

2009 GUIDANCE FOR NONPROFITS: STICK TO YOUR FUNDRAISING PLANS

by Keith Curtis

For leaders of nonprofit organizations, raising money in the current economy may seem daunting. But rather than simply throwing in the towel, now is the time for nonprofit board members and staff leadership to adhere closely to a step-by-step fundraising plan. With a clear and compelling case for support and the proper strategies, a nonprofit can indeed meet fundraising goals, even in difficult times.

Contrary to popular opinion, however, those proper strategies don't include holding more events or mailing more heartfelt appeals. An article about philanthropy on Slate.com reiterated what fundraising consulting firms have hammered home forever: "The most effective fundraising efforts aren't parties but efforts in which people appeal to their friends and colleagues face-to-face."

This philosophy ties into a maxim often bandied about in fundraising: People give to people. In reality, though, people give money to good causes and appointments to the right people. So the questions become, are the right people on your board? Are they willing to ask their friends and colleagues for gifts? If so, are they trained in how to build relationships and ask for gifts?

The idea of asking friends and colleagues for money can send some people running from the room. Keep in mind, though, that more than 80 percent of all U.S. giving comes from individuals. And 10 percent of those donors give half of all individual dollars. The point is that people with wealth will give to charitable causes, no matter what the economy. The key is to make your organization one of their philanthropic priorities.

IT'S ALL ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS

Accomplishing this takes thoughtful planning and patience. Major gift fundraising is a targeted process that requires building and cultivating relationships. People who make large gifts want to be sure the nonprofit is well managed. They ask questions; they want data. When you've educated and cultivated a philanthropist properly, by the time you're ready to ask for a gift, he or she is ready to be asked.

Another reason to take heart right now is a recent report by Giving USA Foundation, "Giving During Recessions and Economic Slowdowns." The report looked at charitable giving during each recession between 1967 and 2007. It found that in every year but one, total giving in current dollars has risen. The exception was 1987, when a change to a tax law the previous year prompted some people to give early.

Several nonprofits that we work with have illustrated this by garnering gifts ranging from \$50,000 to \$250,000 and even more. These organizations are led by boards who know the value of sticking to their fundraising plan and communicating consistently with donors and prospects. They also know the importance of renewing gifts from current donors, letting them know what their gifts have made possible, and making sure they've been properly thanked.

There's no question that major gifts will go to great causes, even when times are tough. Make sure yours is one of them.

Keith Curtis is president of the Hampton Roads Gift Planning Council and a board member of the Giving Institute, founding organization of Giving USA Foundation. He is also president and CEO of The Curtis Group, a fundraising consulting firm that is the only Virginia-based member of the Giving Institute.