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Debunking The Myth of The Philanthropy Fairy

by Frank C. Dickerson, Ph.D. | Claremont Graduate University

I've raised funds since 1969 when I became president of a student organization during my freshman year at The Ohio State University. In my career I helped lead development at an international NGO that is consistently in the top tier of the of The Chronicle of Philanthropy list of nonprofits. That organization now raises \$750 million annually—90% of that from individuals. But I learned most of what I know about fund raising through oral tradition, occasional seminars, trial and error, and a few newsletters.

If fundraising is to evolve from occupation to profession, it must mark its path better. It must formalize the way fundraisers learn by codifying validated theory in a body of literature. Failure to teach a fundraiser how to use language effectively is like failing to teach an architect how to choose the right material for a load-bearing structure.

A Latin legal phrase puts it well: Fundraising is the nonprofit sector's *conditio sine qua non* (the condition without which not). Without effective writing, no money is raised, no programs are funded, and nothing else really matters.

This view is consistent with the undemocratic priority Peter Drucker placed on two of the eight key result areas that he believed were “the same for all businesses, for all businesses depend on the same factors for their survival,” including human organization, financial resources, social responsibility, and profits.

What is the most important skill in the nonprofit sector?

But among these eight factors, Drucker asserted, “marketing and innovation are the foundation areas in objective setting. It is in these two areas that a business obtains its results. In all other objective areas the purpose of doing is to make possible the attainment of the objectives in the areas of marketing and innovation.”

The mixture of tasks that fundraising depends on is similar to the commercial sector's marketing mix. Top among these tasks is the use of language to shape a fundraising message. As a company's words about a product are its key to winning a customer, what a fundraiser writes is a nonprofit's key to winning a donor.

However, the 300-plus higher education programs that offer courses on nonprofit management teach just about everything but the raising of money. And when they do touch on fundraising, they tend to focus on technique and ignore the underlying structure of the language upon which technique depends.

Professional associations are no better. While they offer plenty of fundraising training, they almost never discuss the underlying language that shapes the fundraising message their training equips practitioners to deliver.

You'd think higher education and association leaders believe some benevolent philanthropy fairy just tosses magic dust, waves her wand, and poof—perfect messages and money materialize. But there is no wand, no magic dust, no fairy . . . only real people who raise money the old-fashioned way: They ask for it.

Established professions develop a base of literature to preserve and transmit to their practitioners, both the theory base and the skill sets fundamental to what they do (a surgeon knowing why and where to cut, a CPA knowing what and how to account). Fundraisers must be taught why some language works and other language fails to motivate donors to give if it is to evolve from occupation to profession.

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