

## What scares fund development professionals the most?

**“Making the ask!”** This simple statement will make the most seasoned major gift officer a bit nervous, that is natural, and we may use this.

Having a heightened sense of awareness is a good thing – being distracted by fear is not. Being prepared is the key to overcome your anxiety. How do we prepare? Do your research. Every donor should have at a minimum their gift history, volunteer actions and donor notes. This data will help you to paint a picture about the donor’s interests and propensity towards your organization.

**Research.** The larger the ask – the more research you should do. Your organization's major gift donors should have files describing their wealth, community involvement and in particular, involvement with your non-profit. It is a good idea to discover what other organizations your prospect supports. Better yet, build a hierarchy detailing where they make their philanthropic investments. It is a very good idea to understand where your prospects philanthropic interests lay.

All of this research will help you understand your prospect and will give you areas of commonality in which you may build upon in your face to face solicitation. Build out four areas which you may shape a conversation prior to your meeting.

Example:

- From media publications discuss – business or community involvement
- From donor notes discuss – family, personal history or interests
- From internal and network connections discuss – community interests
- From gift history and donor notes – discuss your organization. programs

**Conversation.** The one mistake I see the most often is when development staff jump right into the proposal. This makes the conversation seem one sided and that you have no real interest in the prospect. Because people make gifts based on sound investment strategies (your case) but also because “it feels right” you may shoot yourself in the foot by not connecting, personally, with your prospect – etiquette is critical – be polite and ask about the spouse, kids, dog and personal interests. This low-key conversation will put you at ease too.

**Appreciable image.** Bring something that relates to your cause. Pictures from one of your preeminent programs, client response letters, positive outcomes like service results in graph form over a period of time. Anything that is a tangible image of what your organization accomplishes. This object is in effect a gift you have brought to your donor, so they may better understand your mission – and – it is a tangible fall back that will prop up your conversation if it lags.

**Stories.** You can never have enough stories. One of the best tools we have is a passionate story about our programs or about how a donor supported us and generated a positive outcome. Gather three or four stories about your organization’s general mission and specific stories about the program the prospect is interested in. Tell the stories with the office staff so when you go live it will flow off your tongue with ease.

**Proposal.** Bring a proposal. Your proposal may be a 30-page case statement complete with proforma or a one-page picture with bullets giving an overview of the proposed project. The point is that you have a proposal to fall back on if the flow stops. Practice going over the proposal and develop questions you think your prospect may ask.

**Rehearse.** Practice and then practice some more! Go over the research points, stories and proposal with your team, friends and family. Also – rehearse in a mirror. You will pick up inflections and gestures you were not aware of.

**Listen.** Being well armed with your research, tangible imagery, stories and proposal you will have everything you need to feel comfortable in making the ask. Reaching this comfort level affords you the clarity and ease to truly listen to your prospect. Listening is the most important quality in successful fund raising and you will never truly be effective at listening if you are distracted by apprehension and fear.

Listen for your prospects buying signs – “Oh, that is a wonderful program”. Listen and watch you prospect so you may gauge the tempo – If you are moving too slow or too fast they will let you know with their words but also their body language. Be astute – don’t miss it.

The really great fundraisers are great listeners. They read their prospects overcoming objections as they proceed and making the ask at exactly the right time. Here is the thing though; They already know the answer before they make the ask. The donor has already told them yes with their qualifying questions and their body language.

The next step is to fashion the gift in the donor’s best interest. Because you listened you know your donor is 73 and has a large IRA account. They have expressed they will make the \$100,000 gift but it does put a strain on their cash flow. You suggest a partial gift of appreciated stock and a partial gift using the Charitable IRA Rollover. By listening you have solved their problem of strained cash flow. What a great set up for your next solicitation – you have become a problem solver.

**What happens when we give?** Those times when you do something unexpected and kind for a stranger makes you feel good – right? Actually, endorphins are released in your brain that make you feel good every time you do something you consider an act of kindness or charitable. That same physiological occurrence happens when your donor agrees to your gift proposal.

**Why asking is important?** Doing your research, building a powerful case and providing a means for your donor to become involved with their philanthropic investment is an art form. Moreover, **it is about you engineering how your donor may change the world through their gift.** There is nothing but honor and respect in your doing this. Treat it as such with every donor your work with.

Follow these steps and I guarantee you that you will become comfortable in asking your donors to support your organization. And in time you will understand that you are the critical conduit which allows philanthropy to change the face of our world.

**Be quiet!** We have all heard the saying “the next one to speak . . . buys”. Well, it is true but why do we keep on talking when we know we should stop? Because we are nervous and distracted. It is OK to take a deep breath sum up your presentation (you will have this in your preparation materials) ask for your gift and wait for the answer. This silence is sometimes called the “pregnant pause”. We hate the silence – it must be filled with additional points supporting the ask – NO IT DOESN'T! Be quiet, relax and wait.

**Steward.** Immediately steward the gift. Donor remorse is a real thing. It is up to you to make your donor comfortable and happy about their decision. Immediately point out one thing in which their gift will have immediate benefits. What if the answer is no? Steward. Explain that you understand it is a big decision, and then ask why. The best chance to understand a no is when it is given. Go back to your qualifying steps and ask your donor where you made your mistake. Yes, your mistake. Take full responsibility and apologize and move forward with your qualifying and, if appropriate, ask for a resubmission with an altered proposal.

**Final thought.** Be flexible and confident. Go at your donor's pace and follow their cues. If you and your team prepared the perfect case with great graphs and images but your donor says, “I don't really need any paper, just explain to me what it is.” Resist that temptation to show your fantastic work and leave it in your satchel. Understand before you sit down your donor will change your well thought out plan for solicitation. Be calm, be confident and understand you are an expert in this field and happily adjust.

*About the Author. Michael Elias is President of Sustainable Development Solutions and has worked in the Fund Development profession for most of his professional career. He enjoys working with national, regional and local non-profit groups in building out their fund development programs, so they maximize donor relationships and, in turn, acquire long term philanthropic investment.*