



Campaigns • Grants • Planning

STRAIGHT TALK ON CAMPAIGNS

By Laurence A. Pagnoni

The “campaign” approach to fundraising did not exist before the 20th Century.¹ Fundraising campaigns were developed before the First World War as a money-raising tool for the American Red Cross and the YMCA. Campaign firms were soon organized with hospitals and colleges as their initial clients. Since those pioneering days, capital campaigns have become standard practice for universities, hospitals, and cultural organizations—nonprofits that have natural constituencies to turn to for major gifts (alumni, patients, and patrons respectively).

The campaign has traditionally been perceived as a technique that is only appropriate for large organizations. We challenge this point of view strenuously.

Why We Don't Campaign

Why do some nonprofits tend to shy away from campaigns or not even think of them at all? One important reason is that they do not have natural donor constituencies. But there are other reasons, and they are worth looking into:

One has to do with the cultural revolution of the 1960s. The civil rights movement and the era of peace and love elevated the social consciousness of the nation. This led to increased safety-net spending and substantial government support for the human services. Government came to be seen as a revenue source as powerful as the fundraising campaign. The ubiquity of foundation grants also had the effect of de-emphasizing the role of the individual donor.

Additionally, there is a huge gap in the fundraising education of the people who become executive directors in the nonprofit sector. Members of the helping professions generally do not receive any formal training in fundraising. The trailblazing Center on Philanthropy at Indiana University was only founded in 1987, and degree programs in fundraising at New York University and Columbia University are much younger. The lack of formal instruction tends to make high-level fundraising seem mysterious and complex.

Finally—let's face it—the large sums of money associated with campaigns tend to scare many nonprofit executives away. But campaigns do not have to be for gargantuan sums. You can use campaign techniques to raise \$10K or 50K. Frankly, given the frequent complaints of revenue shortfall we hear, nonprofits overall don't do enough campaigning.

Why (and When) We Should

We do not recommend that *all* nonprofits engage in campaigns. Here is the point where organizational development and fundraising converge. If your Board is not an effective engine of fundraising, if you lack a viable donor base, or a strategic vision for the future, or a plan for staffing up to accommodate the needs of a campaign, you are not ready for what

¹ See “Historical Sketch of the Fund Raising Profession” by A. C. Marts, Marts & Lundy, www.martsandlundy.com/pdf/history/ML_Historical_Sketch.pdf

the famous fundraiser Sheldon Garber called “The ultimate test of an institution’s philanthropic potential.” Or what Princeton University once referred to as “The moral equivalent of war—failure is unthinkable.”

But if you meet these criteria and your current revenue sources are not sufficient to fulfill the potential of your organization and implement the programs of your dreams, you should consider defining the steps that will position you to begin a campaign.

If you do not meet the criteria, instead of starting a campaign, work on defining the predevelopment steps you can take to get ready for one. Such a plan (written please!) would provide you with a step-by-step pathway to having a better set of fundraising problems this time next year. (So many nonprofits have the same fundraising dilemma year after year, and that is a sign of stagnation, or poor strategy, or poor infrastructure, or all three.) If you would like to talk through the process of creating a pre-development plan, email me and we can set up a free phone appointment.

The worst thing to do is to throw up your hands and do nothing. Two nonprofits we respected recently suspended their operations because of lack of funds. One provided homecare support to 1,000 frail seniors living in Manhattan and Queens, the other assisted 2,000-plus nursing-home residents and caregivers with life-and-death issues.

Instead of flinching at the mention of campaign techniques, please remember that individual donor support in many if not most cases is still the most lucrative revenue source in the country. That’s reason enough to consider a campaign or to get ready for one.

About LAPA Fundraising:

Founded in 1995, we specialize in working with innovative nonprofits. We are a full-service fundraising counsel with a special focus on campaigns, grants, and planning.

Our development services aim to diversify your revenue via major gift solicitation, individual donor programs, planned giving, foundation fundraising, and government proposal writing.

Our planning services help staff and boards develop new programs, improve management, strengthen governance, and define mission/vision/values.

Our grant services will introduce you to grant opportunities you likely never knew existed, and then employ a proven process to write, present, and follow-up on your grant request

LAPA enjoys a special in helping nonprofits navigate the complex intersection of resource development and organization advancement.

About The Author:

Laurence A. Pagnoni, holds advanced degrees in management and theology. He serves as chairman for high level strategy at LAPA Fundraising. Prior to establishing LAPA, Laurence served as executive director of three nonprofit agencies. As chairman of LAPA, Laurence gathers effective consultants to serve a diverse client base. He has led 20 different successful capital campaigns. Laurence may be reached at lpagnoni@lapafundraising.com.