

THE FIRST MONDAY REPORT

Thoughts on Fund Raising for Campus Ministry

Office of Lutheran Campus Ministry Advancement

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January, 2004

NEW YEAR RESOLUTIONS FOR FUND RAISING

Mind you, I don't usually spend my time reading opinion pieces in the "Commentary and Letters" section of *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*. But for some reason, just before the Holidays, I found myself paging through back issues and actually stopping to read some pieces in their entirety. One was a thought-piece¹ by Robert Egger, who is president of D.C. Central Kitchen. His book, *Begging for Change: the Dollars and Sense of Making Nonprofits Responsive, Efficient, and Rewarding for All*, is scheduled for publication in February by Harper Collins. He refers to the end-of-the-year appeals that most of us get (and send) in a desperate plea for cash to shore up the old ship. Some will point to causes involving outside forces, like decreased funding, while others will show donors the cases and faces of the needy organization and those whom it serves. All appropriate, he says. But before sending out the last appeal of the year, (now thinking ahead to next year), he says that charity officials should reflect on this annual fund-raising ritual and ask some simple questions. "Why should people give to any charity—and why to mine? Are Americans getting tired of hearing the same 'woe is me' campaigns year after year? After decades of taking in donations, have nonprofit groups provided the kind of results that donors expect?"

Egger wants us to think about preying upon the public's giving spirit every holiday season. He says that "playing the pity card" might bring in a one-time gift, it doesn't provide the ongoing support we need for the long run. We need to get beyond appealing to donor's hearts (although that is important) and begin appealing to their brains as well. "We are poisoning our own wells by not helping the public to see that our needs go beyond affairs of the heart." He says that donors want details about the effectiveness and efficiency of our organization. They will give more money if they know where their dollars are going specifically. We think that donors will deem us unworthy if we admit our failings and tell them what we need to operate more effectively. A simple appeal to the heart implies that we should be trusted with the details of delivery, when what many donors want to know is how carefully their gifts are being used, and to what ends. They want to know where our organization is planning to go and whether it's getting there. Groups need to communicate not only how they plan to end a problem (such as hunger or homelessness), but why they have chosen a particular strategy and in what ways it is working.

It may seem to run contrary to current fundraising talk, but it may be time to share with our donors some frank words about facilities, infrastructure expenses and costs to keep the organization healthy in its provision of quality services. "It's like telling people that their

¹ *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*, December, 2003, page 37f.

donations go directly to pay for gas, without mentioning whether the fuel is for a hybrid or a Hummer. A good question to keep in mind when analyzing a fund-raising appeal is whether the recipient is likely to see the organization as a valiant army with a plan that's working, or a hapless force keeping a bad peace. Sadly, the latter better characterizes nonprofit groups today."

Egger keeps pushing. He says that "the crux of the nonprofit financing challenge is not about what we don't have. It's about consolidating what we do have and using those resources more effectively. Otherwise, we are just whistling a sad tune to a shrinking audience of donors."

Non-profit organizations, and campus ministries among them, will need to figure out how to respond to the hard questions of financial accountability, if it involves nothing more than an honest statement to donors about how their gifts are being spent. In church circles we could talk about "stewardship." We will need to do this if we are to "break the cycle of annual guilt-based giving rituals and create a culture of educated partners who understand and support the need for long-term strategic planning for the non-profit world." Let's give them a vision and a program, Egger would say, but let's also give them a plan—"an opportunity to be part of something bigger than charity."

Well, that's one think-piece you won't have to read for yourself, since I've digested most of it for you already. I do want to echo some of Egger's thunder, however, as I urge you to think about the effectiveness of tossing in your annual appeal letter at the end of the year along with hundreds of others. Not only might it be more effective, and actually read, if it were received at another time in the year. You might be able to accomplish some of what Egger is challenging you to do—share with your donors the process and plan for delivering on your best visioning. At a time that is much less cluttered with pleas and promises, how might you be able to communicate the serious nature of your work and the way you go about being faithful to your mission. How can you go beyond appealing to donors' hearts and engage their brains as well?

With all that in mind, I want to begin the New Year by suggesting 10 Resolutions that you and your board might consider as you plan for 2004.

1. **Be direct and to the point.** We may fluff our sermons with flowery language and abundant illustrations, but we need to work at being as straight up and direct with our donors as we can. If the roof is leaking and we need to use their contribution to plug the leak, let's say so. Some of you include a "want list" in your newsletters, stating your need for a copier, Bibles, dishtowels, plants for landscaping, etc. Don't be afraid to ask for what you need.
2. **Say "thank you" soon and often.** I understand that the Billy Graham Crusade staff pride themselves on always returning a thank you note or call within 24 hours. Three days is the standard. If the gift is a significant one, perhaps a thousand dollars or more, pick up the phone and express your appreciation in person. If your note is pre-printed, at least sign each one personally. Don't be sappy, but be sincere in your thanking.
3. **Remember that your readers don't subscribe to your newsletter.** Try to make their reading experience as easy and enjoyable as possible. For example, use at least 10 point type and black ink on light-colored paper. Print photos that are clear and large enough to be able to make out the faces. Place the important material toward the front and above the fold. Before they even write the check, your donors are doing your ministry a favor by reading what you send them. Make it a good experience.
4. **Provide donors a chance to give several times a year.** If you begin to think of a "sustaining fund" rather than an "annual fund," you might plan for a variety of ways to

invite a response—letters, invitations, web sites, newsletters, reports, or sharing photos or articles of interest. Each communication should also provide an opportunity to give. Even the thank you letter should include another return envelope.

5. **Know your readers and what motivates them.** The assumption here is that you communicate with a whole variety of individuals. They're not simply generic alums of State U. They come from different generations, have different academic backgrounds, and have had different life experiences since leaving campus. If you are writing to parents and grandparents, some may not know the university at all. Women will read our communications differently than men will. Cultural differences come into play. If you are able to plan far enough ahead, you might consider a slightly different letter to each group.
6. **Work fund raising into your strategic planning.** Many of you lay out plans for very interesting programs during the year. Some of you schedule maintenance or computer upgrades. Extend that a bit and weave fund raising into your planning with your board. Decide what you need, who is going to do what task, how much it will cost to get the word out, and how it will be evaluated.
7. **Plan now for planned giving.** The old school of fund raising talked about planned giving (bequests, annuities, etc) as the third and last piece of the puzzle. Current wisdom is that we should be inviting our donors to consider writing our ministries into their wills or making a gift of stock at the same time they are writing out their checks for the sustaining fund. The best “end of life” donors are those who are your current givers. Invite them now—for a gift later.
8. **Do a critique of each fund raising initiative.** After your appeal letter has gone out and the checks start rolling in (or not), gather a few folks together who can be objective and lift up the good and not-so-good points of your work. Invite someone who does similar work for another organization. Invite a person or two who contributed and ask what motivated them to give. Try to see your communication through the eyes of the person receiving it. What can you learn for your next emphasis?
9. **Don't be silent about your success.** If you have had an especially successful year in fund raising, let people know. Celebrate it. Send a news release. Talk about it among your ministry peers. Lift up your success in your next newsletter. Your supporters will be glad to hear good news for a change and will be encouraged to give next time to your successful program. Enlist your board members as your champions. Be bold (not Lutheran)!
10. **Read at least one book about fund raising.** Most of us learned stewardship on the job after seminary. Yet, these days in campus ministry, every one of us (including board members) needs some continuing education in fund raising. If you are interested in a list of recommended books, video and audio tapes, or an appropriate fund raising seminar, contact me at the Advancement Office. I will be glad to share the resources I have here in the Office or know about.

Finally, let me say a few words of appreciation for the good work you are doing. So many of your letters and newsletters are very well done. They are compelling and inviting. They tell your story with passion. My perception is that the quality of your fund raising work has moved to a new level in the past couple of years. I hope that you are seeing the results of your labors in both gifts and relationships. This is not easy work, but it is rewarding. God bless you in this New Year.

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