

Fundraising Association-style Simple. Strategic. Successful.

All associations have two areas of fundraising in common: membership and sponsorship. These methods of generating funds continue to be the backbone of supporting the world of associations to the tune of +/- 40% of revenue. Forward thinking associations have been building other revenue sources such as Special Appeals for targeted programs, Capital Campaigns and Planned Giving.

With the exception of those associations that require members to join (e.g. Bar and CPA Associations, for example) memberships are under siege not only from cost cutting but from mergers and acquisitions and ceasing operations all together. Sponsorships are likewise under the gun. The big budget sucking sound has been heard around the world and the impact is significant.

If you have not already, now is the time to review revenue producing plans with a critical eye. Of those who have provided memberships, sponsorships and other forms of revenue, how does each feel about your value-benefit proposition? Is it enough to continue or even increase support? Do those who have provided sponsorship feel that it has helped to grow their business? Have you worked to help those who sponsor be more visible to your membership (other than signs posted or credit given in publications)?

And critical to your success: does your strategic plan now include more advanced means of attracting revenue?

Answering these questions may force associations to start thinking of themselves less like a brotherhood of like-employed professionals and more like a true fundraising organization. Less club, more foundation.

First things first: no NPO worth its salt would approach a donor, write a case, or launch a campaign without first creating a strategic plan based upon its vision for the future. Everything else flows from that strategic vision. So, too, must associations let the vision guide how they entice and value membership, how they bring real worth back to sponsorship and how they seek out new ways to bring in revenue.

The mantra in fundraising these days is "it's all about the donor." In the case of associations, the translation becomes "it's all about the members." Everything you do is in support of your members so, not only should the projects you hope to fund directly benefit the members, but every interaction your members have with YOU should communicate this fact. Imagine a charity whose donors and beneficiaries were one and the same and the value of impassioned stewardship pops into sharp relief. I talk with members and sponsors of associations frequently. Those who are deeply involved will take bold stands to stay that way. The more distance from involvement, the more fragile the relationship.

As I researched this article, I visited no fewer than 20 association websites. Fewer than half had an easily accessible Membership area and half of those made it clear what membership entailed,

how much it cost, and what benefits I'd receive. In short, it seems that many organizations that rely on membership assume members or potential members will work hard to find information to join or to get involved in other ways.

Membership will suffer when members do not feel valued. The Sponsor relationship is much the same. Our company has been a long time sponsor of the Council for the Advancement of Secondary Education. Recently, the District III group invited me to speak at a full-day session. The day sold out because of the work the volunteers did to turn out a great group. The night before the presentation, CASE organized a dinner with the leadership of the regional day. They expressed their appreciation by personal attention and exposure to one market we want. This is an excellent example of stewardship of a member/sponsor.

So, what's the key to bolstering your go-to revenue sources? Stewardship. In the same way that traditional NPOs steward their donors, for associations to demonstrate how much they value their membership, they must offer:

- **Exclusivity.** Give them resources and support they can find nowhere else on-line or live. Teasing studies or resources to non-members is a great way to entice new members and make your paying membership feel like they are getting something of real value.
- **Clout.** A few big names will go a long way toward building your organization's credibility and "cool factor." Find a vocal supporter and big gun in your ranks and make her your spokesperson! Just as one big-shot board member will draw other high-value board members to your fold, start building your membership and enticing sponsors with people with whom they want to be associated.
- **Stay in touch.** A non-profit would never write one appeal letter to its donors each year and expect the relationship to remain intact. Good stewardship means keeping those close to you informed, educated, and feeling loved. You can do this by emailing interesting tips, sending them newsletters with helpful information and (perhaps more importantly) stories and pictures of them, and never letting them go more than a few months without a friendly touch from you - without asking for more money. Train your staff to be the friend of members. Do it voice to voice or face to face whenever possible.
- **Opportunities for personal advancement.** Part of the benefit of joining an association is having the chance to enhance one's skills and increase one's network. Make sure to give your members the opportunity to do both. Offer online training, extend invitations to join online networks (e.g. set up a listserv or message board similar to LinkedIn). The hard work is in setting up venues for members to get to know each other but, over time, these social networks grow to have a life—useful and vibrant—of their own.
- **Recognition.** This one seems simple but when someone gives—or volunteers—recognize them. Tie recognition to exclusivity and clout through a society and you've created a go-to group of devoted members/donors, surrounded by those they respect thus spurring them on to give year after year!
- **Customization.** Part of being a good steward is actually communicating with your members and getting to know them on a personal basis. For very large associations, this may seem challenging but electronic surveys and fastidiously updated databases

can help even huge groups get a handle on what each member likes and wants. In her terrific book, *The Competition Within*, Rebecca Rolfes says, “Call me picky or a slower study than I like to think, but the current world, the one without borders or walls, is made for people like me. I can get exactly, and I mean *exactly*, what I want—not what you have to sell. I can sit here or in Timbuktu, never interact with anyone, and have all my needs met—lonely and kind of sad, but possible. I want a membership made for me alone.”

- **Opportunities to give.** Think about forming a Foundation for your association. This group focuses only on additional contributed income. Planned Giving, charitable gifts to support your outreach, scholarships and more. This is a sister organization and is traditionally a 501(c)(3). This allows you to get more people involved.

Together, these elements will help any association provide a better experience for everyone with whom they come in contact and, in so doing, they increase their potential for fundraising success.

Consider: In traditional non-profit fundraising, donors lead by example. A leadership gift in the quiet phase of a campaign spurs more gifts in the community phase because people see that progress is being made but also because a leader they respect has set the bar. Likewise for associations, one gift (or sponsorship) by a visible champion will influence others to give.

Consider: A loyal member pays his dues every year after you send one reminder. But this year, you also included a picture of him in the newsletter and sent him an email offering him a discount on an online learning program you thought he might like (based on preferences saved in your database.) This year, because of these extra touches, he augments his membership with a corporate sponsorship and gift toward your upcoming capital campaign.

If you’ve worked in non-profit fundraising, a shift to association fundraising may seem like a great leap but, truly, raising money successfully everywhere will always revolve around on two things: building and maintaining relationships. The recipe is simple:

Seek friends out. Get to know them. Learn what they value and then give it to them. Stay in touch. Thank them when they give you a gift.

Repeat.