

THE FIRST MONDAY REPORT

Thoughts on Fundraising for Campus Ministry

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Ready, Fire, Aim

Remember how long those drives with your parents seemed to be when you were younger? In the days before in-car DVD players and iPods, crunched between your siblings in the back seat, dying of thirst and having to make a bathroom stop, it seemed like you would NEVER get to where you wanted to be. Even when Dad said, “Half the fun is in getting there,” you figured that was only because he was in the driver’s seat. Planning, preparation, and patience were adult virtues. As a kid you were overwhelmed with feelings of boredom, desperation, frustration, and sometimes panic. Given the choice, you might have chosen to abandon the enterprise and just get out and walk to Grandma’s house.

Finding ourselves in the middle of a fund raising campaign can often feel like the catastrophic car ride of our youth. It seems like it will never end and that we will never get to our goal. Those old feelings of frustration, desperation, and panic envelop us and we would rather cut the trip short and settle for what we have in hand, rather than push along to the bitter end—whenever that might be. We realize in the middle of the venture that we have not planned as well as we could have. We needed more staff and volunteers. We needed more complex software to manage our data. We didn’t budget enough money to cover the kinds of communication we now need. We are regularly at odds with those who accompany us, our committees and other leadership. Results aren’t coming in the way we had imagined. Given this all-too-common of an experience, what might we do to get ready for a major fund raising campaign that would avoid some of these mid-campaign blues?

Jerry Panas,¹ a consummate professional in the field of fund raising, acknowledges that not every campaign is well-planned and successfully managed. In the past 10 years JPL&P has served over 13,000 client-institutions. Most of those campaigns were “block-busters,” he notes proudly. But he humbly adds, “Let’s face it: a small percentage of our programs were...well..., they were bad. That’s the truth of it. In the course of these years, we have learned a lot about managing a successful campaign. There are no guarantees. That’s unfortunately true. But there are some verities which provide inviolate benchmarks to winning.”

When someone with this level of professionalism—and honesty—speaks, I’m ready to listen. Some of what Panas shares is not particularly new, but taken as a well-conceived, thorough package, his “verities” are important to learn and apply to any major fund raising campaign that stands before you. Here are Panas’ “Guidelines to Winning:”

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1. **Not every fundraising firm, no matter how good, is right for every institution or every project.** He suggests that organizations interview a number of firms and determine how their strengths will match the needs of the campaign. For our purposes in campus ministry, firms that have a good track record of raising money in congregations may not have the adaptability to transfer those skills to our campus ministry constituency. We may need a firm that functions better in the not-for-profit sector. Prior to the interview we need to develop a list of expectations or criteria for services. We need to check each firm's record. Ask to see results of their prior work, including a feasibility study they have conducted. The size of the firm is not a determinate, but enthusiasm and a positive spirit are requisite values. Do they share the vision held by you and your board? Can they provide you with periodic updates? Are they a full-service firm, or will you have to go elsewhere for communications expertise, for example? At base, can they get on board with campus ministry quickly and adequately, or are they slow learners who may never understand our mission?
2. **Insist on a feasibility study.** A feasibility study provides you with accurate and timely feedback about the mission of your organization and the worth of what you propose to do as a result of the campaign. It will point out problem areas, such as inadequate leadership or implications of a struggling economy. One campus ministry I know of proposed a campaign of over \$1.5 million, but when the feasibility study was completed it was obvious that they could hope to raise less than half of that amount. They scrapped the campaign and started over in their visioning process. Feasibility studies need to be done professionally, not by a committee of the board or a friend of the ministry who has a little experience with one in the past. A free study is worth what you pay for it.
3. **Beware of a study report which reads more like a sales document than a careful analysis of your market position.** You are looking for this study to provide you with sharp information and critical documentation. If words like "probably" and "seems like" pepper the presentation, ask for reasons why the objectives listed are achievable. Can the expected outcomes be realized?
4. **Evaluate your board with excruciating candor. The buck starts here!** Not all boards are up to the task of managing a major fund raising campaign. They may not have signed on for such responsibilities, or if they did, they may discover soon that they do not have the commitment or the ability to lead the campaign. Panas has written elsewhere that boards need wisdom, work, wealth, and wallop. If your board is seriously lacking in these attributes, you may need to organize a separate Development Committee or Campaign Committee equal to the task.²
5. **Top Leadership is crucial.** The chair of the campaign committee is the most important person to recruit and should be done first. This new chair, who embodies experience and prominence in the community, needs to be able to participate in the selection of the rest of the committee. Because of who they are, they will be able to make contacts and leverage commitments better than other leaders. Also, campaign leadership need to be involved in the beginning with setting the vision and planning the steps of the campaign. If you can't recruit quality leadership you should postpone your efforts until you can do so.
6. **A campaign is won with large gifts.** This is often where enthusiastic boards go wrong. They look at a successful annual campaign and note the number of \$25 to \$100 gifts,

² A job description for a Development Committee is available from Campus Ministry Advancement.

thinking that all they have to do is turn up the volume and larger gifts will flow in. Certainly the truth is that large gifts come from those who have consistently given smaller gifts. However, a large campaign needs many large gifts to succeed. Typically the top third of your total must come from a dozen or so donors. The middle third will come from another 100 or so gifts. And the last third from all others, representing smaller contributions. If you are not able to identify those essential major donors, the odds are against success.

7. **Dare to ask.** This is a whole subject in itself—planning the request, making the visit, following through. Inexperienced campaign leadership often gets cold feet when it comes to asking. They shrink from asking prominent persons or they ask for too little. They may suffer from institutional inferiority. Visitors need to be carefully selected for their energy and their support of the mission. Shy, yet committed, persons can be paired with others who are more outgoing. Everyone should be trained in good listening skills and provided with good information. Then they must have the courage to ask.
8. **Your project must have sizzle.** The Indiana School of Philanthropy notes that to be successful a campaign must be relevant, important, and urgent. Certainly this is true. It is hard to make a case for replacing bathroom fixtures, boilers, or even a sagging roof. While these items may be urgent, we might strain to interpret them as relevant to the mission. Your campaign has to light the fires of imagination in others. It has to communicate a vision that is compelling. It must talk about changed hearts and saved lives. It has to lift up core values and bring them alive. At the center it must be about the Gospel. All this—with positive pizzazz.
9. **Those who know you best of all, love you most of all.** Panas quips, “You don’t make a pickle by sprinkling a little vinegar over a cucumber. You have to immerse it.” Those individuals who are most involved in your campus ministry and have been kept informed over the years will be your best supporters. Those who have consistently given to your annual fund will be the best prospects for making a larger gift to your new campaign. They don’t have to be convinced of your mission. They know it and will want to support it however they are able. It’s the difference between asking a favorite aunt or a distant relative for a gift. Those who know your ministry most intimately will likely be your most ardent supporters.
10. **The cheapest is not necessarily the least expensive.** The emphasis in a fund raising campaign is focused on the bottom line, the net income. It is not about how much you spend, but on how much you raise. It’s the difference between the two that really counts. The temptation with a campaign running on a shoestring is to economize on things like publicity, mailings, staff, and data management. The old truism is that “you have to spend money to make money.” Along with careful planning and nurtured relationships, adequate resources are a primary consideration.
11. **Pin down time commitments.** This is important when working with everyone, from volunteers and board up to the consulting firm itself. Let everyone know what to expect in terms of the time to complete a successful campaign, then hold them to it. Be sure that the firm you hire is able to do what it says it will do. Be sure you have a written contract where the commitment is specifically spelled out. Be sure your other leadership is on board too. You don’t want to find out in the middle of the campaign that people are exhausted and ready to quit. Nail down these commitments at the beginning or you will never see the end.

- 12. Insist on detailed progress reports on a regular basis.** It will be a good idea for key leadership to have strategy meetings at least twice a month to monitor progress and address any complications that arise. Heed early warning signals. Address problems head on. Don't shrink from making difficult decisions now that will affect the outcome of the campaign later. While a "kick off" may signal the beginning of a campaign, it's the yardage gained on the ground after the ball is being returned that counts. The analysis of every play is important. There are no "hail Marys" in fund raising.
- 13. Be bold. Resist the usual, conventional, and commonplace.** While careful, strategic planning is of ultimate importance, knowing how to lead a campaign with creativity, flexibility, and courage are equally important. It's this attitude that must accompany the sense of sizzle mentioned earlier. Are there ways to accomplish the goal that hasn't been tried before? People are tired of run-of-the-mill solicitation letters and boring newsletters. With some reluctance they entertain visitors with a placid pitch. Open their hearts and their minds. Invite them into a vision so compelling that they will thank you for the opportunity to become involved.

Finally, as you begin to plan for your new capital campaign, give some thought to the concept of "ready, fire, aim." I heard a veteran fund raising say year ago that this is the most common mega-error made in strategic planning. The campaign is launched before adequate planning and visioning have taken place. The infrastructure is not in place or is too fragile. Typically, the major gifts have not been secured before the campaign goes public. What you "aim" to do as a result of a successful fund drive has not been determined in a way that is urgent, relevant, and significant. Once the campaign starting gun has been fired, it is incredibly difficult to step back and attend to some of the prior necessities. Rank each of the thirteen points above according to: definitely, probably, or not at all. Look at the bottom line. Are you ready for a capital campaign?

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