

Four Things that Aren't Fundraising

Focusing on what fundraising *isn't* will help you be more donor-centered – and raise more money.

By Jeff Brooks

1. Educating Isn't Fundraising

When you try to educate people into giving, they don't give. And they don't become more educated.

There's a simple reason why: Most people, most of the time, have no interest in becoming more educated. You're wasting your time, and theirs, if you try to hammer into them something they don't care about.

Here's an example of fundraising that tries to educate donors into giving:

You might not know this, but the typical homeless person in our area is not the bearded elderly man who just needs a hot meal. Forget that stereotype! Less than 10% of our clients are over the age of sixty.

Far more typical is the young mother with a couple of children in tow. They don't just need meals. They need holistic services to help them overcome the root causes of the problems that landed them on the street.

Suppose your lecture gets through and succeeds in changing someone's view about who is homeless and what we need to do about it. Congratulations. But you still don't have a donation.

People give for emotional reasons, not because of facts they accumulate. That's why you raise a lot more money by writing like this:

Life has been hard on Karl. He served in the first Gulf War, and he's never quite come home from the front lines. He lives under one end of the 13th Street Bridge. He's been there a few years – Karl doesn't know how long.

Karl's rugged face is covered with scars. He always has new injuries. It's not from the war. Karl gets mugged every few weeks. Not because anyone would think he has money, but because he looks like he won't fight back. Which he doesn't.

This passage isn't about homelessness. It's about Karl.

2. Bragging Isn't Fundraising

It's hard to build a relationship when you make the conversation all about yourself.

Everyone knows this. Yet many organizations approach fundraising just that way. It doesn't work in fundraising any better than in other aspects of life.

The temptation to brag is strong. After all, you need to show donors your organization is worth their consideration. That their gifts will have impact. But the trick is to show donors the information they need, without the chest-thumping.

You might feel tempted to say something like this:

We've been working on Skid Row since 1932, longer than any other social service provider. We've built state-of-the-art facilities, and our staff are the best-trained and most-advanced professionals in the community, bar none!

Don't do that! It's bragging. Instead, turn those facts around so they're about the donor's impact:

People like you have been helping the lost and hurting of Skid Row through us since 1932. Thanks to generous friends like you, our new building is roomy and efficient – specifically designed to help as many people as possible. We'll stretch every dollar you give so you help the greatest number of people in the most life-transforming way.

When you tell the story this way, you're in the donor's context, not yours.

3. Journalism Isn't Fundraising

Journalism is a good thing. But journalism isn't good fundraising. If you focus on the the five Ws of journalism (Who, What, Where, Why, and When, plus How) you'll miss the most important element of the story: *the donor*.

Here's how you might tell the story of a local homeless man when you use the framework of journalism:

Frank Gorman [WHO] spent last Christmas [WHAT & WHEN] under the 15th Avenue Bridge [WHERE]. It was his only option. He'd spent his last dollars buying gifts for the two young daughters he hadn't seen in more than two years [WHY].

That might be the way the local paper would tell the story. But it's not about the reader.

Here's the same story, told in a donor-focused way:

Frank is a lot like you. He loves his kids, and like you, he'd do almost anything to make them happy. But last Christmas, Frank had to make a bigger sacrifice than most parents . . .

The values of good journalism can kill your fundraising: Journalism is objective. It avoids even the appearance of



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slanting the facts to support a point of view. That's the right way to report the news.


Objectivity isn't appropriate in our field. When you become a fundraiser, you take sides, you're wildly biased. Your cause is too important for you to keep the distance of journalistic objectivity.

4. Being Funny Isn't Fundraising

There's a cultural gap between you and your donors. Actually, there are several gaps:

- You're an insider at your organization. The donor isn't.
- No matter how well informed your donor may be, you know *a lot* more about your cause.
- You are younger. And humor-wise, that's about as uncrossable a chasm as there is. If you don't believe me, try telling your grandmother a joke.

There's a more fundamental problem with humor that makes it bad for fundraising – even if your donors somehow get the joke. The psychological foundation of most humor is a sense of superiority. You're laughing *at* something or someone. This sense of superiority is about as far from the emotion that leads to charity as you can get.

When you use humor in your fundraising, you make empathy and kindness difficult. Being funny while fundraising is like belting out punk rock while soothing a baby to sleep. You could be good at both. But not at the same time. 

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What Good Fundraising Is

Make your fundraising appeals sparkle with these ideas from NonprofitWorld.org:

How to Add an Emotional Hook to Your Fundraising Letters (Vol. 37, No. 1)

What Are the Three Most Boring Words in Fundraising Appeals? (Vol. 36, No. 2)

Telling the Story: Exploring Clients' Lives (Vol. 17, No. 1)

Three Simple Questions that Get Donors to Give (Vol. 35, No. 2)

Top Can't-Miss Resources for Nonprofits (Vol. 34, No. 3)

How to Keep from Losing Donors: A Self-Assessment (Vol. 35, No. 1)

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