

THE FIRST MONDAY REPORT

Thoughts on Fund Raising for Campus Ministry

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“KEEP YOUR EYE ON THE BALL”

One of the things I like about springtime is baseball. It doesn't have to be major league ball. Just the sight of my neighbor kids playing catch is enough to bring a wave of nostalgia wafting across my front porch. Ah, I remember when..... When I played in high school, or later coached my own kids' little league teams, what I remember, along with the game-winning hits and the amazing catches in left field (occasionally), is the time spent in practice. It seems like batting and fielding rehearsals went on for hours, which was true, I guess. In those routine practices we were confronted with every eventuality—smashing ground balls, soaring hits to the wall, and as we stood at the plate, curve balls and changeups galore (if it was possible for our pitcher to throw them). We embedded ourselves in this routine, so that when the actual game happened, every play was made with a sense of “Oh, I've seen that before. No problem.” The teams I played on and coached were confident, well-oiled machines—in rehearsal. Then the game was on!

In so many ways, fundraising is like baseball (or choose a sport or discipline of your own liking). It takes practice to feel confident. It takes persistence to step to the plate with donor after donor and know that, while there may be an occasional strikeout, usually there is a response worth waiting for. It takes a sense of teamwork, knowing that when an invitation to make a gift is made, it is done on behalf of the larger ministry. It's not just about you and your individual performance. It probably took a team of folks working with you to obtain the gift (office staff, board members, volunteers, and others who opened doors and made introductions). It takes a community to shape the story of your ministry and it takes a community to share it with others. Finally, it takes enthusiasm for the ministry you are doing and the irrepressible desire to invite others into it. There is a “fever” about baseball, an excitement that begins every game anew, regardless of the previous day's success. Fundraising is motivated by a similar fever and excitement for the cause you bring before others.

I want to suggest that there are some things that need practice and careful attention before “playing the big game” of asking someone for a contribution.

In fundraising circles there is a truism called “the rule of rights.” It tells us that if our gift requests are to be successful, the “right” person needs to ask the “right” donor, for the “right” amount, at the “right” time, for the “right” reason.

You can easily see that by substituting the word “wrong” for the word “right” in any of those places, you will not be very successful in obtaining the gift.

The “right” person refers to someone who has a relationship with the donor or who can represent the ministry in a significant way. The “right” donor is someone who is capable of making a sizeable gift, is interested in your ministry, and has given regularly before. The “right” amount refers to the donor’s potential and history with the organization. The “right” time is based on knowledge of a donor’s current/future commitments or whether they have just won the lottery. The “right” reason is the viable connection between the donor’s interests and the needs of the organization.

With every potential major donor, the “rule of rights” must be tested carefully and systematically.

Practice the conversation you are going to have when you meet with the potential donor face to face. Although you cannot (and should not) script the visit so tightly that it seems like a proverbial vacuum cleaner salesman pushing his merchandise, you do need to have a sense of how the conversation moves forward. Think through the purpose of the visit, the stories you are going to share, and the request you are going to make. You might spend some time with other visitors role-playing your upcoming meetings, so that you feel comfortable with questions or unexpected comments.

The meeting is not a speed dating encounter. It takes time and full attention to complete a successful visit. Perhaps it takes several visits; not everything can be accomplished in one meeting. The donor may have to get to know you better, to be able to trust you and your cause. In the words of Bill Sturtevant, “They have to love you more” in making a large gift than when they simply write a check to the annual fund.

Remember that although the purpose of the meeting is to ask for a gift, you will need to spend more time listening than talking, especially if this is a first meeting. Find out what the person’s interests and connections are. What do they get excited about? What would give them joy? Make the linkage between their interests and the opportunities you bring, if possible. Help them to see how their need to give can be expressed through your ministry. Be attentive to the concerns the donor raises and try to respond to them genuinely. If you can’t answer a specific question, say that you will find out the answer and respond within a short period of time. Then be sure to do it.

Realize that you may have to schedule a return visit to bring more information or to give the donor a chance to think through your proposal, check with family, or contact his/her financial manager. At the level of major gifts, you are talking about “stop and think” gifts, and the donor may need time to contemplate your invitation. Ask how much time would be needed and make the next appointment on the spot if at all possible. A speaker at a fundraising conference once said that you will need to make as many visits with a prospect as there are 0s in the “ask”. So if you are hoping for a \$1,000 gift, you may need to plan on three visits to get that amount. The point is that the larger the gift, the better the donor needs to know your ministry. “Let me think about it,” should be taken as a positive response.

Be timely. Most visits can be accomplished in 30 minutes to one hour. Be on time for the meeting—not 10 minutes early and not 10 minutes late. Don't rush to make your "ask." Listen carefully. Respond appropriately. Then ask, thank, and leave. Some consultants say that the most important time of the meeting is the silence between your "ask" and the donor's response. Give the person time to think and respond.

Have a specific dollar amount in mind. This may be difficult to determine precisely, but you can generally gauge it to be 5 to 10 times the amount of the donor's regular annual gift. Your request might encourage the donor to reach a bit. More often than not, when a donor is asked to give a "reach" gift, they are flattered and will let you know if it's not possible. Ask low, and you will probably get the low amount, but no more. The donor may ask, "What are others doing?" That is a perfectly good question and your response may be, "We are asking our strong supporters like yourself to consider a gift of \$1,000." If you are using the old "giving club" approach (which still works in some settings), you might say, "We're hoping that you can join the Gold Elite Club. Gifts at that level are between \$1,000 and \$5,000." However, in some cases the best response might be, "What are you comfortable with?" or "What would be a fulfilling gift for you?"

Fischer Howe¹ offers a structure for the solicitation meeting.

1. Open with pleasantries. Not the weather, but something to do with them. Comment on their house, their neighborhood, or their connection with your organization. Keep it brief, however.
2. Get to the subject. Thank them for taking the time to meet with you. Offer to share something about your organization like, "Would it be helpful if I brought you up to date on our new building campaign?" Use this time to connect with their interests. Share pictures or other information. Let them ask questions, but keep on subject as much as possible.
3. Get to the asking. Always put your request in terms of an opportunity. Suggest an amount that they can consider. You are not telling them what they ought to do. It's like opening an elevator door at a certain floor. They will tell you if you are asking at an appropriate level. You can tell them what others are doing. You can say that in order for the campaign to be successful, you need 10 gifts at the \$10,000 level and you hope that they could give one of those gifts.
4. Be ready for any number of responses. Obviously the best response is positive. But whatever the response, say "thank you." Don't argue. If they say "no," ask if they might like more time to think or need more information. Could you meet again in six months? If there is a complaint, the first one may be about your institution. Deal as sympathetically with it as you can, offering to look into the situation. Don't push. Don't whine. Don't retreat. Sometimes it helps to stress the importance of doing something now. Sometimes it's best to leave it on the table. "Give something, whatever you can," is probably going to get you a small amount, given reluctantly.

¹ Fischer Howe is the Washington, DC, representative of David Lavender/David Rice & Associates, a fundraising and management counsel for non-profits.

It's better to keep the conversation open and see if you can schedule a visit in the near future to talk again.

5. Leave on a positive note. If a gift is not secured, ask if it would be helpful to send a letter summarizing your conversation. Regardless of the size of the gift, your overall intention is to nurture the relationship with the donor.
6. Follow up. Promptly follow the visit with a note expressing appreciation for the visit and, if appropriate, for the gift. If a gift is not received, the note is a tactful reminder that the invitation to contribute is still open.

Practice may not make perfect, but it will provide the confidence that many representatives of your ministry need to make successful visits with prospective donors. Some people will have the natural ability to invite gifts and feel comfortable talking about money. Others will need some practice, so that their comfort level grows. It may take a lot of swings of the bat before they are at ease stepping into the box to swing at an inside curve ball.

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