
The *ten* most important things you can know about fundraising

BY KIM KLEIN

Many times at the end of a training or a speech about fundraising techniques and principles, I am asked, “What are the most important things to remember?” Usually the person asking is either a volunteer with little time to help with fundraising, a person new to fundraising and overwhelmed by the number of details she or he has to keep in mind, or a staff person who is not responsible for fundraising but wants to help.

Over the years, I have thought about what I consider the ten most important things to know about fundraising. The items are not presented in order of importance, although #1 is probably the most important; nor are they in order of difficulty. If there is any order, it is the order in which I understood these things and integrated them into my own fundraising work. Undoubtedly, other skilled fundraisers would have slightly different lists, but this list has served me well for many years. I hope you find it useful.

1. IF YOU WANT MONEY, YOU HAVE TO ASK FOR IT

While there are some people (may their kind increase) who will simply send an organization money or offer money without being asked, there are not enough of them to build a donor base around. Most people will not think to give you money unless you make your needs known. This is not because they are cheap or self-centered; it is because most people have no idea how much it costs to run a nonprofit, or how nonprofits get money. If you don't ask them, they will simply assume you are getting the money somewhere. They have no reason to think your group needs money unless you tell them, the same way they have no reason to know if you are hungry, or unhappy, or needing advice.

Millard Fuller, who founded Habitat for Humanity, says, “I have tried raising money by asking for it, and by not asking for it. I always got more by asking for it.”

2. THANK BEFORE YOU BANK

Once you receive money, you must thank the person who gave it to you. I have found that disciplining myself not to deposit checks until I have written the thank-you notes has forced me to make thank-you notes a priority. I am not rigid about this rule because if I get behind in my thank-you notes, and then don't deposit the checks for a while, the donors may wonder whether we really needed the money.

Thank-you notes do not need to be fancy and should not be long. If at all possible, they should include a personal note, even if it is from someone who doesn't know the donor. You can add something as simple as, “Hope to meet you sometime,” or “Check out our website,” or “Happy holidays,” or even, “Thanks again — your gift really helps.”

Many organizations have created note cards for staff and volunteers to use when writing thank yous. The front of the card has the logo of the group, on the top half of the inside is a relevant meaningful quote from a famous person, and the bottom half of the inside is used for the thank-you message. It is a small space, so you really can't say much.

Many databases will print out a thank-you note after you enter the information about the donor — saving valuable time. These are best if accompanied by a personal note at the bottom.

Late thank yous are better than no thank you at all, but photocopied form thank yous are almost the same as no thank you.

The long and the short of thank yous is: if you don't have time to thank donors, you don't have time to have donors.

3. DONORS ARE NOT ATMS

A survey of donors who gave away more than \$5,000 a year asked, “What is your relationship with your favorite group?” Several gave similar answers, even though they did not know each other and did not give to the same

group. All the answers were on this theme: “I would love to be considered a friend, but I am more of an ATM. They come to me when they need money, they tell me how much, I give it to them, and the next time I hear from them is when they need more.”

This is a terrible indictment of much of what passes as fundraising. When I have described this common situation in trainings, people have often asked, “How can we make sure our donors don’t feel this way?” The answer is very simple, “Make sure you don’t feel that way about your donors.”

All groups have a few “high maintenance” donors, and may be forgiven for wishing them to go on a long trip to a place without phones or e-mail. But the majority of donors require practically no attention. They have the resilience of cacti — the slightest care makes them bloom. Thank-you notes, easy-to-understand newsletters, and occasional respectful requests for extra gifts will keep people giving year in and year out.

Think of your donors as ambassadors for your group. Design your materials so that donors will be proud to give your newsletter to a friend or recommend your group when their service club or professional association is looking for an interesting speaker, or forward your e-mails to several of their colleagues.

By treating your donors as whole people who have a number of gifts to offer your group, including their financial support, you will have more financial support from existing donors, more fun fundraising, more donors, and the peace of mind of knowing that you are not treating anyone as an object.

4. MOST MONEY COMES FROM PEOPLE, AND MOST OF THOSE PEOPLE ARE NOT RICH

There are three sources of funding for all the nonprofits in the United States: earned income (such as products and fees for service), government (public sector), and the private sector, which includes foundations, corporations and individuals. For the nearly 60 years that records about who gives money away have been kept, at least 80% of this money has been shown to be given by individuals.

In 2002, total giving by the private sector was almost \$241 billion, and 84.2 percent of that (\$202 billion) was given away by individuals! These people are *all* people — there is no significant difference in giving patterns by age, race, or gender. Income is not nearly the variable that one would think: middle-class, working-class and poor people are generous givers and account for a high percentage of the money given away. In fact, a study by Arthur Blocks of the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University showed that 19% of families living on welfare give away an average of \$72 a year!

Too often, people think they can’t raise money because they don’t know any wealthy philanthropists. It is a great comfort to find that the people we know, whoever they are, are adequate to the task. Seven out of ten adults give away money. Focus your work on these givers, and help teach young people to become givers.

5. PEOPLE HAVE THE RIGHT TO SAY NO

One of the biggest mistakes I made early on as a fundraising trainer was not balancing my emphasis on the need to ask for money with the reality that people are going to say no. No one is obligated to support your group — no matter what you have done for them, no matter how wealthy they are, no matter how much they give to other groups, how close a friend they are of the director, or any other circumstance that makes it seem they would be a likely giver.

While it is possible to guilt-trip, trick, or manipulate someone into giving once, that will not work as a repeat strategy. People avoid people who make them feel bad, and they are attracted to people who make them feel good. When you can make someone feel all right about saying no, you keep the door open to a future yes, or to that person referring someone else to your group.

People say no for all kinds of reasons: they don’t have extra money right now; they just gave to another group; they don’t give at the door, over the phone, by mail; a serious crisis in their family is consuming all their emotional energy; they are in a bad mood. Rarely does their refusal have anything to do with you or your group. Sometimes people say no because they have other priorities, or they don’t understand what your group does. Sometimes we hear no when the person is just saying, “I need more time to decide,” or “I need more information,” or “I have misunderstood something you said.”

So, first be clear that the person is saying no, and not something else like, “Not now,” or “I don’t like special events.” Once you are certain that the person has said no, accept it. Go on to your next prospect. If appropriate, write the person a letter and thank them for the attention they gave to your request. Then let it go. If you don’t hear no several times a week, you are not asking enough people.

6. TO BE GOOD AT FUNDRAISING, CULTIVATE THREE TRAITS

A good fundraiser requires three character traits as much as any set of skills. These traits are first, a belief in the cause for which you are raising money and the ability to maintain that belief during defeats, tedious tasks, and financial insecurity; second, the ability to have high hopes and low expectations, allowing you to be often pleased but rarely disappointed; and third, faith in the basic goodness of people.

While fundraising is certainly a profession, people who will raise money for any kind of group are rarely effective. Fundraising is a means to an end, a way to promote a cause, a very necessary skill in achieving goals and fulfilling missions.

7. FUNDRAISING SHOULD NOT BE CONFUSED WITH FUND CHASING, FUND SQUEEZING, OR FUND HOARDING

Too often, organizations get confused about what fundraising is and is not.

If you hear that a foundation is now funding XYZ idea, and your organization has never done work in that area nor have you ever wished to do work in that area, the fact that you are well qualified to do such work is immaterial. To apply for a grant just because the money is available and not because the work will promote your mission is called fund chasing. Many groups chase money all over and, in doing so, move very far away from their mission.

Similarly, if your organization seems to be running into a deficit situation, cutting items out of the budget may be necessary but should not be confused with fundraising. When deficits loom, the fund squeezing question is, “How can we cut back on spending?”; the fundraising question is “Where can we get even more money?”

Finally, putting money aside for a rainy day, or taking money people have given you for annual operating and program work and being able to put some of it into a savings account is a good idea. Where savings becomes hoarding, however, is when no occasion seems important enough to warrant using the savings.

I know a number of groups that have cut whole staff positions and program areas rather than let money sitting in their savings be used to keep them going until more money could be raised. I know groups that overstate what they pay people, what price they pay for equipment, what they spend on rent, all to get bigger grants from foundations or larger gifts from individuals, and then put that extra into savings — savings that they have no plan for.

A group that saves money needs to have a rationale: Why are you saving this money? Under what circumstances would you spend it? Without some plan in mind, the group simply hoards money.

Fund chasing, fund squeezing, and fund hoarding need to be replaced with an ethic that directs the group to seek the money it needs, spend it wisely, and set some aside for cash-flow emergencies or future work.

8. FUNDRAISING IS AN EXCHANGE — PEOPLE PAY YOU TO DO WORK THEY CANNOT DO ALONE

Hank Rosso, founder of the Fund Raising School and my mentor for many years, spoke often about the need to eliminate the idea that fundraising was like begging.

Begging is when you ask for something you do not deserve. If you are doing good work, then you deserve to raise the money to do it. What you must do is figure out how to articulate what you are doing so that the person hearing it, if they share your values, will want to exchange their money for your work. They will pay you to do work they cannot do alone.

9. PEOPLE'S ANXIETIES ABOUT FUNDRAISING STEM FROM THEIR ANXIETIES ABOUT MONEY

Anxiety about money is learned, and it can be unlearned. If you are ever around children, you know that they have no trouble asking for anything, especially money. In fact, if you say no to a child's request for money, they will simply ask again, or rephrase their request (“I'll only spend it on books”), or offer an alternative (“How about if I do the dishes, then will you give me the money?”).

Everything we think and feel about money we have been taught. None of it is natural; none of it is genetic. In fact, in many countries around the world, people talk easily about money. They discuss what they earn, how much they paid for things, and it is not considered rude to ask others about salaries and costs.

We have been taught not to talk about money or to ask for it, except under very limited circumstances. Many of us are taught that money is a private affair. Having too little or too much can be a source of shame and embarrassment, yet money is also a source of status and power. Most people would like to have more money, yet most will also admit that money doesn't buy happiness.

As adults, we have the right — in fact, the obligation — to examine the ideas we were taught as children to ensure that they are accurate and that they promote values we want to live by as adults. Most of us have changed our thinking about sex and sexuality, about race, about age, illness and disability, about religion, about marriage, about how children should be raised, what foods are healthy, and much more. We have done this as we have learned more, as we have experienced more, or, as we have thought about what we value and what we do not. We need to take the time to do the same work with our attitudes toward money. We can choose attitudes that make sense and that promote our health and well-being.

Our attitudes toward fundraising are a subset of our larger attitudes toward money. The most important change we can make in our attitudes toward fundraising is to remember that success in fundraising is defined by how many people you ask rather than how much money you raise. This is because some people are going to say no, which has got to be all right with you. The more people you ask, the more yes answers you will eventually get.

Finally, if you are anxious about asking for money or would rather not ask, this is normal. But ask yourself if what you believe in is bigger than what you are anxious about. Keep focused on your commitment to the cause and that will propel you past your doubts, fears, and anxieties.

10. THERE ARE FOUR STEPS TO FUNDRAISING — PLAN, PLAN, PLAN, AND WORK YOUR PLAN

Though humorous, this formula that I learned from a community organizer underscores the fact that fundraising is three parts planning for one part doing. I learned this later in my career, after having gone off half-cocked into many fundraising campaigns and programs. I meant to plan, I planned to make a plan, I just never got around to planning.

I have learned (usually the hard way) that an hour of planning can save five hours of work, leaving much more time both to plan and to work. Planning also avoids that awful feeling of “How can I ever get everything done,” and that sense of impending doom. It moves us out of crisis mentality and means that we are going to be a lot easier for our co-workers to get along with.

There are a lot of articles and books on planning — I recommend reading some of them. However, the easiest way I have found to plan something is to start by defining

the end result you want and when you want it to happen, then work backwards from that point to the present. For example, if you want your organization to have 100 new members by the end of next year and you are going to use house parties as your primary acquisition strategy, you will need to schedule five to seven house parties that will recruit 10 to 15 members per party.

To set up one house party will require asking three people to host it (only one will accept), which will require identifying 15 or 20 possible hosts to carry out the number of house parties you want to have. The hosts will want to see materials and know what help they will have from you.

The materials will have to be ready before the first phone call is made to the first potential host, and the first phone call needs to occur at least two months before the first party. So, the materials need to be produced in the next two weeks, hosts identified in a similar timeframe, calls made over a period of two or three months, and so on.

When you are tempted to skip planning, or to postpone planning until you “have some time,” or to fly by the seat of your pants, just remember the Buddhist saying, “We have so little time, we must proceed very slowly.” **GFJ**

KIM KLEIN IS PUBLISHER OF THE *GRASSROOTS FUNDRAISING JOURNAL*.