

Thoughts on Fund Raising for Campus Ministry

February, 2006

“What Your Donors Expect to Hear”

I'm a tough audience for the senders of newsletters and fund raising appeals. My round file is more than a little full of attempts to interest me in the latest compelling vision of the Fund for Retired Dog Catchers or the reasons why scholarships for the new university curling team will enhance the school's academic programs. I'm not easily enticed into reading something hastily assembled with my name misspelled on the crooked label on the back of a mutilated newsletter. I rush past the “pastor's page,” glance at the headlines, and flip through the pictures scattered throughout, (most of them fuzzy and green-tinted, echoing the color of the paper). I'm not easily convinced that my time is worth it to continue.

Call me on the phone as part of a telethon (often during an evening meal), and I will politely tell you that I already know about your campaign (through your newsletter...), so please just send me a note and a return card in the mail. I'll respond in my own good time. Some of the reason for my hesitancy is because I need to consult with my wife about any donation I make, even smaller ones. But I am also aware that this is a solicitation call, and unless I am informed in advance, the call catches me sideways and unprepared for a response. The perky voice on the other end of the line says that she wants to invite me to the Homecoming gala or update my personal data, but I know that she really wants my contribution, insignificant as that may be. So why am I such a hard-sell, and what do I really expect to hear from such communications?

Primarily, I expect to be informed of the vitality of the organization in honest, straightforward ways. I want to hear what's happening, or what's going to happen, that is consistent with the mission and the overall vision. I don't want it fluffed up or glossed over. If there are struggles, I want to know about it; maybe I can help. If there are things to celebrate, I want to cheer you on. Don't invite me to a party that has already happened. Tell me how I can be part of what's happening now.

Find ways to invite me into your ministry. Pictures do that to some extent, at least good ones. A well-crafted article by someone touched by the ministry through a mission trip or personal encounter opens doors of understanding. Lead me to your Web site so that I can see your creative work from another angle. Send me your email address so that I can correspond with you if I choose. Invite me to your Blog. Include me on the guest list for your next event and let me know that I'm welcome. If you count me as one of your supporters, help me to understand your daily struggles and successes, as well as your dreams for the future.

I have often said in fund raising workshops that most donors expect to be treated like “Aunt Martha and Uncle Harry.” By that I mean that if they are dear to your heart (and you dear to theirs), they will want to hear from you frequently—more than a once-a-year newsletter or solicitation letter. They will want to know your ministry on a personal level. They will want to know how they can help. They will want to celebrate your progress and share your joys. And when they give you a gift to help you along, they will expect to be thanked as soon as possible in as personal a way as possible.

Communication with your donors is part of good stewardship. You take care of the gifts, but you also take care of the givers. Keeping them knowledgeably in touch is a responsibility you assume at the point that you cash their check. They give to your organization with the expectation that their donation will connect you both at a deeper level.

Kay Sprinkel Grace writes, “As donor expectations for transparency, accountability, and measurable impact increase, we find ourselves presented with new challenges and new opportunities in donor communications.”¹ In her typical helpful, concise style, she lists ten things that donors want to hear. I offer them here, with commentary.

- **Whatever the message, frame it in gratitude.** Sincere gratitude is different from gratuitous thanks, however. Be sure your means of appreciation is appropriate to the gift. Don’t send flowers to someone for a \$50 gift. On the other hand, don’t send a form letter in response to a \$5,000 gift. Instead of a telethon asking for donations, think about holding a telethon to thank people for their gifts. You can’t say “thank you” enough.
- **Mirror the donor’s values in your messages.** You are trying to connect with the heart of the donor. While you may have many “reasonable” reasons to support your program, the one that they will respond to is the one that connects with their heart, their values. These values are best conveyed through stories and personal accounts. Reinforce your values through your messages. Help your donors hear the echoes in their lives.
- **Convey progress towards a shared vision.** A shared vision, along with shared values, is a primary motivator. You might say something like, “Our hope is that every student who comes to First State University will have an opportunity to hear the gospel first-hand.” How will you do that? What will it take? How can they help? Then, at some point, report back on your success. Donors need to feel that they are participating in success. Let them know when progress is being made.
- **Communicate good news, even if out of cycle with regular communications.** Good news happens often when we least expect it. That should come as no surprise us in the church. So when your ministry gets good news, share it. Send a

¹ Kay Sprinkel Grace, “Ten Things You Should Always Communicate to Your Donors,” *Contributions*, January-February, 2006, pp. 7-8, 17.

copy of a newspaper clipping announcing an event or word of a recognition for your staff or ministry. If you have email addresses for your donors, send a link to a Web site where the good news is available. Call your best donors by phone. Good news is urgent and needs to be shared immediately, even if its not time for your regular communication.

- **Communicate bad news, too.** Certainly Aunt Martha and Uncle Harry want to know if you are struggling with issues or if the bottom has dropped out of your budget. It's part of the "transparency" concern named above. Your solid supporters will not love you less. Burying bad news indicates lack of trust in your supporters. Surprise them with good news, but not with bad news. Tell them in a timely manner. Honest communication keeps them invested.
- **Let them know how they can help.** Although a donor's gift is a sign of their trust and solidarity with your ministry, it's not the only thing that they can contribute. Perhaps they can offer their service as volunteer or serve on a focus group or participate in a visioning process. Even if they decline, they will appreciate being asked.
- **Tell them how important they are.** No gushing, please. However, do tell your supporters that they make a real difference. "We could not have made our financial goals last year without your help." "Our mission trip would have been cancelled except for last-minute gifts like yours." "Your prayers are cherished." Even though they may sense it, tell your supporters often how important they are to the ongoing work of your ministry.
- **Let them know how their support attracted the support of others.** Gifts invite other gifts. Grant-making organizations usually look at the breadth of support in making their decisions. Smaller gifts support larger gifts; while significant gifts encourage donations at all levels. Let your donors know that their gifts are magnets that attract the gifts of others.
- **Be sure they hear from a beneficiary of their giving at least once a year.** An easy way to do this is to include a story or quote in a letter or newsletter from someone served by your ministry. A photograph or a phone call makes the contact even more personal. Anecdotal feedback is a good way to keep the connection strong.
- **Let them know that they are your investors and stakeholders.** This language may sound a bit strange in church circles. It is accurate to say, however, that as church members they do have a "stake" in the outcome of your ministry. They "invest" in your ministry and they will want to know how their investment is playing out. They will come to view their participation in a more serious way. A "contributor" is finished when the check is in the mail, but an "investor" has an ongoing responsibility beyond the gift. Help them to see how to increase their investment.

I want to conclude this First Monday Report by sharing a front page article from a recent newsletter that DID catch my attention. It was personal, compelling, and lifted up the difference supporters make in moving a ministry forward. It made me want to find out more. It made me consider making an investment. That's what good communication does. See what you think.

FRAGMENTS OF THE FACE OF GOD²

The walls on the Upper Room chapel still bear the marks of a worship series completed a couple of years ago. Worshipers were asked to choose a person of faith—ancient or modern—whom they admired. Stories about their Christian witness and a picture of each saint was placed on the wall. They became, for us, a visual gospel, “Fragments of the face of God.” Many of these representations still remain in the chapel.

From time to time I think of others who should be added to that wall of remembrance because of the strength of their witness.

This season of All Saints, Marilyn and Wendell Loftsgard come to mind. Marilyn recently sent a memorial gift to Luther House in honor of her beloved Wendell who died suddenly in an automobile accident last spring. Accompanying her check was a letter describing why Lutheran Campus Ministry has been important to them over the years.

Having completed her medical library science degree and working for a while in that field, Marilyn wanted to do something more with her life. She applied to attend graduate school and work with Lutheran students through the (then) National Lutheran Council Division of College and University Work. She studied at Gettysburg Seminary and then headed for Good Shepherd Lutheran Church in Tempe, Arizona. At one of the first student gathering she met Wendell, a senior from Iowa. “...we just knew there was something between us,” Marilyn wrote.

They finished their degrees, moved here and there, worked hard, raised three sons, and celebrated nearly 48 years of marriage. She finished her note, “...you can see what Lutheran Campus Ministry meant to our lives as it was the beginning of our life together and the basis for a solid and loving marriage.”

One thing she didn't mention, however. Wendell was a fine woodworker. When a new and stronger handrail was needed for the stairs leading to the Upper Room at Luther House, I asked Wendell if he'd make a new one for us. “Gladly,” was his immediate reply. Every time we climb the stairs to the chapel and look at the pictures on the wall, the craftsmanship of Wendell and the love of the Loftsgard's for campus ministry guides us safely there.

Lutheran Campus Ministry makes a lasting difference. It's a privilege to see God's face through people like the Loftsgards. Thanks, Marilyn. And thanks be to God!

² Jim Norlie, The Luther House “*Luminary*,” Fall, 2005. Used with permission.

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