



# Fruitful Ideas for Getting Back to Successful Fundraising

**Now's the time to energize your fundraising tactics.**

There's a lot of ground to make up after the hiatus caused by the pandemic. During COVID's onslaught, you had no choice but to reconfigure your strategies in creative ways. Although digital and virtual innovations helped, time-honored face-to-face cultivation remains the preferred, proven approach. The best methods meld new with traditional methods.

Here are key ideas to explore as you vitalize your fundraising efforts.

## **Build relationships, not just financial supporters**

Focusing on financial goals –dollars raised – can unwittingly convert people into numbers. As staff are urged to keep an eye on the prize, the humanness of your supporters can slip away. That's the greatest mistake you can make.

As a counter-measure, take a look at your promotional messages. Be sure they're focused on the personal value of supporters rather than financial goals. Donors want to know you see them as individuals, not metrics.

## **It is all about donors' agendas**

It's easy to become so engrossed in what an organization wants to achieve that leaders lose sight of the integral role

of donors. Unfortunately, in many cases, donors become a means to an end rather than important stakeholders.

Consider a nonprofit zoo that aspires to build a gorilla exhibit. Plans are set for a fundraising campaign. Before long, development staff are knocking on prospects' doors, rushing to achieve the campaign goal. Inevitably some prospects will have no interest in gorillas. Maybe they're more interested in raptors. Nonetheless, they receive a broadly-disseminated pitch focused on gorillas. Is there a better way to chase off promising donors than to solicit them for something they don't care about?

Gifts from donors should reflect their passions – not solely the campaign target du jour. By engaging donors around the issues that resonate most deeply for them, you earn their respect and create long-lasting relationships. Further, engaged donors talk with their friends about the project they're helping to fund. Nothing stimulates a campaign better than excited donors who connect new donors to the organization.

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## Say “thank you” more often

Caught up in day-to-day operations, it’s easy for nonprofit leaders to neglect those who make their organizations’ efforts financially possible. Benign neglect is cumulative.

When executives forget to say “thank you” often enough, it’s not surprising that some of the most fervent supporters drift away. Remember to check with your staff who nurture donor relations. Ask them which supporters could use a dose of kind attention, love, and a sweet bouquet of “thank you.”

Let your colleagues know that you want to be informed about any supporter needing attention or celebrating a milestone. Surprise these friends with a gift of your time and attention. Say “thank you” simply for their friendship – not because of the dollars they gave or might give.

Taking time to build genuine friendships with donors shows that they’re not means to an end but are the end in themselves. During the COVID downturn, some organizations kept in touch with all their donors – even the ones who couldn’t give during that time. Those are the organizations that will receive gifts when the donors are once again able.

## Lasting relationships aren’t built on a meal or two

Most nonprofit leaders can count on one hand the number of six-figure gifts they’ve corralled simply by taking a prospect to a meal. Like a first date, the first meal is where the prospect will decide whether the organization warrants a second meeting. Yet, many leaders seem to think that all meals lead to donation deals.

A meal, no matter how superlative, is at best a first introduction and a hint of what might come. Durable relationships take time to nurture.

## Be certain you have the facts

Have all pertinent facts before approaching prospects and prior donors. Do your research before moving forward.

Rely on staff to create an accurate profile using reliable sources. But assure them you’d rather hear bad news before you approach someone about a major gift than to learn after the fact that the expected wealth isn’t there.

Be cautious about relying on just one or two sources. Doing so is a perfect set-up for misreading the situation.

Consider the following example. A donor told a nonprofit leader about a farmer who was wealthy beyond imagination and prepared to make a seven-figure gift. Fortunately, the development leader’s assistant knew the farmer’s



community quite well and by gentle probing discovered that the actual wealth was held by a family foundation. The farmer wanted to be supportive, but she had a fiduciary duty to the foundation. The foundation held assets for a dozen family members, all of whom had different ideas about how to distribute the funds. Getting the facts beforehand aligned expectations while preventing a waste of time. It also helped the organization make a successful plan for how to solicit funds from the family foundation.

## Make room on your calendar

Think your schedule is really tight and that you have more people to meet than you have time for? Think again. Your busy schedule doesn’t matter to the potential donor. And why would you want to create a scheduling obstacle for those with the capacity to make gifts?

If your schedule is that busy, consider reducing meetings to 30 or 15 minutes. Do everything possible to make compromises in your schedule so that important meetings occur on a timely basis. If you’re blessed with assistants, ask them to make sure you’re not meeting for the sake of meeting. Ensure that your meetings have pre-defined agendas, goals, and time limits.

## Don’t overlook colleagues

Capitalize on staff. Reach out for their help and feedback. They’re overflowing with good ideas on how to nurture donors. All you need to do is ask.

Mentorship from under-30 staff can transform your approach to donors. They’re social-media experts and can use those skills to great benefit. They can also share innovative ways to forge bonds. Ask for their input and follow up on their suggestions. Make sure they know you welcome their insights.

**“Benign neglect is cumulative.”**

**“Say “thank you” simply for their friendship.”**

## Listen

There's a good reason that we have two ears and one tongue as the saying goes: We must listen twice as much as we speak.

In our age of digital chatter, we're bombarded by messages and many are simply noise. Start your day by vowing to listen before you speak. Think of the great women and men you've known. Did they fill up the airspace with chatter? Or were they comfortable with pauses, long or short, and silence? Let donors revel in the comfort of a confident, respectful leader who doesn't need to have the first say – or the last. Remember that there are at least two sides to every story. Hear others out before acting. Show restraint. Let others talk it out till they're ready to hear what you have to say. By taking time to hear all sides, you're prepared to make the best decisions.

## Look ahead with a positive mind

Focus on “constructive” rather than “critical” ideas. Keep your attitude optimistic. That's not to say that you should sugarcoat bad news or withhold unwanted information. To the contrary, it's vital to be honest and forthright about what's happening. But when you have to deliver a negative message, end with something uplifting.

Let people know how they can make the bad situation better. Finish your message in a way that makes them eager to



tackle whatever's wrong and take the steps that will make things right.

Donors want to invest in something positive and forward-looking. They don't want you to dwell on the negative. They respond best to positive, inspiring calls to action.

## Paint on a new canvas

This post-pandemic period is challenging. Coming off a resource-constrained drought, many organizations are stretched to the limit. But we all have a new canvas on which we can paint a picture of our future that's fruitful, bountiful, and sustainable. Start honing that future today. **S**

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