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The 16 Best Pieces of Fund Raising Advice

The more things change, the more they remain the same. Isn't it strange that after more than eight decades of fund raising, after literally thousands of workshops and seminars, after innumerable barrels of ink have washed over countless books, that after all this, successful fund raising can be distilled down to a mere 16 tenets.

But, come to think of it, maybe that shouldn't be surprising. There are, after all, only 10 commandments, a mere seven Wonders of the World, and just one Golden Rule.

Granted, you can't illuminate every aspect of fund raising, every nuance and shade, every subtle underpinning in just a handful of essentials. But it is safe to say, if you abide by each of the principles below, you will almost always experience a startling degree of success.

1) Get started now

It's a fact of life that whenever we have plenty of time to do something, it seldom gets done. This is especially true in fund raising. While most of us decry pressure -- who likes to be told to "Do it now!" -- any campaign, small or large, requires timetables, report meetings, and deadlines. They are the antidote to procrastination, the device that moves a reluctant volunteer from procrastinator to solicitor.

Without an adhered-to schedule, your fund raising will stall, or worse, wither away. And, if you're advised to wait for a better time to begin your campaign, realize that when you've made your plans properly, that alone is the perfect time to begin.

2) Ask for a specific gift

The need to ask for a specific gift is one of the most commonly misunderstood principles in fund raising. While many volunteers are willing to seek from prospects "any amount at all" or "whatever you can give," when told to request a specific dollar figure they almost always balk.

Yet, without the mention of a figure, the prospect dangles, forced to guess at the solicitor's intentions, "I wonder if he means \$50 or \$500?" This uncertainty -- and discomfort -- is eliminated instantly by citing a specific amount.

Granted, you can only suggest the level and not insist upon it. But the figure carries great weight, raising the sights of the prospect and letting him or her know you've given careful thought to your campaign.

3) Ask accordingly

Raising money by the multiplication table — attempting, for instance, to persuade 1,000 people to give \$1,000 each — rarely if ever works.

Most prospects won't come up with that arbitrary amount; another contingent might want to, but can't afford it; still others will give you nothing. Worst of all, some who might be inclined to give you \$10,000 will be discouraged from doing so. Rather than "averaging" and relying upon 100 percent participation, a far more realistic approach is to determine how many gifts of differing amounts you need to reach your goal.

This means carefully researching and rating your prospects, and developing a "gift table" to serve as a guide to your solicitations. After all, would you think it fair to be solicited for the very same amount as a prosperous entrepreneur?

4) Get them involved

Ideally, all organizations should be involving their constituencies at all times, and not merely when funds are needed.

To be sure, involvement has many faces. It can be big, like asking someone to serve on a nominating committee, or it can be small, like seeking a donor's advice or asking her to do something for you.

You will find, almost invariably, that the best trustees are those who are meaningfully involved. The same can be said for the most successful solicitors. And the best contributors are those who are involved in your effort from conception to victory.

One caveat: don't delude yourself into thinking you can rush a rich person on board and have him or her contribute significantly to your cause. Almost always, earning the trust and commitment of a major gift prospect is a slow, ongoing process, sometimes taking years.

5) Describe it in human terms

Whatever you're raising money for, strive to make your project personal for the potential donor. A library isn't merely a collection of books, it's a fertile place where young minds grow. Cancer research isn't sterile equipment and test tubes, it's the promise of a cure for someone engulfed by the disease. A museum is for people, nature preserves are for people, restoring an historical site is for people.

With a little forethought and imagination, it won't be hard to translate your campaign into human terms, something people can connect to or feel warmly about.

6) Don't count on publicity

Each year, thousands of organizations waste millions of dollars on materials of little or no value in raising money. Why the reliance on these crutches (for in reality that's what they are)?

First and foremost, people want to avoid the discomfort of looking a prospect in the eye and asking for a contribution. To avoid that dreaded task, people will go to almost any length. But there are other reasons too.

Perhaps those connected with your organization doubt the worthiness of the cause and seek assurance behind glossy brochures. Others may feel the printed word has magic and is therefore more effective than the spoken word. Still others may yearn to be part of a carefully constructed image of success. Whatever the reasons the sad truth is, publicity doesn't raise money. It never did, and it never will.

7) Seek the very best leaders

If there's one requirement for successful fund raising, it's strength at the top. No organization is ever stronger than its leadership, nor can it extend its constituency beyond the sphere of influence its leadership represents. Truly effective leaders are rare, of course, but they're always worth looking for and waiting for.

Si Seymour, author of *Designs for Fund Raising*, describes this special breed best: "They bring warmth and confidence to the cause. They have a way of attracting the interest and loyalty of effective and devoted lieutenants. They give the required amount of their talents and their time. They know what the committee system is for and how to use it. And, finally, by the example of their own words, deeds, and gifts, they help to set high standards of campaign performance. They never question the good faith of those with other views, and they never doubt the ultimate victory."

8) Look to thyself, first

In successful fund raising, the "rock in the pond" principle must prevail. An organization cannot expect others to invest in it until those closest to the center ante up. Solicitation should proceed, therefore, from the inside out, starting with the board and the institutional family and then spreading outward. And always keep in mind that fund raising is subject to a law of diminishing returns — the wider the periphery, the greater the effort, the smaller the gift, and the higher the cost. This frequently makes board members squirm, for it can be their first collective realization that, on all prospect lists, their names come first.

9) Look 'em in the eye

The best way to raise money is to ask for it, and the best method to use is person-to-person, eyeball-to-eyeball contact. But how often this "first principle" is neglected by staff and volunteers. Inclement weather, aches and pains, too harried at the office, yesterday's failure, or even yesterday's big success — all these and a host of other excuses can prevent a reluctant fund raiser from making personal calls.

But no mistake will be as costly to you. The shopworn phrase, people give to people, fully applies. While a positive image in the prospect's mind will help, what really wins his or her contribution is the "ask," the personal entreaty of a friend or peer. Substantial gifts come from making personal calls. That's the plain and simple truth.

10) *Be grateful, even for small gifts*

The story goes that when Booker T. Washington was soliciting funds for Tuskegee Institute, he received in the mail one morning a crisp dollar bill from John D. Rockefeller. Others may have scoffed or been irate at this token gesture, but not Washington. He wrote and duly thanked Rockefeller ... and he did more. At the end of the year he sent the tycoon a detailed accounting of what had been done with the dollar, penny by penny. Impressed, Rockefeller thereafter supported Washington's work in earnest.

11) *Hired guns can't do it for you*

Fund raising can't be hired out to paid professionals. As mentioned earlier, an institution cannot expect others to support it until those closest to the center do so — and at generous levels. Sad to say, there are no fund raising Lone Rangers who'll gallop into your community, deposit bags of gold, and ride off to the wild cheers of your board of trustees.

What reputable professionals will do, and won't do, is summed up best by John Schwartz, former president of the American Association of Fund Raising Counsel (now the Association of Fundraising Professionals).

They will identify the strengths and weakness of your organization; they will set up the conditions for action; they will predict costs and maintain budget controls; they will provide an overall plan; they will stimulate and organize top leaders to make them effective; they will be the first to tell you if you cannot do what you are trying to do.

They will not normally be active in the solicitation of contributions; they will not relieve top people of responsibilities in the fund raising effort; they will not take over, hire or fire staff; they will not give you any magic formula.

12) *Aim your focus on individuals*

It's a fundamental error, for the majority of organizations, to focus on corporations and foundations and almost totally ignore individual prospects. By doing so, they restrict their efforts to about 10 percent of the philanthropic pie (individuals account for nearly 90 percent of all funds donated each year). Why is this error so common? In no small measure because foundations and corporations are the easiest targets. They fully expect to be solicited. Foundations exist to award grants, and many businesses, as a cost of doing business, routinely allot monies for philanthropic causes. As a result, the hardest part of any fund raiser's job, the most feared one — namely, asking — is a foregone conclusion.

13) *Nurture past donors*

How you treat donors after they give to you determines, in large part, whether they will give to you again. Treat them well and chances are they will give to you again ... and again. Anyone who's been in the fund raising field for a while knows that past donors are an organization's best prospects. They have already expressed their trust in the most meaningful of ways — by parting with their hard-earned

dollars. Thank them, respect them, involve them, keep them informed, and, most importantly, appeal to them often, and you'll be surprised at just how generously they'll respond.

14) Focus on their needs, not yours

Despite the worthiness of your cause, or the multitude of people you help, there's no good reason why prospects should give you money just because you ask. More likely they'll give when they see a benefit for themselves.

Imagine your donors as customers. Would it be sensible to advertise the following? "Shop here, we need customers to stay in the black." Of course not. Customers aren't interested in helping a business prosper, they're interested in low prices, quality, convenience, service, and variety.

In sum, they're interested in what they need. By thinking of your donors as customers, you'll move away from your need to theirs, which will go a long way toward making your fund raising approach compelling.

15) Ask, but as the last step

The final, and not the first, step in fund raising is the solicitation of gifts. This may surprise those who think solicitation alone is fund raising. The practiced fund raiser knows that only when a series of earlier steps have been followed does asking come easily.

Before the actual solicitation comes planning, recruiting the right leaders, preparing your arguments, researching and rating your prospects, cultivating these people, and matching the right solicitor to the prospect.

Only when each of these steps has been accomplished, are you truly prepared for the actual solicitation, which then should be relatively easy.

At that point, you will have meaningfully involved your prospect, shared your vision and goals, and demonstrated their importance to the community if not to humankind.

16) Keep it simple

Keep in mind that, despite all principles and techniques, fund raising at heart is quite simple. As author Irving Warner succinctly puts it, "You raise money when you ask for it, preferably face to face, from the smallest possible number of people, in the shortest period of time, at the least expense."