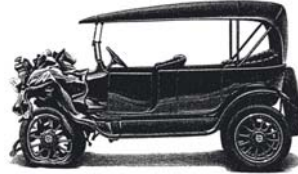


THE FIRST MONDAY REPORT

Thoughts on Fundraising for Campus Ministry

February, 2007

HOW TO AVOID A WRECK



Defensive driving is something that every kid in the Midwest is taught before they get behind the wheel of a moving machine in the middle of winter. There is too much glare ice, too much snow and sleet, and too many careless drivers not to be exceptionally alert when you're on the road in the wintertime. You have to think ahead and plan ahead for the possibility of a car spinning sideways, out of control. You have to know where the ditches are. And you need some idea of where to swerve to avoid a disastrous collision. When you're in the driver's seat, you have to know how to avoid a wreck.

As many of you know from experience, being in the driver's seat of a fund raising campaign is serious business that requires careful planning, attention to every possible detail, and alert responsiveness to every conceivable twist and turn in the campaign. There is not time to be gazing out the window or multi-tasking your way through the maze of responsibilities. There is little room for major error. Even fender-benders might slow down the campaign to the point where the fund raising has to be parked for a time and all momentum is lost. It will be impossible in this short space to cover the full scope of development work, but here are some examples to get you thinking about how to avoid a wreck.

Steven Wilbers, a professor in the Management Advancement Program at the University of Minnesota, wrote a brief article recently titled, "How to Write Fundraising Letters that Never Fail." Just follow these simple steps, he suggests:

- Catch the reader's attention in the first three to four seconds. Lead off with the strongest material. Use action words and powerful messages that have a sense of urgency and encourage action on the part of the reader. Remember: feelings first, facts follow.
- Consider using a Johnson Box, named after a New York copywriter, which is a concise provocative summary presented as an attention-getting block of text before the salutation.
- Personalize your letter. The whole tone of the letter should sound like you really know the person to whom you are writing. Even though it may go to a thousand

- persons, your letter is read by one person at a time. The strongest word in fundraising is “you.” (Herschell Gordon Lewis)
- Engage the reader by calling for immediate response. Arrange the copy so that it leads the reader through the message to take the action you want. Make the action convenient to do—such as including a reply envelope and a range of possible gifts.
 - Consider using a promotional or involvement technique. Ask the reader to do something other than make a gift, such as return a survey or send a story about their involvement. Once they are involved they will be more likely to give.
 - Don’t be afraid to write a long letter. A long letter gives you a chance to make your request more than once. State your purpose early and often.
 - Be sure to emphasize the benefits of contributing—both ways—to the donor and to the organization. Tell the reader what their gift will accomplish, even if it’s small. Help them see the vision of your organization.
 - Test the effectiveness of our appeal letter. Try it out on a test group and ask for feedback. Show it to colleagues. You might even try an A/B test, where one letter is sent to one group and the other to another group to see which draws more response. This will give you a clue about how to draft future correspondence.
 - Finally, mail a letter to yourself. When it arrives, open it, read it, and take out your checkbook. Ask how much the campaign really means to you. Listen with your heart. Then write a check and see how it feels.

Even though I am rather careful to remember the points that Wilbers makes when I write fundraising letters, I still was involved in a major accident a few years ago. I sent out an appeal letter to a Christian constituency and forgot to mention Jesus. One person was candid enough to respond and point out my *faux pas*. Talk about not being aware of the audience—it’s like running a red light at a busy intersection! How many other readers noticed what the person who responded did? I will definitely not make that mistake again.

“If you make a mistake—make a new one each time.” Dale Carnegie

Steve Hitchcock, who writes a regular article for *Contributions* titled “The Mail Sack,” helps us look at temptations that lurk everywhere when doing direct mail fundraising.¹ The greatest single temptation, he says, is that people fail to resist writing about *your* organization, *your* programs, and *your* needs. People who send you contributions year after year need to feel that it’s *their* organization. From the beginning they need to feel that you have them in mind. So start off by thanking them for their past support. Then address the concerns and values you know they have, and let them know how your organization is linking with those values.

The second temptation, Hitchcock says, is that we write essays instead of personal letters. We use “long, flowing sentences, lofty ideas, and a plethora of well-turned phrases.”

¹ *Contributions*, November-December, 2004, page 11.

The flaw is that essays lead to reflection, while letters urge action. “The letter is the ‘seed that dies’ so that the gift can bloom.”

A third temptation is to try to save paper or be too brief. If you need more than one page to state your case (in the friendly, compelling manner mentioned above), by all means use more paper. And as part of the package, include a reply envelope and a response form. This form restates the main reason for sending the gift, has your contact information, and states that the gift is tax-deductible.

Finally, don’t soft-pedal the request for the gift. Don’t assume that your regular supporters know why they’re supposed to send a gift this time. State your cause, ask for what you need, and give them a way to respond.

Not long ago I received a solicitation letter in the mail. The organization was familiar to me; I may have donated in the past. As I scanned their “essay” about the importance of *their* organization (not mine), I couldn’t tell what they expected *me* to do. Write a check, I suppose, but there was no suggested amount. Not even a P.S. that reminded me to send my check soon. It joined other wrecks in my round file.



Now let’s change vehicles and talk about “wrecks” when it comes to board work. I have shared with many of you in workshops that one of my memorable wrecks was a lunch conversation I had with a very active board member who was stepping down after six years. She thanked me for the experience and said as we parted, “You know I never really understood what my role as a board member was.” Another fender-bender that might have been avoided if I, or better yet the board itself, had spent some time in orientation and mentoring.

Peter C. Brinkerhoff writes about why boards fail.² Here is the accident report:

1. They don’t come to meetings.
2. They don’t do their homework.
3. They focus on management rather than policy. Give smart, committed board members something significant to do and keep them engaged in key issues.

² CIA, the complementary e-newsletter by Brinkerhoff, November, 2006.
Subscribe at www.missionbased.com Quoted in *Modern Donor*, 2/07.

4. They ‘dis’ the organization (or other members) in public. While disagreement among board members often happens, and in some ways is healthy, it should not be public information. Members ‘dis’ the organization if they don’t get their say or their way in the meeting.
5. They disregard standard business practices, such as budget, insurance, audit.
6. They ignore their own priorities or policies. If there is a strategic plan, stick to it, or change it, but don’t ignore it.

Brinkerhoff advocates for ways to manage board failure.

1. Have job descriptions, including attendance expectations, for all members. Use this as a recruiting tool.
2. Choose members carefully and have a mentoring program for them.
3. Include non-board members on committees to evaluate potential for full membership.
4. Send board leadership to training events or have them do some reading and discussion about current board practices.
5. Mix the membership—half who are advocates for what you do and half who are people with business skills. The first group keeps you honest to “mission,” while the second group keeps you honest to “no money, no mission.”

Now, let’s change to one more vehicle and talk about grant writing. I’ve written any number of grant proposals. Some have been funded, some needed revision, and some were wrecks. In grant writing, you don’t always get to find out why the accident happened. If you get a response at all, it might just be a terse form letter, telling you that your proposal was not a match for their mission. I’ve learned that the more effort you put into knowing what the granting agency wants and expects *before* I begin to write helps me to shape my proposal more accurately and clearly. When I’ve been on the reading side of grant applications, I have watched good ideas fail for lack of focus, insufficient information, or fiscal credibility.

Joe Barbato reports on a survey with the top 100 foundations across the country and has developed a kind of 10 commandments for grant writers.³

1. Thou shalt give the people what they want. Follow the foundation guidelines “religiously.” Do not skip questions or omit requested information.
2. Thou shalt not go on and on. “Eschew surplusage” (Mark Twain)
3. Thou shalt organize thy thoughts. You have to make choices about how to order your information and encapsulate it at every turn.
4. Thou shalt not pluck the heartstrings too vigorously. One executive said that rhetoric made his teeth hurt. Another person said that they don’t want to read poetry.
5. Thou shalt not speak in tongues. Don’t use jargon. Define technical terms. Choose a short, simple word over long, obtuse ones.
6. Thou shalt keep at least a pinkie toe on the ground. Be realistic. Don’t make huge promises that you can’t fulfill.

³ Joe Barbato, www.writingforagoodcause.com

7. Thou shalt take a positive approach. Don't badmouth the competition. Lift up your strengths and why you will be able to accomplish what you propose.
8. Thou shalt ask for the money. Don't be shy; ask for what you need in both the cover letter and the grant itself.
9. Thou shalt not employ a cookie cutter. Don't write one proposal and send it to 80 foundations. While you may be able to reuse some language from other proposals, write with particular focus to each foundation.
10. Thou shalt proofread carefully. It's a necessary thing, like eating spinach.

Finally, when we consider major fundraising campaigns, here are some reasons why some campaigns fail that I have learned from others in the field.

- The campaign doesn't live up to the essential requirements of being urgent, relevant, and important.
- The leadership doesn't commit to a solid action plan.
- The chair of the campaign committee is unable to lead for any number of reasons.
- The goal set for the campaign is unrealistic and unspecific.
- Not enough potential donors have been found and/or relationships established with them.
- Top-ranking members of the organization and others in the community are incorrectly assumed to be highly supportive.
- There are not enough campaign workers.
- When visits are made, there is too much talking and not enough listening.
- The board is uncommitted, untrained, or unable to govern.
- An adequate budget has not been allocated.
- The campaign focuses on survival rather than mission.
- Staff members take on too much of the work of the board.
- A feasibility study, if done, has been disregarded.
- The donor base is too small, uninterested, or uninformed.
- Leadership have not made their gifts in advance.
- The public phase of the campaign opened before the lead gifts were secured.

In a nutshell, as a development colleague of mine has often said, the primary reason why fundraising efforts fail is because of the "ready, fire, aim" approach. Strategic planning, and the careful execution of that plan, happens too late or is laid aside in the heat (or panic) of the campaign. Drive carefully everyone—avoid the wrecks.

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