

Get Them Asking! Emboldening Your Event Solicitors Tip Sheet

Asking for money is a learned skill. Most people have not successfully fundraised before they step onto a board, nor have they studied fundraising in school or done much asking as part of their job. The nonprofit that wants to make the most of its board's fundraising potential has to help its board members figure out how to channel their natural gregariousness and commitment to the cause into confident asking.

That transformation often starts by helping board members overcome their instinctual reticence to play on their personal connections. This calls for instilling a new mindset about what fundraising really entails – and events are a great place to practice. Rather than simply sending board members out with instructions to “come back with the money” and a pat on the back, hands-on training and coaching is much more likely to result in positive outcomes. Think about these four areas to get started:

Build Courage

- Get them planting seeds. Successful, sustainable fundraising is about relationship-building, and not just about dollar signs. Board members should be directed to focus on long term gain, not just short term cash.
- Many board members' worst fears about asking their friends for money can be eased by your emphasizing that their job is to build relationships over time, in a way that respects their friend's and the board member's own values.
- Cultivate, cultivate, cultivate. Make sure board members know that you're not expecting them to make a cold ask: It's socially awkward, and likely won't be successful, especially long-term.
- Represent but don't proselytize. While board members should be prepared to be ambassadors for your mission, they are not required to convert people with no interest in your cause, but rather to help you find the ones who do.
- You are never starting from scratch. Ask about your board member's prior experience in fundraising. What associations, positive or negative, do they have with asking? Address any specific questions on their mind based on those experiences that you can answer in reassuring ways.

Build Skills

- Though the immediate task may be to solicit for a special event, a board member's job goes beyond selling tickets to building interest and enthusiasm for the mission. (That's what will keep donors coming back beyond the event.)
- Board members need to think about “the why” from the donor's perspective. What's going to make the donor feel rewarded for supporting your cause? What is meaningful and compelling to *them*?
- For events that have a silent or live auction component, suggest that board members invite people as their guests and state explicitly that they are hoping they will bid at the event. This is an easier ask (be my guest) and can ultimately result in as much money (or more) as if they'd paid for the ticket themselves.

- All men (and women) are not created equal. Not every board member's contact will be a viable prospect. Weighing factors like the contacts' level of interest in the mission, their connection to the asker, and their ability to give at a higher level, can help board members segment their lists and decide on whom to spend more energy. Help board members create a short but thoughtful list of contacts with high interest and ability and a plan to cultivate them personally.
- Event sponsorships are a major gift ask. Someone who pays for a sponsorship-level contribution must first understand the cause, especially for a smaller organization. Sponsorships, most often, are a personal, not a marketing decision, as most special events just don't offer enough access or visibility to make gala sponsorship a purely business decision.

Build An Ask Progression

- Have your board members think of their first ask as starting a conversation. Don't have them worry about the percentage of people they sell to – the conversation itself (about the event and, most especially, about your nonprofit) is itself the gain. This is a very different idea and will ultimately yield major results.
- Ask people for advice. About your event plans, on management topics, on fundraising pitches – about anything about which they might plausibly have an opinion. Asking for advice honors their expertise and brings them into your circle of insiders.
- Ask for help in identifying likely prospects. "Who else should we be talking to?" is a great opening (or closing) question.
- Solicit in-kind donations (auction items, goody bag inserts, food, etc.) – and invite your in-kind donors as the organization's guests with the hope that if they have fun and get inspired, next year they'll spend money (and maybe encourage others to do so as well).
- Ask for feedback and advice after this year's event is a step on the road to inviting them to join your event committee next year. Once they've told you what you should do differently, it's not far-fetched to ask them to come on board to help you do it!

Build In Success

- Once your board members get started getting gifts based on their personal connections, including those whose causes they have supported in the past, they can then translate their success into asking on behalf of the mission.
- Who are the up-and-comers – whose loyalty is already not set in stone – that you can excite about your cause? Set some board members to identifying the right people to lead your organization towards your event's fundraising success not just now but in years to come.
- Finally, think about the next generation beyond your board. Do you have a special rate for under 35s? We want the next generation of potential long-term donors in the room, so start cultivating them now.