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Carson Rakes in Cash, Spends Big on Mail and Fundraising

The retired neurosurgeon topped the GOP field in cash donations in the third quarter.

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Direct mail firms, email marketers, and fundraising consultants for retired neurosurgeon Ben Carson had a big third quarter this year, grossing \$11.6 million, according to new Federal Election Commission filings.

Carson's presidential campaign did well, too, netting \$9 million in usable contributions after accounting for those fundraising costs.

And it's those two figures that help explain how Carson, a political novice, has topped the Republican field in cash donations in the three months that ended Sept. 30: About 56 percent of his much-touted \$20.7 million haul was spent raising it.

Campaign spokeswoman Deana Bass said the high percentage rate was to be expected for a new campaign. "Obviously, in the beginning we were doing a lot of list acquisition and cultivating new donors," she said. "We've certainly been pleased with the volume of donors."

Campaigns that can tap into a high-dollar donor base can limit their fundraising expenses to about 15 percent of what's collected. "Campaigns do what they need to to raise funds," said Al Cardenas, a fundraiser for and longtime supporter of former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush. "Typically a major donor base is your best option since your net yield is much higher."

A total of \$4.2 million went to Eleventy Marketing Group in Akron, Ohio, \$1.8 million to Action Mailers in Aston, Pennsylvania, and \$1.3 million to TMA Direct in Reston, Virginia.

In contrast, payments for "payroll," normally one of a campaigns' biggest expenses, totaled just \$169,000 to a dozen individuals.

The hefty payments to direct-mail and email fundraising companies also explain how Carson pulled in \$12.4 million in donations under \$200, compared to \$8.3 million in large donations, up to \$2,700, the legal maximum per election.

Some of those contributions also paid for upscale travel that most other campaigns avoid, particularly early in the primary season. The Carson campaign paid \$1,401 to Sparks Steak House in New York City (where it's possible to buy a \$105 bottle of 2012 California Merlot), \$19,355 to Starbase Jets in Addison, Texas, and \$3,209 to the Stanford Park Hotel in Menlo Park, California.

Carson nevertheless starts the final months of the years with \$11.2 million on hand, putting him in the top tier of candidates in that category, which includes Bush, Sen. Marco Rubio of Florida, and Sen. Ted Cruz of Texas. Celebrity businessman Donald Trump has only a quarter-million on hand, but the figure is meaningless as he has already demonstrated the ability to write himself a seven-figure loan.

Carson is coming in a close second to Trump in most recent polls, but is nevertheless running an unconventional campaign with almost no attempt to detail policy positions. And this week, Carson is starting a two-week publicity tour for his latest book, "A More Perfect Union," which will limit his campaign events.