

Fundraising 101 A Brief and Basic Overview

So. You need to raise some funds, say \$50,000. And you need to have it within a certain timeframe, say next quarter. What do you do?

- a) Put it on your credit card.
- b) Rob a bank.
- c) Go to a complete stranger, ask them for the money, and explain what THEY get out of it.

If your *first* impulse was answer “c”, then you are a natural born fundraiser and you are excused from reading the rest of this article. For the rest of us¹, the vast majority, we have some work to do.

Fundraising is both a skill that can be learned (which is good news for all of us currently sitting in a development office) and an art (which unfortunately requires long, intensive studies at the knee of a master- of which there are very few.) Suffice to say, this article will focus on the *skill* of fundraising.

Now, before we get down to the serious business of raising funds, *please be sure to keep the donor’s experience in mind*, as we move through the following process. That means thinking though who to target for which campaign, avoiding multiple solicitations to the same people in close succession, and planning for ample donor recognition and praise. It doesn’t hurt to thank your donors more than once, in fact, it’s been said that it’s best to thank them seven different ways if you can.

The very first thing to do is set your goals and to create the frame of a master plan. Use a calendar to map you campaign goal and then work backwards to figure out deadlines for each task. Include all the steps you can think of -- when to print literature, when mailings must go out, and when calls or visits must be made. You will add to this skeleton plan as you develop your strategy. This map will help you budget your time and resources and show any potential conflicts; as you get more adroit in the development office, this mapping will help you manage multiple simultaneous campaigns.

Next you must determine your strategy for the campaign, including which donors you will target and how you will reach them. What is your message? How will you present your case? And, you will want to frame your approach from the donor’s perspective – not yours and not the organization’s. There are often different strategies for different levels of giving. You will think how best to approach some of your bigger

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- a) We do not recommend attempting to personally fund your campaign. Put the credit card down.
- b) As appealing as this might sound, especially at the end of a long, grueling campaign that is short \$100,000, we cannot recommend it. Yes, that means, put the ski mask down.
- c) You are a natural born fundraiser. You have already been excused. Why are you still reading?



donors and what they might find most appealing. You will also want to consider who in your organization is most likely to be heard when making the “ask.”

Once you develop your strategy, go back to your master plan and edit and fill-in more details. Keeping this map up-to-date can only help you. Organization is one of the foundational underpinnings of a good fundraiser.

Speaking of organization, how are you going to keep track of everything? You don’t want to ask a prospect for a gift if they have just sent their gift in. While your system does not have to be as sophisticated as Black Baud’s Raisers Edge to work, you will need some sort of structure on which to base your fundraising activities.

And now, we pause a moment, to acclaim the virtues of your database, which tirelessly supplies you with an abundance of information. Know it. Love it. Take good care of it. Scrub away all the bad addresses as mailings or email bounce to you, double-check and update information as you enter in donations, and be sure to put all the data away where it belongs. This last point is especially important, because the database only knows how to look for information in the fields where you tell it to look and it will miss data that isn’t where it’s supposed to be.

To begin structuring your database, look closely at the giving histories of your donors. Patterns will emerge and will help you decide how to approach donors at each giving level for the various campaigns. Giving level categories can be as simple as small, medium, and large or more complex, but they will help you target each group with the strategy you devise for it.

One obvious group will be non-givers, or people in your database who receive mailings from your office but have never made a contribution and they are easy to group together and code as Non-Givers. Your strategy for this group may be to not solicit them at all, or it may be to send one mailing a year, but you will likely decide it’s better to focus your energy elsewhere.

Other groups may not be so obvious and will require some consideration, such as infrequent givers, or those who have only made a contribution once or twice. Such individuals could be included in the Non-Giver category, especially if the individual made one contribution 10 years ago and it was only for five dollars. But what if another individual gave \$1000 five years ago? Maybe that person should be in the small or medium size donor group so he or she will receive a personalized letter and maybe a follow-up call.

Often it will be easiest to work from the top down by grouping your largest donors first and assigning them to one or more campaigns. If you are to begin a capital campaign, it is important to decide whether you will also solicit these top donors for your annual campaign or not. Most often, it is necessary to “cannibalize” your top annual donors and assign them only to the capital campaign, but that’s ok because it forces your team to develop new annual donors. Do not solicit your top donors for multiple campaigns unless you know their personal feelings about giving to more than one campaign.



Continue working backwards by classifying and setting goals for each of your donors until you get to small donors and non-givers. As you prepare your final lists, be sure to pull out any names that shouldn't be on the list. Remove names for which there is no current address or any who may have asked in the past not to be contacted or solicited.

As you develop your appeal, or case statement of why your organization deserves the money for which you are asking and how it will be used, be sure not only to spell out how your organization benefits, but also how the *donor* benefits. Include tangibles, like any gifts the donor might receive, any tax deductions available, or any naming opportunities (hopefully not becoming "a leaf" on the ubiquitous "Tree of Life" found in many organizations²). Also include intangibles, like helping to lower the infant mortality rate, or increasing access for low-income workers, or improving the health and well-being of the entire community.

Regardless of the giving level, be sure to make your appeal as compelling as possible. Use active language to tell a story, as opposed to simply referencing facts, and include examples of how the program or building will impact the lives of various people.

Also be sure to make your contacts as personal as possible. Reference any giving the donor has done in the past, what impact that donation had, and how much it was appreciated. Your top priority is to make the donors feel good about contributing to your organization so they will want to do it again in the future.

In the end, the most fundamental piece about fundraising is showing up; being there to have a relationship with your donor and nurturing it. Then you have to ask. All the planning and preparation will do no good unless you create an opportunity to make an ask, and then...ASK. That takes people who like being with people, who understanding how others might be thinking, and who are comfortable asking for money. Build the relationship. Prime the relationship. Make the ask. Repeat. It's the only way to build a successful campaign.

² Most of which are deciduous, and not coniferous. Who wants to be a needle? It's hard to print a name on a needle.