



BREUKELLEN RIESGO

Executive Director Chitra Aiyar addressing the crowd at Sadie Nash Leadership Project's 2014 Garden Party.

# It's Not About The Stuff

## Choosing the Right Fundraising Strategy for Your Donors

By Judy Levine

**THE GAVEL COMES DOWN**—on every auction organizer's nightmare.

An exclusive back-stage tour of Hamilton is going for \$500—and the donor is going to be mad.

Expecting it would raise at least \$5,000, the donor is sitting in the back of the room wondering why this jewel, which is clearly worth so much more, is going for so low a price.

The answer is a mismatch between the item and the people in the room.

How did this nonprofit get to this juncture?

Too much focus on the fundraising activity and not enough thought about who potential donors really are—and what will inspire them to give.

But it's not just at events where the match between donor interests and "asks" can go wrong.

Successful fundraising has famously been described as "the right person asking the right prospect for the right amount of the right

thing for the right project at the right time in the right way." This article details common examples of these "rights" gone wrong—and what can be done to prevent those expensive mistakes.

### The Right Person Asking

We all have examples of the wrong person being sent out to make the ask. Janet Rodriguez is known to care about community gardens, so Cynthia, who's met her once or twice, is dispatched to ask Janet to visit La Raices Community Garden, in the hopes that she'll be receptive to an ask once she sees the abundant kids' vegetable patch. But surprise, surprise—Janet doesn't respond to Cynthia's emails or voice messages, and the approach goes nowhere. Well, why should Janet respond to Cynthia? Janet might truly not have noticed Cynthia's outreach (or thought it was spam), or she might have triaged it to the bottom of her to-dos, but either way she's made a decision that La Raices is not a cause that's high on her priority list. And the choice of messenger is partly why.

Peers give to peers. However you define peers—fellow kindergarten parents, law school classmates (who didn't go into public interest law), community garden members—the choice of asker is key in gaining a donor's attention, and getting a “yes.”

Another mistake nonprofits make is not casting a wide enough net for askers. What about tasking a committee of donors with reaching into their networks to expand your donor pool? Establishing a council of community elders to mine their lifelong connections on your behalf? Don't limit yourself to just board and staff building your network.

### The Right Prospect

When fundraisers chase after money—going for perceived wealth over linkage or interest in the cause—the resulting gift is the minimum a prospect can offer and still remain socially credible. Many times, if the linkage to the asker is not strong, that amount is zero.

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Take the case of Rodolfo, owner of a local tech manufacturing firm. He's got the resources, sure—but is he really interested in your youth debate team? What's in it for him, and how does it tie to his company's enlightened self-interest? While an ask for a workforce tech retraining program might have resonance, a debate team is not likely to be as successful.

Make sure the prospect has some modicum of interest in your cause, or the types of causes your organization espouses. Otherwise you'll get a surefire “no,” or the lowest amount a donor can give to honor their relationship with the asker. We want more!

### The Right Amount

Ahh...the shoals of picking ask amounts. Ask for too much (really too much) and the prospect feels unseen, dismissed and undervalued. If you're asking me for \$25,000 and I can afford to give \$500, I'm going to feel silly offering that up. But on the other hand if you're asking for \$500 and \$10,000 is more like my usual gift, I'm likely to happily under-give and call it a day. Either way, a wildly off-target ask amount is a signal to the donor that you don't know them, didn't care enough about them to do your research, and/or you're delusional and who wants to put good money after bad?

Sometimes timing can be at issue here. If you're sending everyone your annual appeal, try taking your major donor prospects off that list. Otherwise you run the danger that they'll check off the \$500 box and then when you come calling they'll proudly tell you not to bother, they're already made their gift (without your ever having to meet with them to make a truly compelling ask). Ouch!

### The Right Thing

Asking for the right thing is not just a question of asking for the right amount of money. Sometimes it's best not to ask for money at the start. Consider asking for an in-kind gift—it gets your relationship started, it costs the donor a lot less to provide than if you had to purchase it on the open market, and it puts you and the donor on the same side of the table—now you're both putting resources towards ending child trafficking, for example.

Some easy first asks? Printing, professional services, meeting space, products, even design. Once you've gotten this relationship-opening support, you can go back to the donor and show how their in-kind contribution was used to provide kids with a healthier future. Then it's an easy segue to asking for cash to help the cause further.

But don't get your askers too revved up asking for in-kind contributions, no matter how much easier an ask it is. Volunteers love to ask for silent auction items, for example, experiencing the thrill of victory when a particularly alluring service or hot restaurant says “yes.” It can be all too easy for your event committee members to focus small, spending their energies on walking around the block garnering \$25 gift certificates while ignoring the need for table-buyers and event sponsors.

An auction is not successful just because it's got the right items—it only works when the alignment between bidders and items is high. Auctions, and silent auctions especially, tend to be the tail that wags the dog of fundraising events (in other words, volunteers focus on procuring things, not people). But the bidders have to be in the room for an auction to be successful. If no one in the room is interested in sports, a signed baseball from Aaron Judge is going to languish on the shelf. If no one's got kids, an overflowing basket of art supplies coupled with a semester-long kid's crafts course won't move for more than the minimum. Both interests and budget must align for real profit to occur.

To avoid the empty-bidder-cards syndrome, charge the event committee not just with securing items, but with filling the room. Put a rule in place that every time someone on the committee gets a donation, they need to sell a ticket to two people who would be likely to go for that item in a big way.

Finally, those attending have to be primed to bid. Sitting back on one's hands does not make a good table guest. Attendees need

to be reminded, both before and during the event, that all bidding benefits a charity that provides real good in the world. Bidders shouldn't be looking for bargains; they should be focused on supporting an important cause—while getting a cool item at the same time. That awareness will change the tenor of the room, resulting in more profit (from all those items your volunteers ended up acquiring anyways).

### **The Right Project**

Here's where many asks flounder, getting a tepid "yes," or worse, a "come back later" (i.e., never) response.

Know thy prospect. Know what makes them sit forward in their chair. Does this person need the social promise of an event to get them to loosen their purse-strings, or are they turned on by your program impact and is that the better ask? Are they in-

## **ULTIMATELY, YOU WANT TO ASK FOR SUPPORT IN A WAY THAT THE DONOR RECOGNIZES THEMSELVES IN THE EQUATION.**

terested in leaving their mark on the future (a capital or organizational capacity pitch) or is the here-and-now of primary concern? Do they need to know all the program details to feel comfortable enough to make a commitment, or are they the type of person who is more inspired by mission and larger social vision? Might sponsoring your GED program in their mother's name be the most meaningful ask for them, since their mom always regretted not having the chance to finish high school?

The all-important donor cultivation phase of the asking process will tell you what the right project is. One experienced asker talks about waiting till the prospect's eyebrows go up to inform her how to focus her ask. Of all the ways to package your agency's needs, what is the bundling that will most excite this donor?

### **The Right Time**

Given all these rights, it's imperative to take the time to cultivate prospects appropriately—both to get to know their proclivities and passions, but also to enable them to get to know you and your organization and to build trust. If you ask too soon, as the saying goes, you get a "no" or "go away" money (here's \$100 and don't come back, as opposed to the \$1,000 gift you were hoping for).

Sometimes, you also need to wait to get a donor's attention. If you find out through the cultivation process that their mother is ill, or their child is a senior in high school, to mention two high life-stressors, delay approaching them for a gift. No matter how much you may need the money now, you won't get a thoughtful, considered gift.

### **The Right Way**

Some people love golf outings. They get to spend a day exercising outdoors, and raise money for a cause they care about (or honor an individual they care about who asked them). But for those for whom this is not an attraction, a golf outing sounds like an invitation from Mars.

There are also many subtler mismatches between the ask vehicle and donor. Sometimes the mismatch is with the agency's mission, as in events involving alcohol benefitting a teenager recovery program. Even though their parents might enjoy it, is that strengthening your mission's message or undercutting it? Watch your event partners carefully, too. Touting a prominent sponsorship that undercuts your organization's values—or just distracts from them—is a real danger. Sometimes even partnering with another nonprofit on an event can obscure the community value you provide.

Ultimately, you want to ask for support in a way that the donor recognizes themselves in the equation. When a donor says to themselves: "That responds to me, my interests, my web of social connections, my social values" during the pregnant pause between pitch and answer, that's when you'll get a gift that matches their true capacity.

But when you don't get that click of recognition, while most of these lost opportunities don't involve great outlays of cash (with the exception of special events), they're expensive in that they've lost you potential donors. And prospects who don't feel heard don't return for a second chance.

Take the time to suss out who's in the room—whether an actual room, as in a special event or one-to-one meeting, or a virtual room, as in eAppeals and letters—to make sure your ask is going to ring a bell. You want donors to be sitting forward in their seats, eager to make an impact, instead of leaning back, puzzled as to why this appeal is coming to them. ■

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