



How to Put the Fun in Fundraising

(And bring in much more money for your nonprofit) BY CLEVELAND JUSTIS

Many of us following our passions ultimately find ourselves serving on nonprofit boards, volunteering for charities or working in positions where we need to ask people to donate their money. For many, fundraising is the least desirable part of the job — making us feel like we're used-car salespeople or that we're going to have to hit up all our friends and family members for their hard-earned savings.



Nothing is further from the truth. I used to be terrified of fundraising, until I understood that I needed to change my approach and realize that building the relationship is so much more important than asking for money. In this article, I'm focusing on face-to-face fundraising with people you think might be significant donors to your organization.

Here's some of what I've learned:

ONE Approach your work from a position of abundance and strength – share your delight for the organization. People give to success and passion – and rarely to organizational desperation. If your organization is strong and serving an important need – share this! On many occasions I've received donations just by talking about my work – without even asking (I recently received a donation from my car mechanic). Clearly I love what I do and a compelling need exists. People want to support important work if they have the capacity to give.

TWO Educate yourself about the person you're planning to ask. The more you know about the person, the more likely it is that you'll be able to establish a strong connection between your work and the person's interests. Some important questions to try to find the answers to: What is her passion? Does she typically make donations to similar organizations? Does she serve on boards of other nonprofit organizations? You may not want to ask these questions directly – it is amazing how much you can find out about a person's interests from a quick Google search of her name.

THREE Engage your prospective donor in your work. The old fundraising adage that “people give to people” certainly holds true. But your prospective donor will be more likely to give big if he's engaged and connected to the work and to you and your love for the work. Bring the prospective donor to meet the clients served by your organization, invite him to special events, bring him to board meetings, send him newsletters and press clippings. I rarely ask someone for money before I've introduced him to my organization in at least four different ways. You want to form an emotional connection with your potential donor.

FOUR Finesse the relationship and use your intuition. If you've followed the steps above, you may be getting close to making an ask. This is when people start to find a million reasons to not ask. Don't shy away now – you've done the hard work. I do find it easier to ask with another person. The key here is to decide how much to ask for and to make it possible for the person to gracefully say no. This is the intuitive part of fundraising. If the person has been engaged with your work then charge forward. If they don't seem interested then let it go.

FIVE Making the ask. There are a million different ways to ask but they all come down to the same thing – you need to get the




words out of your mouth (which is why it is helpful to have a partner with you). I typically say something like, “As you know, we're currently seeking support for X project. Would you consider a gift of X dollars to ensure that these deserving people are provided with these important services?” Generally, it is always best to ask people for more money than less. Having said this, gracefully thank the donor for any amount they give. A couple of reminders:

A You're not going to ask people who aren't interested in your organization (because you've already met with them several times) so your chance of success is high.

B Most people with the means to give like to invest in causes that ignite their passion so you're helping them become more involved with the community.

C You're giving people an opportunity to “invest” in something that they believe in. Many prospective donors plan to give away a certain amount of money annually, and you're helping them find a great cause to support (besides, their alma mater probably already has lots of money).

SIX Follow up and keep the donor engaged. This is the most important step. Send a thank you note regardless of the outcome of the ask. Regularly invite the donor to participate in the work of the organization. Keep her involved and you may get even larger checks in the future. 

Cleveland Justis is the executive director of the Headlands Institute in Sausalito, Calif., and he serves on the board of directors of Net Impact. Cleveland, who holds an MBA from the UC Davis School of Management, has served in educational and nonprofit leadership positions for much of the past 18 years.