

## Maria Gitin Torres, Ask the Expert: Fundraising in tough times

Confronted with drastic reductions in government funding, stock market fluctuations and recession, it is natural to react with reduced expectations and feelings of hopelessness. Feelings are contagious.

There are people and places you like because they inspire you: A visit to a favorite aunt, a walk on the beach. Other activities make you anxious: Perhaps balancing your checkbook or getting an X-ray.

Nonprofit organizations are collections of people committed to a cause and bonded together by belief in their mission. It is no accident that educational and religious organizations raise more money than any other type of nonprofit. They market a product that everyone wants: Hope.

During this period of economic uncertainty, some nonprofits are dropping their fund development staff. Some are focusing exclusively on high net worth individuals, hoping they are immune from the downturn.

Based on 20 years experience, conversations with colleagues and current reading in philanthropy journals, here is some advice based on the principles of Don Miguel Ruiz, author of "The Four Agreements: A Practical Guide to Personal Freedom," a Toltec wisdom book published in 2000.

- **Be impeccable with your word.** Donors are motivated by results, not organizational needs. It is tempting to exaggerate results or to take sole credit for activities that are collaborative. Fundraising works best when you are completely honest.

Disclose the amount of overhead that is included in your budget. When you distribute a list of things a contribution will do or buy, don't underestimate or overestimate the cost of each giving opportunity.

- **Don't take anything personally, but always treat your donors as individuals.** The stock market did not decline just to hurt your group's chance of success. Historically, mid-level and top-tier donors continue to give during recessions at approximately the same amounts to organizations where they have an established relationship. While cultivating new donor relationships, don't forget to appreciate the ones you already have. All relationships require thoughtful attention. Neglect of regular donors will take a toll.

Foundations are people, too. While there may be less grant money to go around, maintaining a positive, non-demanding relationship with your program officer will go a long way toward seeing that your proposal gets a favorable review.

- **Don't make assumptions.** A pet peeve of many donors is that organizations make assumptions, such as: "We are asking you to increase your gift this year because you are among the fortunate," "we who are lucky enough to have had great parents" and "all families of immigrants feel the same obligation to sacrifice."

Unless you have a highly sophisticated database with excellent data mining skills, you know only a few things about your donors. The most important is that they give because they believe in your mission. Always appreciate them for what they have given or are about to give and then link your organization's work to their core values. Connect their hopes with your results. Money is a vehicle for turning their hopes into reality. Offer your donors a wide range of options including smaller monthly contributions through payroll deductions and online credit card gifts. Don't be afraid to promote special sponsorship opportunities at higher levels.

- **Always do your best.** If you are a board officer or management staff, it can be tiring to always need to be the cheerleader. Some organizations are so understaffed that they fall into a victim mentality. There is always too much need, not enough resources. If this is the case, maybe it is time to trim your sails. Manage size appropriately. Offer what you can really deliver and deliver well.

If cutbacks are necessary, it is far better for morale to cut entire programs and positions and to reward those who stay rather than "spread the pain" with cross-the-board reductions. Let your donors know that quality staff and a good working environment with benefits are essential to delivering top quality services. Don't apologize for wanting the best for the people inside your organization and for those you serve.

Honesty and hope coupled with realistic plans are a winning formula for attracting and retaining funders with the added benefit of making you feel more hopeful, too.

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