



Fundraising Readiness Checklist

Check Out Your Organization's Fund-Raising Readiness And Learn The Secret Of Fund-Raising Success

For many people, fund-raising is the stuff of myth and magic---a series of tasks rivaling the labors of Hercules and demanding the powers of a Merlin. Myth and magic, because they offer the balm of simple acceptance in place of the pain of comprehension, can be very comforting, and in no instance is this more true, than when the *myth* of fund-raising *magic* is used to excuse fund-raising failure.

"If," goes the justification, "running a successful fund-raising campaign is an endeavor comparable to dredging the river Styx, and soliciting large gifts equivalent to pulling Excalibur from the stone, what mere mortal can be expected to succeed?" Given that attitude, let me add a corollary: "Why bother to develop a goal or start a campaign?" The answer to those questions is, because we have to, and because the myth of fund-raising doom can't measure up to the basic truth that *fund-raising success is simply hard work on the part of people who are thoroughly prepared.*

A successful fund-raising campaign is not magic. It is a straightforward, concise process of executing well-defined components arranged in a step-by-step progression. I know this to be so because I have seen it done over and over again--starting at A and working through to Z, successfully carrying out campaign after campaign and achieving goal after goal. I've never found a well planned fund-raising campaign to be a Herculean task.

Looking at the nuts and bolts of a fund-raising campaign is the best way I know to make its success probable and its process understandable. Breaking down a campaign step-by-step, point-by-point, lets you present it to staff and volunteers of a non-profit organization in a way calculated to increase acceptance of over-all goals and individual responsibilities.

However, if successful fund-raising is simply hard work on the part of the thoroughly prepared, then that preparation must begin before a campaign is planned. An organization contemplating a campaign needs first to assess and evaluate its readiness to raise money. To that end, I suggest that the checklist below be used to self-evaluate your organization's fund-raising readiness at a special board meeting, at a staff retreat, or as a one-on-one survey of trustees and staff.

Try it yourself and see if it changes your own understanding of your organization's readiness to raise money. It's easy to do. Just check each statement that you can honestly claim to be true for your organization.

Knowing Your Organization

- We have a clearly defined, fully understood, and completely accepted mission statement that addresses the difference our organization will make for those it serves, rather than merely describing what it does.

- ❑ We take advantage of our strengths as we make our case for support, letting none of the good things we do be well kept secrets.
- ❑ We turn our weaknesses into strengths by first identifying those we are handling in a defensive way or ignoring, and then developing a plan of action to change them.
- ❑ We can readily identify our principal support base from those personally touched, inspired, or motivated by what we do, and from those not directly involved with, but nevertheless influenced and impressed by what we do.
- ❑ We know exactly what our operational budget numbers are. When it comes to raising money, if we do not know our expenses, we can neither set fund-raising goals, nor let prospects know our needs.
- ❑ We maximize earned income and constantly assess whether more can be obtained by increasing charges for services in order to lessen fund-raising pressure.
- ❑ We are guided and directed by a long-range strategic plan, which we revisit annually. This "blueprint" of our organization is a prerequisite for establishing, first, a general fund-raising effort and, subsequently, specific fund-raising campaigns.

Planning For Fund-Raising & Achieving Consensus

- ❑ We work from a written General Development Plan which has been created within the context of our organization's strategic plan, and avoid "quiet," or out of context fund-raising campaigns that often strain our main fund-raising campaigns and merely take money from one pocket and put it into another.
- ❑ We produce annual, endowment, capital and sponsorship campaigns as needed and assure resources are in place to take them to their fullest potential.
- ❑ We have a Board of Trustees committed to leading our organization and raising funds, and all fund-raising campaigns begin with those trustees.
- ❑ Our fund-raising efforts are guided by a development committee comprised of trustees and other volunteer leadership and which has a mission statement outlining the committee's duties and describing the policies to be implemented.
- ❑ We always develop achievable goals for a campaign before asking for the first gift, either making sure our fund-raising prospects are capable of meeting those goals or lowering the goals so that they are in line with our fund-raising potential.
- ❑ We always present compelling cases for support that not only state the amounts we need, but present the reasons our organization merits support.
- ❑ We always inform and involve all of our organization's departments and personnel in campaigns, recognizing that they are important members of our fund-raising team.
- ❑ We produce for every campaign a fund-raising budget projection with clear, defensible reasons for what we propose to spend in order to complete the campaign.

Funding Sources & Prospects

- ❑ We solicit our trustees for contributions at or near their potential to give, rating and evaluating them in the same way we do other prospective donors.
- ❑ We always follow the steps of major prospect cultivation---identification, information, interest, and involvement---because successful fund-raising is based upon relationships, relationships, and more relationships.
- ❑ We first prospect those we serve---those who care about us---as potential donors and base our solicitation to them on an emotive appeal.

- We have assembled a database of contributions managers at foundations, corporations, and government agencies, and because they are stewards of others' money required to justify their recommended donations, we base our solicitation of them on rational grounds, rather than emotive appeal.
- We prioritize individuals, corporations, and foundations for best funding potential, understanding that real wealth lies in the hands of individuals and that corporations and foundations are not usually the best source-of-first-choice for our organization's needs.
- We always rigorously rate and evaluate the giving potential of prospects because this is the key to fund-raising success. Just as we must set a goal for each fund-raising campaign, we must set a goal for each prospective donor. Campaign goal achievement is based upon prospect goal achievement.
- We always determine how many gifts of what size we need to meet campaign goals and begin our solicitations with the largest gifts working down to the smallest.

Organizing A Campaign

- We never assume our solicitors know our organization, the purpose of the campaign, or how to ask for money, and we always equip them with easy-to-use solicitation kits that provide needed information and instill confidence.
- We always develop campaign timelines for campaign leaders and solicitors, realizing that long-running campaigns diminish enthusiasm.
- We always provide job descriptions that clarify lines of accountability and responsibility as well as duties for both campaign leadership and solicitors.
- We always seek the best possible solicitor-prospect assignments, especially taking advantage of solicitors' peer contacts, friendships, and leverage. Prospects are more likely to give when solicitation comes from the 'right' person---someone they respect and who can make a strongly credible, personal case for support.
- We have staff in place to provide all needed campaign resources, including letters, lists, proposals, support data, and meeting arrangements, because the support provided to our volunteers and the information provided to our prospects will make the difference between campaign success and failure.

Managing A Campaign

- We always suggest a specific gift amount to every prospect, and while we know the dollar amount we want, we suggest donors contribute it, rather than tell them they should give it.
- We use challenge and matching gifts as a tool to attract and maximize the gifts of others in annual fund, sponsorship and underwriting campaigns, as well as capital and endowment campaigns.
- We efficiently use one-on-one, mail, telephone, door-to-door, and other solicitation methods, employing those that truly are best for a campaign rather than what is easiest or fastest.
- We use membership and named gift opportunities, set at publicly identified contribution levels, to promote giving. These programs allow solicitors to more easily suggest specific contribution amounts, and they help create subtle peer pressure on a donor to give at an appropriate level.
- We always provide campaign leadership and solicitors, organization staff, and other interested parties with regular, periodic progress reports and campaign updates during the campaign.
- We are always in a position to get a troubled campaign back on track by readily identifying problems and taking timely corrective action, including covering unexpected shortfalls by instituting a plan to increase the prospect base and/or average gift size.

- We always record gifts and collect money in a timely fashion following required practices of our finance department and auditors. This can greatly relieve problems with disputed or canceled pledges.
- We promptly deposit checks, acknowledge gifts, and apprise solicitors of receipts of those gifts. We never want to hear, "I sent my check in two months ago, but still don't know if you received it."

Post Campaign Activity

- We announce results, give recognition, and thank donors and volunteers, giving credit where it's due and oft times where it's not, so that as many volunteers as possible feel a sense of accomplishment for our success.
- We promptly provide donors the special benefits and privileges, memberships, and named-gift opportunities offered to them when they were solicited, remembering that our promptness in fulfilling promises is as important to them as their promptness in fulfilling pledges is to us.
- We cultivate donors and prospects by inviting them to events, annual meetings, and site visits and issuing newsletters and other communications, making sure that they hear from us at times other than when we are asking for money.
- We always evaluate the effectiveness of solicitation kit materials, the campaign kickoff, and progress reports and meetings by reviewing our ongoing campaign notes and debriefing campaign leadership and solicitors.
- We always evaluate effectiveness of the development office in providing all necessary and desired resources to campaign leadership, solicitors, prospects, and donors with an eye toward changing and improving for the next campaign.
- We always write a no-holds-barred final report of the campaign and share it on a confidential basis with the campaign chair, chair of the development committee, president of the board, and the organization's CEO.

This checklist contains 41 key affirmations I believe a non-profit organization must be able to make before planning and conducting a fund-raising campaign. How many were you able to claim as true for your organization?

Now that you have gone through the entire list, I suggest that you reread it to make sure you understand each affirmation. The points on this checklist are synopses. Please don't let their brevity get in the way of developing a full understanding of what they represent. On top of that you should evaluate their relevance to your particular situation, look for ways to maximize their effectiveness and value for you, and consider adaptations and adjustments that better tune them to your organization.

You accomplish those objectives by employing your own experiences and resources at hand, and by accessing the wealth of fund-raising knowledge available from books, articles, workshops, and on scores of internet sites.

I would be delighted to hear the results of your analysis, because if there is one thing I have learned from nearly 30 years as a fund-raising development professional, it is that there is something to be learned every day. I hope that what you have learned today, if you didn't already know it, is to demythologize the fund-raising process. There are no gods of fund-raising success. And, oh yes, the secret of fund-raising success?

Hard work and preparedness.