Get Out There and Start Asking

It’s been a long, wild ride. The goal of this book was to walk you through the process of transforming your fundraising operations into a professional operation, from how to recruit qualified candidates for the necessary positions to have a stellar shop to how to solicit gifts of $25 all the way up to $1 million—and everything in between.

I’d like to leave you with some final thoughts, some meditations on recurring themes that we’ve dealt with up to this point.

Rejection

First: remember that you are going to get rejected. A lot. More than you might think. As a reminder, you will get $0.20 to $0.25 for every dollar you ask for. Whether you’re scrapping for $10 participation gifts or soliciting a major donor for $100,000, this ratio will hold over the long term. Again, this can mean that for every $100,000 solicitation you make you get one person in five who says yes, or five people who give you $20,000 in response. It almost always averages out to 1:4 or 1:5.

Do not take the rejections personally. You can’t afford to. You need to develop a thick skin and divorce yourself from the outcome. That isn’t to suggest that you should also divorce yourself from the preparation that goes into the
solicitation. You might be asking why you should bother putting in the effort of coming up with a solicitation strategy.

Preparation does matter, even if, despite your best efforts, you’re looking at 1:4 odds in the best of situations. You should enter every gift conversation assuming that you’re going to hear yes.

Remember: there are hard nos and soft nos. There is also “not yet,” “not that much,” or “not this time.” *No is not a permanent state.* Rather, *it is a response to a singular appeal at a given moment in time.* If someone says no this year (or quarter), that does not preclude him or her from giving later. The flip side, of course, is that just because someone gives now does not necessarily mean that he or she will give later. Take no donor for granted, and don’t take “no” to mean forever.

Recently, when interviewing a candidate for a major gift position, a colleague talked (accurately, for the record) about how we divide our prospect pools into thirds. You have your top third: the people you can always rely on to be consistent and generous, those you can turn to in times of crisis or campaigns to step up their giving. Then you have the middle third: the people who give when they’re asked to give, not always the amount that you’d hoped for, but people who can be prodded. Then you have your bottom third, your C list: the people who never get back to you or rarely respond, and are terrible donors relative to their capacity.

I was quick to qualify. Those thirds are malleable, moving targets. Someone in your top third today can very easily drop to the bottom third, and someone who has never given might finally see the light and begin writing checks and taking your calls. You just never know when they’ll convert, nor will you necessarily be able to predict why. So you have to get out there, see as many people as you can, and solicit as much as possible at all three tiers of your prospect pool. The gritty work will pay off.

And, seriously, don’t take rejection personally. Remember: you are not responsible for the outcome. You are responsible only for making the best possible case to the donor. Once you’ve made the solicitation, you don’t control the situation.

**Staffing**

If you’re the executive director of development, take heed: you need staff members. It’s so hard to stomach the initial startup cost of paying another staff member, but believe me, in fundraising, staff members are a wise investment. *You leave money on the table for every aspect of the gift cycle that you*