Prospect Identification:
You Already Know All the People You Need to Know To Raise All the Money You Want to Raise

By KIM KLEIN

The title of this article is taken from a phrase I often use in my fundraising trainings. It meets with skepticism, denial, laughter, incredulity, and occasionally two reactions that mark people who might actually go somewhere in fundraising: horror and relief. It is obvious why relief would be a great reaction to have to the idea that you already know the people you need to know, but why horror? People who are horrified by this notion realize that their best prop has just been knocked down; the excuse that worked when all others failed has just failed. If they already know who they need to know, what is stopping them? How can they not raise money? Their horror is that they have been found out. But many of them recover from horror and go on to raise money.

What does it mean that you know who you need to know in order to raise the money you want to raise? Simply this: As we point out every year, and sometimes more often, the most money given away in the U. S. comes from middle-income, working-class, and poor families. This happens to be most people. Most people give away most money. This is good news. Imagine if most money were given away by corporations — we would have even more elite universities, a handful of well-funded arts groups, and a lot of funding going to research, scholarships, and cause-related themes. If, similarly, most money were given away by foundations, we would again have a much smaller landscape of nonprofits, with a much greater focus on large organizations. The concept of grassroots fundraising and, consequently, grassroots groups would not exist.

We have a diverse, creative, and extraordinary group of nonprofits because we have a diverse, creative, and wonderful population of people who give away money.

In 1995, however, an ominous trend in grassroots giving was tracked and analyzed by the research wing of Independent Sector, a coalition of nonprofit organizations that provides research and advocacy on behalf of the nonprofit sector. Virginia Hodgkinson, vice president of research at Independent Sector, reported that the 68 million households that had made donations in 1995 was 4 million fewer households than had given in 1993, a drop of nearly 5%. Part of this loss was attributed to who was asked for money. The survey reported that only 60% of Americans were asked to contribute to nonprofit organizations in 1995, down 17% from 1994. Clearly, millions of people who would give are not being asked!

WHY AREN'T PEOPLE BEING ASKED TO GIVE?

Nonprofits have themselves caused the problem of people not being asked to give: They focus on the wealthiest potential donors and often pass over lower-income or middle-income households. "If they are targeting more affluent households, they are losing other participants in society," commented Hodgkinson.

Now, one of my own areas of promotion as a fundraiser and trainer is major gifts — how to find them and how to get them. As a consequence, I feel some responsibility when I read a study like this. But perhaps my full message has not been heeded, as I always stress that even your biggest gifts may not come from your wealthiest donors. Giving and having are often unrelated. Havers have. That's why we call them "the haves." Even some very poor people are "haves." What little they have, they hang onto. Some very wealthy people are also "haves." They hang onto the great deal that they have, and they try to have more.

In fundraising, we must focus on givers. Since most people give when asked and, as corollary studies show, do not give when not asked, we must increase the number of people we are asking.

This brings us to the logical question: Who are we missing? One answer is suggested by Independent Sector's research. They identify the "underasked" as young people and people of color. Furthermore, they find that when these "underasked" are asked, 78% respond. This is a higher percentage than the percentage of givers thought to be in the population at large (about 70%). Since giving and volunteering are habits often developed when young, if we continue to underask young people, we can expect a continuing decline in contributions in the future.

REVERSING THE TREND

How can we make sure to reverse this trend of focusing our asking on affluent households and not asking millions of people who might give?

First, start your fundraising with people you know. Don't focus on posh neighborhoods or major donors to other groups, or act from rumors about how many millionaires are setting up family foundations.

I was recently with a wonderful organization in Oregon that had been grappling with this issue for more than a year. A member of the fundraising committee had carefully researched and compiled a list of business people in town who gave money to various causes. It numbered about 200. Here's an example of her excellent research (with names changed):

- Joe Smith, owner of three hardware franchises, chair of Rotary and active in the Chamber of Commerce. Gifts include $300 to his child's school foundation, $250 plus hardware to a homeless shelter in town, $500 to his alma mater.
- Mary Jones, vice president of a local bank, active in her church and in Rotary, $500 to a battered women's program, $500 to the local symphony orchestra, and a large amount (exact amount unobtainable) to Habitat for Humanity's building program through her church.

And so on, for all 200 names.

All this research had taken about a year to complete. The volunteer who had done it had pored over program books, newsletters, social pages of the newspaper. All of the information was derived from public sources. Once the research was completed, the committee had decided to approach each person on the list individually and divided up the names among themselves. Of the 200 names, 25 were people known to one or more committee members, and those people were asked. Half gave and half declined to give. Those who had given had been asked for introductions to others on the list, yielding introductions to about 20 more on the list.

The remaining people, whom no one on the committee knew personally, did not get asked, despite the committee's intentions and various deadlines set for themselves. In fact, five committee meetings had transpired at which the names were divided up and assigned or reassigned, only to be followed by another meeting at which members reported that for the most part these prospects weren't being approached. This process went on for a full year, so that two years had been devoted to this project — one for the research and one for the follow-up, or lack of it.

In frustration, the group asked me what they should do to motivate themselves to approach the rest of the names on the list. The volunteer who had done the research was understandably peeved that so little had been done with her efforts, although she too admitted that she had not approached any of her designated prospects.

I told the committee something they probably knew in their hearts already: They should give up approaching people they don't know. Nevertheless, the research will be helpful as they are bound eventually to meet some of these people through their known contacts. In the meantime, I suggested, each committee member should make a list of 15 people they know and ask these people for donations. I saw looks of relief on many faces: "It would be a lot faster for me to ask people I know," said one young woman. And another added, "If I ask ten friends and only get $20 each, I'll still have more than I was able to raise from one of these contacts." Then the horror chorus started: "But these are the most prestigious people in town. These are the movers and shakers. We can't ignore them." I pointed out that I wasn't suggesting ignoring them. "I am suggesting that you start with who you know; these are much more likely to be the movers and shakers for your group. Then you can see who these people know."

Finally, the chair suggested a compromise. All those who wanted to ask people they knew should compile a list of those people and bring it to the next meeting so that the group could ensure that no one was being asked more than once. Those who wanted to keep working from the list of 200 could do so. Of 13 committee members, 11 decided to ask people they knew and 2 decided to work the list. Ironically, the volunteer who did the original research was one of the 11 who decided to ask people she knew.

Six months later, 8 of the 11 people who agreed to ask people they knew had done so, resulting in 70 new gifts and $1,900 raised. The two who were plugging away on the original list had asked three more people and raised $750 from two of them. The other three members of the committee had compiled their lists but not quite gotten around to asking.

This is excellent progress.

STARTING WITH WHO YOU KNOW

When you start with people you know, start with the person you know best — yourself. Make a gift that feels good to you and then ask your friends for a gift in that range. Much time is lost trying to determine how much to ask people for. The most important thing is to have them feel good about their gift, should they choose to give. A person will feel good about the size of his or her gift if the gift is comparable to the gift given by their friend. Some people may give more and some may give less. You may feel comfortable asking people with considerably more resources for a gift larger than the one you gave, and you probably want to scale back your request when approaching people who have considerably less than you do. Using yourself as a benchmark will save a lot of time. Once a person has given, their gift becomes their own benchmark to start the process of asking for more.

If all of us involved in fundraising ask people we know, we probably won't leave out the millions of households that went unasked in 1995. However, if our circles of acquaintances are not diverse, we may have a large segment of potential supporters whom no one in our group knows and who don't get asked by us. Therefore, it behooves us to make sure that our boards of directors and our staff and volunteers represent the broadest range of demographic possibilities of our communities.

EXPANDING THE FUNDRAISING COMMITTEE

A final point: Make sure everyone in the organization knows how to raise money — staff, volunteers, board, everyone. Any time you notice the faintest enthusiasm about fundraising from a client, a staff person, the janitor of your building, or whomever, bring them on your fundraising committee.

Here is an example: A group was planning its 20th anniversary celebration. The committee was meeting at the home of a board member, whose 16-year-old daughter was eavesdropping on the committee meeting. At one point she piped up, "I have an idea for how you can raise even more money." Committee members smiled and her mother said, "Good — why don't you tell me later." Looking puzzled, the girl left the room. A few minutes later, one of the committee members passed the girl's bedroom on her way back from the bathroom. On a whim, she said, "What's your idea of how we can make more money?" The teenager said, "A lot of people coming to your event will have to hire baby-sitters. I can organize a group of my friends and offer free baby-sitting at the event, and people can contribute what they would have paid for sitters to the organization. It will be much more fun for the little kids and will let me and my friends help." This was a good idea that resulted in an extra $600 being given to the event, and a bunch of 16-year-olds whose ideas will not so easily be overlooked next time.

We have too much money to raise to be able to afford to lose even one household's giving, particularly over something so correctable as that they just needed to be asked.

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