

Is your agency ready for a fundraising campaign?

By: Gary Bernstein

To conduct a successful capital or endowment campaign, you must inspire your constituents. Your project must be visionary. It must make sense and be consistent with your mission and strategic plan. It must be well thought out, well researched, well focused and well presented.

Most important, it must motivate action as it secures people's emotional, then financial, investment.

Especially in this economic climate, do not hit the panic button. It's a challenge and can sometimes be overwhelming. But it's also quite exciting to create a vision and a dream, and then rally your community to make it a reality. It truly is an opportunity of a lifetime.

It all begins with good planning -an insightful, honest assessment of potential, possibilities, people and pitfalls.

The first task is to understand the underlying principle for the appeal and capture that within a simple yet thorough document. Fundraisers call this the case for support or case statement. It tells the prospective donor how your organization will use the funds and who will benefit.

Creating the case is top priority, and in many ways, similar to the group effort involved in developing your agency's strategic plan. Board members and community leaders are more likely to support a plan they helped create. Include the features and costs of the project, but focus on the benefits. Make an appeal to the heart as you stress why every gift will matter.

Emotion and passion lead to commitment. Until the donors believe in your agency's mission, the written case statement has little value. The case for support must become part of your donor's belief system. Donors and supporters will give freely of their time and talent when they understand and embrace your cause.

This is most critical for those prospects your team will identify, cultivate and solicit for leadership and major gifts: those six, seven or eight-figure expressions of support that will make or break your campaign. Back up your case with current statistics that show how the current economic situation is affecting your programs as you meet increased needs.

Major-gift fund raising is the most cost-effective, resource-development strategy. A major-gift initiative gives your agency an opportunity to sell the movers and shakers on your programs and services. The appeal will be personal; the case for support will reinforce your project's viability and value to the community.

The decision to conduct a campaign is not an easy one. Many factors contribute to success or failure. You can best identify and measure them - as well as build constituent interest and support - by conducting a pre-campaign assessment. Here is a checklist of eight important tasks:

1. Review all issues related to board development. Seek people with influence and affluence. Work to ensure the agency is well positioned in the philanthropic community. Your campaign leadership will most likely be your current leaders of the organization. Those who have been charitable in the past might also be quite generous in the future. Now is the time for board and campaign leadership to stand up and be counted. Make your board members part of the solution, inform them, involve them, and give them important tasks to do.
2. At every step involve as many volunteers and potential supporters as possible. If you find any key people or constituencies who you have neglected, brief them and make every effort to get them involved. Prepare written materials describing the project. Stress these benefits to the agency and community.
3. Prepare a number of project budgets. Consider capital, endowment and the annual operating needs. Capital campaigns are characterized by visionary projects and large financial goals. The funds are to be attained during a multiyear pledge period. Because of the economy, be prepared to offer donors longer pledge periods.
4. Form a resource development committee to help shape the agency's comprehensive fundraising strategy. Your committee might want to seek advice from outside counsel to formulate a professional campaign plan. Outside counsel helps reduce risk, ensures staff and campaign leadership stay on course, and maximizes your fundraising potential.
5. Plan your solicitation strategy. You will secure your leadership contributions first from those closest to the organization capable of making pace-setting investments. You will approach prospects with more modest means after you have secured lead gifts. Finally, there is a public phase (typically after you have secured commitments for at least half the total) when you approach the larger base of supporters.
6. Develop a core of knowledgeable people who will help your agency avoid common mistakes in preparing for a capital campaign. These key people should help remind other volunteers to focus on leadership gifts. This committee -sometimes

called a campaign cabinet - will remind others to seek support from individuals as well as foundations and corporations. They also should remind the volunteers to focus on personal contact, not mail, phone or special events.

7. Evaluate, and, if necessary, strengthen your record-keeping functions and fundraising software systems. Accurate and complete records are critical for a successful campaign project.

8. Improve communications and keep communications open inside and outside your agency. Inform donors about how the changes in the economy are affecting you and those you serve. Consider weekly e-mail blasts or other communication techniques.

When you have addressed these eight tasks and prerequisites, and answered all of the questions, you will be poised for a successful campaign. You now are equipped with the necessary and basic information that will provide a road map for victory.

Gary Bernstein currently serves as President of Bernstein Group & Associates, LLC, lending his support to a variety of nonprofit organizations nationwide. Gary Bernstein has proudly authored a textbook titled, *The Principles of Sport Marketing* with Sagamore Publishing and *Nonprofit Sport and Recreation Programs: Principles and Practices of Leadership and Management* by Sentia Publishers. For more information, contact Gary Bernstein at 757-667-0293 or gary@bernsteingroupandassociates.com