



Turning the Direct Ask INTO GOLD

It may take more time, and a bit of courage, but it's the best way to garner funds.

By Sue Knaup



Few nonprofit leaders jump for joy when given the opportunity to make a direct ask of a potential donor. If your gut wrenches with the very thought of asking for a donation, don't worry. You're not alone. There must be something in our DNA that tells us we're not allowed to ask for help from anyone.

Here's how you address that gut twist.

The Three Secrets

First, keep in mind that by asking potential donors for a donation, you're offering them a chance to contribute to their community. That might sound hokey, but give this a chance. Between their jobs, their families, and not enough rest, most people have every second of their lives scheduled. They don't have time to show up at city council meetings or represent issues to officials. When they hear your offer to give, they discover their opportunity to make a real impact because your organization is in the position to make that change happen. So, first step, change your mindset from asking for help to offering donors an opportunity to help their community.

Following that is one of the most important fundraising tips: People give to people. So when you're wrestling with that first step, don't let yourself yield to the call to send out

a mass e-mail or post a plea on your Web site instead. These messages will add to the substance of your fundraising efforts, but they won't replace the direct ask.

By connecting directly with individuals, you're bringing them the life and passion of your organization, which will last far beyond your meeting. Your passion for your work will kindle their desire to support your organization. And as you build their trust with this ask, know that trust in you equates to trust in your organization.

Now here's the kicker, the one we all forget when we're talking ourselves out of picking up the phone and making the call: They can't say "yes" unless you ask!

The Effectiveness Factor

Here are more reasons the direct ask is the most effective way to raise funds:

- There's no need for expensive printing—the donor will rely on you for answers.
- Donations and pledges can be given immediately.
- Donor funds can be used where the organization needs them most.
- Happy donors give year after year.

Preparing for the Ask

Before reaching out to a prospect, be sure your organization is currently doing successful work in the

donor's interest area. If you're not sure what the prospect's interests are, find out during your initial call to set up a meeting.

Do a little research to find out what level of contribution the prospect has given to your organization and others in the past—not just the last few years, but way back. You might find a major donor gave \$1,000 to your organization nine years ago and never gave again. The most common reason donors stop giving is because no one asked them to give again.

Before you pick up the phone to ask to meet with the prospect, have all the necessary information in front of you. If you're raising funds for an urgent campaign, know the campaign message by heart, and have the complete campaign plan at your fingertips (see "Campaign Planning" under "Resources" at One Street.org). If you're raising funds for this year's budget, have bullet points in front of you regarding your organization's work plan and successes this year. Practice describing why you contribute your time and money to your organization so you can demonstrate your own commitment.

Be sure your organization is doing work in the donor's interest area.

Reveal Your Organization through a Child's Eyes

Ask children to draw pictures showing what your organization means to them. The children of your volunteers and other supporters are ideal, but you can also ask a teacher to have her class do the drawings, after explaining what your organization does for the community.

You can use the children's art work on notecards, on the front of invitations to your events, and in a myriad of other ways. Reward the children whose drawings you use with gift certificates or other treats. For more creative ideas, see "Special Events Galore!" (www.stevensoninc.com).

Host a Day of Scrapbooking

People's growing desire to create lasting memories makes scrapbooking an ideal fundraiser. Many nonprofits have had success by organizing daylong events, including lunch, refreshments, a flat workspace, and the chance to pool the use of expensive scrapbooking equipment. Managers of craft and scrapbooking stores may be eager to supply your guests with sample packs, gift cards, and discount coupons for lessons and supplies. They may also be willing to give brief workshops or lessons. Donated door prizes might include luxurious albums, high-end scissors, or other scrapbooking tools. Encourage scrapbookers to donate their own leftover items like stickers, ribbons, and colored paper for a free-for-all table.

Maximize Auction Mileage

Next time you plan a fundraising auction, give people a chance to see and touch items before the event begins. Let them try on jewelry and play with puppies to be auctioned off. If possible, create a tradition by offering the same item every year. For example, board members may donate their vacation home for a week or cook their signature dinner for guests each year. Have someone take pictures or videos of people enjoying this donation, and show the pictures at next year's auction.

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After the Ask

Don't say a word. This is perhaps the most critical tip of all. After you've made the ask, you must give the prospective donor some time and space to think. Don't make the mistake of assuming their silence means they're upset. It simply means that you've asked them for a lot of money and they need to run some figures before they can answer. Let them be the next to speak.

If they agree, show your gratitude, and commit to personally keeping them updated on your organization's progress—note this in your calendar and make sure it gets done.

They might ask to give at a lower level. This is great because you'll know you didn't ask for too little. Thank them and commit to keeping them updated.

They may write a check right there and then. If not, let them know that you or one of the organization's staff will send them a letter requesting their pledge and noting some of the details from the meeting for their records.

Demonstrate your own commitment.

They might ask for more specifics in writing before they commit. This is fine, too, because it isn't a "no." Ask them what specific information they'd like to see, and take detailed notes. Then, make sure you send the information to them as soon as possible, starting your letter with your gratitude to them for meeting with you.

They might say no. That's okay. Remember, you'll never get a "yes" unless you ask, and that always comes with some "no's." Be very gracious, thank them for their time, and make sure to offer another way they can contribute—perhaps join a committee, become a member, or simply spread the word to their friends. They'll be feeling far worse than you, so make sure to ease their mind about their decision. If they aren't a donor today, they can still become one in the future.

Send a handwritten thank-you note by the next day no matter what

their answer was, simply thanking them for the meeting. This is separate from any additional written details they may have requested.

After You Receive the Donation

Immediately send a professional thank-you letter they can use for their tax deduction records. This letter will help build your relationship. Think of it and your future communications as an unbroken thread that allows the donor the opportunity to continue to support your organization.

If yours is a membership organization, make the donor a member with all benefits and communications. Show appreciation for their donation in your newsletter, other materials, and on your Web site where appropriate. Make certain they receive all advocacy alerts and events notices.

Such accolades and communications add to the substance of your relationship with this donor. But remember, these gestures don't replace personal connection. Always make room in your schedule for direct contact with your donors, even if it's just a personalized update on their favorite programs. Such updates show you value donors as partners without asking them too often for donations. If you have lots of contributors, find a gift level that makes sense for setting special donors apart for your direct communication efforts.

Look for ways to involve your donors, such as asking for their advice or personally inviting them to an event. Once you get the knack for the direct ask, you'll find you enjoy connecting with these folks because they share your passion and appreciate you showing them how to help.

And remember: Ask them again next year. If you don't, they'll be disappointed, maybe even insulted. Donors want to give—make sure you give them that opportunity by asking. ■

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