The Best Route to Approaching Donors: Hand-Head-Heart

Effective donor engagement strategies: Consider and articulate how supporting the mission benefits your donors too.

By Paula Golden

One of the Most Effective Donor Engagement Strategies

Effective donor engagement strategies: How nonprofits can better engage potential donors by taking the time to consider and articulate how supporting the mission benefits them, too. In other words: Your donors support your nonprofit — but how does your mission connect to your donors?

Introduction from the author

Times radically changed after the COVID-19 pandemic. While there is greater need for philanthropic giving, a serious talent shift has taken place that is impacting the development strategies of nonprofit organizations.

Young people seek higher-paying, for-profit jobs to achieve a lifestyle enjoyed by their parents: Owning a home, educating their children, and acquiring savings for a secure retirement. The nonprofit talent pipeline is shrinking. Simultaneously, there has been exponential growth in digital technology, online tools, and code-driven applications that require greater knowledge by staff to achieve the objective of discerning the wealth, active interest, and the emotional or economic intersection of a donor and the nonprofit.

Nonprofits must meet new challenges, as well as design websites to validate their work if they are to successfully connect with their donors. They *must* invest in technology and digitally literate talent to underpin their traditional work to meet their annual giving, large donor, and estate gift goals. They need to get smarter on the business side of fundraising if they are to successfully trigger a donor's desire to give to their cause. There's lots of money out there and lots of people eager to give it to good causes.

Want more donations to your nonprofit? Try seeing things from a donor's point of view.

In speaking with executive and development officers who are charged with fundraising, you may find it most helpful to convey some simple principles that can be applied to maximize the return on the time and energy put into achieving optimal fund development results.

Individual donations provide the lion's share of support to grassroots causes, exceeding 80 percent of all non-governmental income. Yet many organizations struggle to successfully engage prospects because they haven't taken the time to see things from their point of view.

Nonprofits tend to look at gifts from this perspective: We have a worthy cause; we have financial needs to sustain the organization and advance the cause; we know of someone with money who can support this cause *if we just can get to them*. By contrast, donors tend to look at gifts from this perspective: We have money; we have certain priorities that come from our values; we want to maximize our return on our investment and the impact we can have placing finite resources.

Marrying these somewhat disparate perspectives is the art of fundraising, but the caveat for nonprofits is that not all donors will prioritize or align with your cause; and the biggest No-No in fundraising is to put your cause forward without finding the connective tissue between the cause and the prospect. Casting your bread upon philanthropic waters and seeing what happens just won't cut it in a world where limited resources and changing tax laws are dramatically shifting charitable giving.

So, if tossing out your cause as your first move is not the smart play in fundraising, what is the critical first step to bring your nonprofit into focus for a donor? RESEARCH! RESEARCH! RESEARCH!

Three critical elements to close

Visualize this: It takes three critical elements to close a gift—think Hand-Head-Heart:

- **Hand** is the *capacity* to give
- **Head** corresponds to the *interest* in the field
- **Heart** is the *desire* to contribute

While this may seem obvious, it is amazing to me how few leaders of nonprofits fully grasp the power of researching all three elements before pitching a prospect. Most nonprofits think that a donor's capacity is easy to assess. Not so. A 990 or Wealth Engine report only reveals so much. Gauging capacity requires understanding how much wealth is liquid and accessible. Capacity is not just a matter of wealth—it is whether that wealth is available for a real-time gift or perhaps a more creative solicitation strategy.

How to get a donor to sign

So how do we gauge and strengthen a prospect's interest in our field? In order to get a donor to sign on the dotted line, your nonprofit has to put forward both an intellectual and emotional case. Our hard-nosed businessman had no wife, no kids, and no outside interests or activities. (This is a *true* story!) Finding connective intellectual and emotional tissue between him and a cause would be no small feat.

The critical component to finding this connectivity is to *listen.* Listening to the prospect can provide clues, and also listening to those close to him, such as his financial advisor and attorney. The goal of this research is to understand what drives the donor. Elements in this case that may prove relevant include the business that the man had invested his life in and his history — where he grew up and his education. By way of example, the businessman was known to have grown up extremely poor—he was a self-made man. He was also a devout Catholic and had an affinity for dogs. Any information you can gather before the fact makes a difference in how you present your case.

The most critical step

Finally, the most critical step in successful fundraising is to craft a strategy to connect the dots between the capacity, the interest in the nonprofit mission, and the potential emotional connection to your cause. From this research, a strategy can be made to approach the donor with a gift opportunity that ideally advances his or her vision of what the world should be.

The next time you're putting together your fundraising strategy, look through both your *and their* perspective. Keep in mind the simple principle of Hand-Head-Heart to ensure you deploy resources wisely and approach individuals and foundations that align with the three elements to maximize return on your fundraising initiatives.