



“Friend Raising” Results in Funds

Fund development more than just asking

by Bob Jones, Ph.D., Chair of the Resource
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No trespassing” signs, frequently seen along the roadsides of America, have a useful place in our board rooms as well. The fear of “trespassing” on personal relationships may be one of the biggest barriers to the engagement of volunteers in cultivation and development efforts.

Ironically, when the “no trespassing” concept is fully articulated and respected by the nonprofit organization, recruitment of new donor relationships often escalates in both size and pace. This is because by fully articulating your policy and beliefs, the emphasis for development is put where it belongs, on building relationships rather than acquiring money.

Create Relationships

When pressed to be involved in seeking new supporters, how often do we find volunteers by thinking about immediate friends or family who can make a gift? Quite often, I would say. But also quite often you will find that people just cannot think of anyone. They are paralyzed, feeling either trapped or unhelpful. Encouraging volunteers to step away from the focus on the donation, per se, can be most liberating. Furthermore, it is most important to encourage them to avoid ever putting pressure on friends or family to give gifts just because they are involved themselves.

The goal is to create a positive culture combining “relationship building” with “no trespassing.” Encouraging our volunteers to consider focusing on why others would be curious about our work, the motivation for involvement, and the connection someone might feel for the agency, the clients, and the mission is the key to unlocking their creativity and comfort with cultivation.

Research Backs up Advice

It is important to help volunteers think simply about engaging in “conversations” about the agency, its work, those served, and its mission—with no “ask” involved. That’s right: no ask. What I am suggesting is to encourage leadership volunteers to be active conversationalists and “friend raisers.” This means focusing on why they are involved with the agency, comfortably sharing their experience of the agency, what they are proud of, and why it is important to them, not in a manner to convert or convince, but just to share with and engage the other party.

Some background information might be helpful to put this suggestion in context:

- Most volunteers—in fact, most human beings—find asking for money uncomfortable. (When given the choice of asking for money or undergoing a root canal

procedure, some might actually opt for the root canal).

- Board members are proud of their agency, the staff, and the positive impact the agency is having on those it serves and the community (if they are not, there are much more serious problems than growing the development capacity of the agency).

- One of the primary responsibilities of the board is as an ambassador in the community; in fact, community relationships begin with the board members. Staff members help manage and grow them, but board members open the doors.

- Trespassing on personal relationships does not build a sustainable donor base. Even when it results in a gift, it rarely creates a relationship and it may in fact complicate one, the fear of which often paralyzes volunteers.

- Less than 8 percent of philanthropic dollars in the U.S. go to child- and family-serving agencies.

- Donor designations are an increasing trend as donors wish to have a genuine picture of the impact they are making, often with verifiable outcomes measures reported back to them.

■ Restricted giving, quite often the manner in which new donors will engage with a charity, can be a positive pathway for building trust, developing a relationship, and engaging them in supporting other aspects of the agency, including general operations.

■ Recent research demonstrates that the deeper the personal connection with a charity, particularly active volunteer involvement, the greater the probability of sustained and increased giving. In other words, it is all about the relationship.

■ Human service agencies must understand donor attrition. We rarely impact directly on our donors in a major, life altering fashion. As donors move to new communities, retire, or become involved in new interests, their giving behaviors change accordingly. Continual cultivation of constituents is an imperative focus for our sector.

Powerful Tools

Speaking about the good work of the staff and the impact of the agency is a powerful tool that volunteers can use to spread awareness, develop interest, and engage others. Professional communications tools and clear messaging further help the volunteer articulate the difference made by the agency. There is no substitute for the immediacy of a volunteer's enthusiasm and energy.

Helping prepare our leadership volunteers to share the message in their own words is often much more productive from a development point of view than attempting to cajole the timid into donor solicitations that they dread. Celebrating increased curiosity in the work of the agency by new constituents is important and energizing to our volunteers.

Prepare for Rejection

Providing inoculations against the impact of disinterest is a wise step. It is important to put into perspective for the volunteer that many, if not most, people are not interested in or moved by our work.

A lack of interest in our work should not be confused with a personal rejection. There are a lot of nice, giving people who are moved by other charitable calls. Giving permission to volunteers to "drop it" is helpful.

If a volunteer is speaking about the agency or its work and the other person keeps changing the subject or simply fails to respond, this is a message that person may be focused on other charitable giving. It is not evidence of the personal failure of the volunteer to engage the other party.

If the other person asks follow-up questions or demonstrates an interest, that is a sign that it is time to share more information, offer to follow up with literature or a tour, or offer to introduce the person to one of the senior staff. Opening the door for more dialogue is a valuable contribution to the agency's constant need for new constituents.

Further, focusing our efforts with that segment of the community that already has an interest in child and family services is a more productive effort than attempting to convince the disinterested.

Even when interest is expressed, it may be helpful to encourage the volunteer to proceed slowly. Do not encourage them to rush to convert an interested or curious person into a donor. Help volunteers remember that the goal in cultivation is engaging the person in a relationship, and creating a portrait in the other's mind of how he or she can make a difference. This will also reinforce the message to our leadership volunteers that we need and value their efforts in the actual relationship building process. People will invest in what they believe in.

Reap the Rewards

The concept of engaging in conversations is a particularly useful frame through which to help board members and volunteers develop an increased understanding of, and comfort with, cultivation of new supporters. Ask your leadership volunteers to scan for interested people while speaking casually about the agency in their many spheres of influence. Ask them to pay close

attention to who is interested. Does the person ask a follow-up question?

Even when prospecting for new donors and developing new lists, urge volunteers to consider why someone would want to learn more about your work and what the connection would be for that person. This is a refreshing lens from the old and heavy "let's acquire a gift" mindset that is so off-putting for volunteers.

Friend raising can even be an organized activity. At Children's Aid and Family Services, we have had a good deal of success with asking key supporters to host cocktail parties for their friends, associates, and neighbors. Over the past year, with only a handful of these events, we have increased our donor base substantially and our donations last year by 20 percent.

We tell supporters holding the event to advise invitees that a representative of the agency will speak for 10 or 15 minutes, but that there will be absolutely no solicitation at the party. It is a social gathering where our volunteer very briefly declares with some pride that this is an agency they actively support and why. They then introduce me or a leadership staff member. We strictly honor the no solicitation rule. I even go so far as reminding people of it at the beginning of my remarks.

Successes such as this provide practical illustration of the "no trespassing" rule. The agency builds new relationships by raising awareness and acquiring new supporters; the volunteer's efforts are acknowledged; and those that attend feel good about an experience that allows them to find out more at whatever pace they choose. ■

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To find out more about Children's Aid and Family Services, visit their Web site at www.cafsnj.org. He is also a member of the Alliance Board of Directors.