, and told what the funds would be for simply/clearly. So I think that drew people in. I also think the idea of the 6-city tour itself was compelling because people/fans knew how long and hard we'd worked so it felt like a break or pay-off to us and our fans. Fans could see the tour would benefit us as artists a lot and that we would reach a lot of new audiences.

I think the collective feeling was that people wanted us to be able to take advantage of this great opportunity. Underneath that was the fact that people actually cared about us, which came from relationship building not only by me, but also by my family and fellow artists. Also there was the sense that things were in place and organized with our tour, so people knew the funds wouldn't go down the drain.

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I might try to set a higher goal next time because the related fees do take out a chunk.

Also I'd try to see if I could get the donor gifts organized/made/secured in advance while I've got all kind of good will and energy swirling around. For the 2011 India tour, I had only developed the gift ideas, but didn't produce them immediately. I had cards produced in India, but while they look beautiful, the sizes are nonstandard. A year later, I'm just now sending gifts out.

Unfortunately, at the time, I could not do more. In hindsight, I think it is better to figure out gifts concurrently with the campaign. If you have minimal people-power and resources, you'll need the in-kind help of people who are excited about the event. Come up with easy-to-produce gifts, even if they seem dinky. And yes, if you can get some nice or useful items, that's great. But in many cases, people you know care and are excited about your event and will donate.

6. *Did you learn anything new about your donors as a result of your recent crowdfunding campaign?*

I didn't expect so much help from people in Denver and Houston, i.e. my parents' old friends. The notion of a culmination of many years of effort in a bright new opportunity brought a lot of people out of the woodwork. That was a compelling enough reason for people to give, even though they'd never seen the work, nor would they see any of the shows.

Some people don't care about gifts.