

# Individual Giving: Building a Powerful Constituency

by Craig Bowman

## Part I: Changing the Game

If nonprofit organizations are going to get serious about sustainability they need to get serious about asking people for the resources they need to do it. In this section, I hope to change the way you think about fundraising. I am going to convince you that asking people for money is easier than you think and the rewards are always greater than you expect. And I'm going to show you how to do it.

Let me begin by telling you up front that I love asking people for money. You think I'm crazy, but I really do enjoy it. It creates an opportunity to strengthen relationships and build a broader base of support for the critical work being done in our programs.

Throughout this section, I will be talking about raising *money* because that is what most of our programs need. Sometimes, however, we could benefit from other kinds of resources. So when I write about money here, go ahead and think *time*, *talent*, and money (or rather, *treasure*).

I want to help you find new and creative ways to identify and recruit new volunteers; tap into their wisdom, experience, and skill sets for the benefit of your program; and most important, raise all the money your program needs to both survive and thrive!

### Heart + Head = Passion-Raising

I believe that raising money from individuals involves two key elements. The more important of these elements involves the heart (yours and theirs) and speaks to the passion, caring, and commitment that people bring when stepping up to get involved with issues and concerns they care about. The second element involves your head and requires a commitment to creating the right system for managing your resource development program.

Let's start by talking about passion—the true heart side of this equation. Most of us get into nonprofit work because it connects us directly to things we care about. In my workshops, I ask folks to include in their introductions one thing about which they are passionate—personal or professional. What gets them up in the morning and is in their thoughts as they go to sleep at night.

Take a moment and ask yourself, right now. What drives you to push yourself, to exceed expectations, to dream big dreams?

This may be one of the most important lessons I have to offer so I hope you reflected on the question. If you did, I'll bet you're sitting there right now with a big smile on your face. If you were feeling tired, I'll bet you have more energy all of a sudden. You're probably feeling warm, maybe a little anxious, and perhaps even restless. You want to get up and get moving! That's what passion does. It wakes us up. It drives us. It changes us and it changes the world.

I think the measure of a truly spectacular person—a leader in their field, a devoted parent, a gifted child, a teacher, an agent of change—is always reflected best in their connection to their own passion. Our work in the social-profit sector<sup>1</sup> is about making the world a better place for the people who are hurting and suffering now and those who will inhabit the world when we are gone.

Passion fuels our work. It sparks our dreams. It gives us hope. It fires our imaginations. Passion gives us the courage to do, to give, and to share. Forget the language of raising funds, talk about raising passion! The money will come. The volunteers and their time and their wisdom will come. The resources you need will come when you are in the business of raising the passions of the people connected to your work.

As for the second element—the head part of the equation—you need to be able to identify these connected people (your prospects) and track their passion and their giving. You'll want to be able to express gratitude to these individuals regularly so you'll need to manage their contact information. And you'll want to learn and remember why and how they got connected so you can build and strengthen these relationships over time. You'll need some sort of system. It does not have to be complicated or expensive. You can start simple and small and the system can change, and adapt, and expand as the passion for your work grows. (I'll offer you some tools for this part of the work later in this section.)

This “system” piece often causes organizations so much anxiety that any effort to begin building a constituency of individuals gets sidetracked by fears of not being ready. Don't be afraid to talk to the people who care about your work; and don't be afraid to ask them for help. They don't need your system (or you) to be perfect. They do need to know that their resources will be put to good use and that the organization is well-managed. More important, though, they need to see your passion and they need you to help unlock their own.

*1 I will use social-profit, rather than non-profit, throughout this piece to emphasize the importance of our sector. Our work actively creates benefits for society, it generates a new kind of profit, and it adds value. This language better captures the work that we do and it often resonates well with individual donors.*

## Part II: Shifting the Paradigm

When I'm teaching people how to raise money from individuals, I spend a lot of time proving to participants that it is worth the effort to shift their thinking when it comes to raising money. I'm going to do the same here and I ask that you really spend some time thinking about what you are going to read. Suspend your disbelief for a few minutes and imagine that what I am going to share with you might actually be true!

Now if you were with me in a workshop, I would begin by asking you if you know where the money that funds your program actually comes from—how it breaks down by source or stream. Do you know?

This is information that you need to have regardless of your role in the organization. If you don't have the answers, the next time you're in the office, ask someone who does. Why is this breakdown important? Where the money comes from usually affects how the program has developed, how it operates, and how decisions get made, all of which may affect sustainability.

Knowing where your money comes from *now* is a key to helping you make better-informed decisions about fundraising strategy in the future. Specifically, the percentages I will discuss are important indicators of your potential for creating a diversified—and therefore more sustainable—resource base.

For most organizations, the percentages from private sector sources are heavily skewed in favor of corporate and foundation dollars<sup>2</sup>. Assuming this is true of your organization as well, let's get started by taking a few minutes to help you understand how you measure up against actual giving statistics in the United States.

### Paradigm Shift One: Show me the money

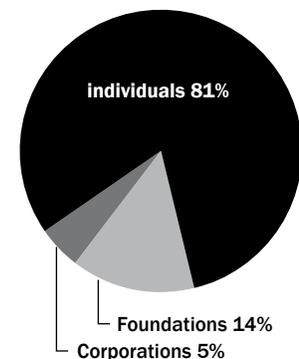
If you're like most people, you'll be surprised at just how much private money is donated to charitable organizations (including religious institutions) on an annual basis. This is money that comes from individuals, foundations, and corporations. It does not include government money.

There are many great sources for these data, but I prefer the analyses offered by two organizations, Independent Sector (<http://www.independentsector.org>) and the Giving USA Foundation of the American Association of Fundraising Counsel (<http://www.aafc.org>).

According to the Giving USA Foundation, Americans gave just over \$290 billion dollars to charitable causes in 2010. This is a lot of money!

Now that we know just how much money is out there for us to tap into, we need to know who's giving it:

### Who Gives 2010?



<sup>2</sup> Source: Giving USA, a publication of Giving USA Foundation™, researched and written by the Center on Philanthropy at Indiana University. <http://www.aafc.org/gusa/>

The primary sources of charitable contributions can be broken down into three primary streams: corporate, foundation, and individual (including planned after-death) giving.

In 2010, corporate giving only amounted to about 5 percent of the \$290 billion total. Foundation giving was about 14 percent in the same year. Individuals accounted for the rest of the contributions, a whopping \$234 billion, or 81 percent of total giving!

A few other interesting statistics about individuals and giving (from Independent Sector's Web site):

- Nearly nine out of 10 U.S. families make charitable contributions (89%).
- Americans report that being asked to give makes a substantial difference in the size of their gifts. Yet, 44 percent of households were not asked to contribute, indicating untapped potential to increase giving.
- In the United States, more people donate money than vote in national elections.
- Two-thirds of U.S. donors (86 million) file the IRS short form and do not receive a deduction for their charitable giving.
- When donors do itemize (at every income level) they give at least 40 percent more.

So what's my point? Why do I care so much about individual giving? Perhaps the well-known 1950s bank robber, Willie Sutton, answered it best when asked why he robbed banks: "Because that's where the money is!"

Now let's look at who *gets* what all these groups give. According to the USA Giving Foundation, religious institutions receive over 35 percent of all charitable contributions, more than educational, environmental, and health-related organizations *combined*.

It is probably no surprise to you that religious institutions receive the biggest chunk of contributions in the United States. Why? *They ask at every opportunity and they ask with a sense of purpose, with passion, and with an expectation that congregants will find meaning in their gifts.*

Faith communities engender a sense of *ownership* among their congregants and this is a powerful tool for mobilizing resources. It is the members of a church that build the cathedrals and turn on the lights and decorate the altar and pay the staff and feed the hungry and clothe the poor.

Religious institutions know that you give people an amazing gift when you ask them for their time, talent, or treasure. You honor them with your request. You strengthen your relationship. You support their other interests and commitments (including their faith). And you embrace and share a belief in their power to make a difference in the world. This is why individual giving is more about raising passions than raising funds. Which leads us to ....

### **Paradigm Shift Two: Excite their passions and raise more money**

Our spiritual leaders understand the necessary connection between resources and making the world a better place. They have gotten over the fear of asking by trusting their faith and believing that raising money from people is not “a necessary evil,” as many of us often think. They know that raising money is part and parcel of the mission of their church. It is why they have missionaries. Giving control of one’s self over to a higher power and giving of one’s resources to the church has become a sacred part of the tradition and an integral component of the faith for millions around the world (regardless of the denomination).

Our work of service is sacred, too. We know that people want to be a part of something wonderful that is larger than themselves. They want to direct the abundant resources they have in their life toward the things they care about most. They want their own lives to have purpose and meaning and they want to uncover and discover their own passions, hopes, and dreams. Some may already do this from within their faith tradition and that is wonderful. They probably love the way that makes them feel and they want to experience that feeling more often. They will step up when asked.

Others whose spiritual practices are more private may be longing for a public way to express their own desire to be a part of the solution, part of a community’s response to the problems facing it. Your role with these folks is to take a powerful stand with your own life. Remember that who you are and how you live your life speaks more loudly than the words you say. Make your life an intense example. Let yourself feel the love you have in your heart for every person whose life is changed by your program; and demand of yourself every action that you can take to help your prospective donors experience that same love.

I promise you that when you bring your authentic self into those asking moments, you will always elevate the quality of the relationship. You may still hear your prospect say no, but they will have changed. You will have brought them closer to their own passion and that is powerful. That is your mission in action. That is you building a community of committed, passionate, concerned individuals who want the world to be better. If they don’t ultimately invest in your work, they will find the right and perfect place to share their abundance. Your role in this powerful result will be rewarded.

One of the best ways to excite someone’s passion is through the art and practice of storytelling. In the “Getting Started” section below, I’ll help you think about the stories that capture the essence of your organization’s powerful work. You’ll learn to tap into your own authenticity and use your passion to move prospective individual donors into powerful relationships with your program.

### **Paradigm Shift Three: Embrace sufficiency, forget scarcity and suffering**

Using leading government sources (such as the World Bank and the U.S. Federal Reserve) for the most recent data available, we can estimate that in 2003 there was a worldwide money supply of approximately \$47 trillion with \$11

trillion of that total actually in the United States and much more controlled by U.S. citizens in other parts of the world. It is worth noting that while U.S. citizens control between 25 and 30 percent of the world's gross domestic product, we represent less than 5 percent of the world's population.

Given these numbers, you would think that we could easily see the potential in asking our friends and family, colleagues and fellow congregants, neighbors and new acquaintances to invest in our work. Yet for some reason, *we let our fear that they may say "no" frighten us into never asking*. Instead we suffer in the misery brought on by not having enough to do our critical, life-changing, mission-driven work.

One of my closest teachers and mentors, Lynne Twist, is an incredible fundraiser. Lynne has a theory about "the myth of scarcity" (excerpted here from a 1996 interview by Michael Toms for the New Dimensions World Broadcasting Network):

*We don't just think things are scarce, we think from a condition of scarcity. It's not just that we believe there might not be enough; we actually have a mindset or a frame of reference that no matter what's happening there is not enough.*

*Picture yourself going through a day. When you wake up in the morning, no matter what time you went to bed, and no matter what time you're waking up, the first thought almost everybody has is, "I didn't get enough sleep." And then the next thought you have is: "I don't have enough time to get myself to work on time," or "There's not enough milk in the refrigerator," or "We don't have enough money to do the things we want," or, if you're running a volunteer organization, "There aren't enough volunteers," or if you're running a for-profit organization, "We don't have enough profits." It's the frame of reference for life, particularly in the industrialized societies, but it's pretty much that way all over the planet.*

*No matter who you talk to, you can get agreement on this, and you can get a whole conversation going about "There isn't enough of this," and "I don't have enough of that." It's a frame of reference for the way we live and think. And money is the great lightning rod for this scarcity notion.*

I believe that Lynne is right about the pervasiveness of the scarcity mentality as a way of life. When I'm talking to people about how to excite passion and attract new investors, I'm always met with concerns that are rooted in people's fears about not having ...

- Enough staff or time to talk to individuals
- Any rich people we can ask for money
- More people in the community who will help us
- The ability to compete with other organizations
- The money to print nice materials or go to training, or hire a consultant, or host an event, or ...

You get the idea.

These are all probably true statements, but they are also all excuses based in the mentality of scarcity. Don't get me wrong. I have been in that moment where it feels like nothing will ever change, that we just need a break, a bit of good luck, a little more money. In the end, though, I got through that moment when I focused on doing better with what we already had. Refocusing people's time. Changing priorities. Giving people room to be creative.

Richard Bach, one of my favorite authors, writes in his book, *Illusions*, "Argue for your limitations, and sure enough, they're yours." I have come to believe that we need to re-orient ourselves from within a condition of sufficiency—a "place" or condition where we have enough and where enough is just the right amount to meet our needs. Believe that you have everything you need to start building a constituency of individual donors. Your passion will get you started and people will notice the change. We want to be around people who are hopeful, who have faith in change.

So your job is to change the conversations you have with yourself and that you permit others to carry on around you. Help them to see the unbelievable bounty you already have. Later, I'll give you activities to do with your team that will show them all the people who are already connected to your organization and who already care about what you're doing.

#### **Paradigm Shift Four: It's not about knowing rich people**

If I could choose to change just one misperception about raising money from individuals it would be the notion that not knowing people with wealth is a roadblock to being successful in your efforts. Wealthy people have money to give and you should ask them. That's easy. We agree.

What frustrates me about this conversation, however, is that most of that \$260 billion in annual charitable giving comes from middle-income, working-class, and poor people. This also happens to be most of the nation's population! Your universe of prospective donors is huge. There are 300 million people living in the United States and most of them have incomes like yours and mine.

Another person who has significantly affected my thinking about individual giving is Kim Klein, publisher of the Grassroots Fundraising Journal (<http://www.grassrootsfundraising.org>) and author of several books, including *Fundraising for Social Change*.

*3 By now, you've noticed that I use the word investment, rather than gift, most of the time. This is intentional and you should do the same when talking with your prospective donors. You are not interested in charity. You don't want guilt money. You don't want to take money from people who you wouldn't want to go for a walk with in the park.*

*You want people to invest and to become involved. You want donors who share your values, your excitement, and your passion. They are directing their abundance to you and placing their dreams for a better future in your hands. You are becoming partners. They are investing in your work. They are investing in you.*

In 1997, Kim published an article titled “You Already Know All the People You Need to Know to Raise All the Money You Want to Raise.” Brilliant! This says it all. Stop your constant (scarcity mentality) fretting about not knowing rich people.

You should focus on the people you already know: the people who care about you and your organization and the things you care about. It is likely that your passions will connect. This will make your asking easier and more successful.

**Paradigm Shift Five: You’re not asking for a gift, you’re giving one**

By asking the people you know to invest<sup>3</sup> in your work, you are actually helping them to give attention to problems they can’t take care of on their own. You are offering them a chance to put the resources they have in abundance in their life (time, treasure, or talent) to work on the issues they care about most. You are giving them a chance to work through you and your organization—to take a stand with their life by directing their resources to your organization’s critical work.

My friend Lynne believes that there are four key elements involved in successful fundraising conversations. Powerful contributions are made when:

1. People are in touch with themselves, with their own vision and magnificence, and with the difference they can make
2. People see that the work you are asking them to support really makes a difference
3. People see that their money makes a difference
4. Someone asks, giving them the opportunity to invest

Your job is to ask. Their job is to decide.

I’ll focus more on this concept in the next section, but in the meantime, you can practice by asking yourself: What do you expect to hear when being asked to contribute to an organization? How does it make you feel? What are the factors that you consider? The answer to these questions will help you quantify the “gift” your program can offer its donors.

**Paradigm Shift Six: The worst they can do is say no!**

I think the thought of actually asking people for the things organizations need has probably created more anxiety than any other aspect of fundraising. Somehow we have gotten it into our heads that asking for what we need is rude or impolite or not dignified. I don’t know where this started, but it has to stop.

Your organization is performing life-changing work. You are solving problems that are worthy of support. You deserve to have the resources to do more of this work and to do it better. Remember what I told you above? You are doing sacred work. It is OK to act like it.

If you agree with my premise above, that the worst they can do is say no, then you are ready to embrace some new ways of thinking about asking people for their time, talent, and especially their treasure. I want you to accept the following:

1. It is your job to boldly ask. It is the prospective donor's job to decide yes or no. Ask and then be quiet. Listen. Answer their questions. Thank them genuinely, regardless of their answer.
2. You will not define your success by the number of people who say yes and give, but rather by the number of people who say no!
3. You will not avoid asking your friends and family.
4. You will not be afraid to ask people for what your organization needs.
5. Whenever you are asking someone to invest, you will speak only 25 percent of the time and really listen during the rest of the conversation.
6. Your belief in your organization will always exceed your fear of asking.
7. You will always remember that if you don't have the time to express your gratitude, you don't have the time to have real people as donors.

These rules are simple and straightforward. If you follow them, you will be successful in raising people's passions and the resources you need. It may not happen overnight, but you'll be surprised at how quickly you can transform your giving program using these strategies.

### **Paradigm Shift Seven: The power of gratitude**

If there is anything I have learned from raising money these many years, it is about the awesome power present in simple acts of gratitude: Taking someone's hand and looking them in the eye while you thank them for their investment. A handwritten thank-you note. A phone call for no other reason than letting someone know how important they are to your organization.

You would be surprised at how these simple acts can transform your organization's constituency of donors. I promise that more than anything else you can do, learning how to thank people will make the most profound difference in your efforts.

Melody Beattle said that "gratitude unlocks the fullness of life. It turns what we have into enough, and more. It turns denial into acceptance, chaos to order, confusion to clarity. It can turn a meal into a feast, a house into a home, a stranger into a friend. Gratitude makes sense of our past, brings peace for today, and creates a vision for tomorrow."

The case study beginning on page 13 illustrates one idea that's worked for me.

## **Part III: Self-Assessment and Getting Started**

Confucius said that “a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.” The same is true when it comes to building a powerful constituency of committed and passionate individual donors. If you’re still reading, my guess is that you probably have what it takes to be successful in raising money from real live people just like you and me.

You’re also beginning to understand that my intention is not to give you a step-by-step plan, but rather to change your way of thinking. The system is important, but it is secondary to embracing the philosophy of passion-raising I’ve put forward. I want you to shake it up and let go of old ways of thinking about money and fundraising.

### **Do Your Homework**

1. As you get started, begin by pulling together a small group of stakeholders who share your interest and passion for developing a constituency of individual donors. This small group will act as a kind of development team, so be sure it includes staff and board members. This group can also include donors, volunteers, and clients. It really is up to you, though I would start with a smaller team that can always expand.
2. Review your organization’s annual budget.
3. Familiarize yourself with the organization’s revenues and expenses.
4. Know how much you get from individual donors versus corporations and foundations.
5. If you don’t have a copy of your organization’s development plan, ask for one.
6. If your organization doesn’t have a development plan, you will need to create it. This is essentially your road map for generating the revenue your program needs to thrive. If this is your first development plan, I would recommend you spend some time on this step before moving on. Earlier reading sections offer an excellent starting point.

Whatever type of resource development plan you create, it should help you keep your passion-raising on track by forcing you to:

- Set realistic revenue goals in your budget
- Create clear expectations for staff and board about their roles and responsibilities
- Monitor, assess, and revise your revenue projections throughout the year
- Devise appropriate campaigns for reaching your goals

A good development plan covers all your revenue streams, but puts extra emphasis on your efforts at building a strong and committed constituency of individuals who are investing in your mission-critical work.

### **Activity: Reflect on Your Own Giving**

It is important that each board and staff member individually take stock of their own relationships, identify potential prospects from their list, develop an asking strategy, and then go forth and ask! Not only will this generate new revenues, it will also help you address the anxiety around asking. These are people they know and who know them—friendly faces.

One way of doing this step is to have each person get a blank sheet of paper and turn it horizontally. On the sheet, have your team members draw vertical lines to create seven columns. Make columns one and five a little wider. Allowing two–three minutes for each step (a little longer for steps one and five), tell them to do the following (one step at a time):

1. In column one, write down the names of the first 25 people who come to your mind—friends, family, colleagues, politicians, bankers, teachers, clergy. Don't censor yourself. This will begin to create a list of donor prospects, but don't put someone on the list, or leave them off, because of what you know about their ability to give or your concerns about asking.
2. In column two, put a checkmark next to the names of people you know and who know you. Circle the checkmarks for the 10 "strongest" relationships. You decide what strongest means.
3. In column three, put a checkmark next to the names of people that you personally know give of their time, talent, and treasure (to any organization).

4. In column four, put a checkmark next to the names of people you think would be interested in the work of your organization.
5. In column five, next to any name you checked in the last step, write down what you think is that person's self-interest for getting involved or investing in your organization. Be really candid here. This person won't be seeing your list!
6. In column six, I want you to set a financial goal for what you could ask this person to invest in your organization. If you had to do it, knowing what you know now, how much could you ask them for? Take a deep breath. Write it down.
7. Finally, look at the amounts you just wrote down. If you wrote down an amount \$200 or less in column six, triple it and write it down in column seven. If the amount is greater than \$200, double it and write that down in column seven.

Now spend a few minutes asking people to process this activity. What did they learn? What were the surprises or the "Aha!" moments for them? How did it feel to put target amounts next to people's names? How did it feel when you told them to aim higher?

After a few minutes, give your team members the following homework. Have them look at those checkmarks they circled in column two. These are the people they need to ask very soon. At least three asks within the next week. Some prospects may need more cultivation. That's fine. But all of us have at least three people who are ripe and ready right now.

7. Review (or develop) a one-page external case statement to assist you in approaching donors. The case statement is essentially your organization's mission, vision, and values in writing. It should be passionate and powerful. You want this statement, which is often the only thing prospective donors will read, to spark their imaginations by showing them exactly how their involvement and their investment will make a real difference. When she trains fundraisers, my friend Lynne suggests we motivate donors by asking them to stand with us in "the gap"—the space between the amazing work

## The Magic Number

When it comes to deciding how much to ask for from a prospective investor, let me tell you a story with a valuable lesson. Early in my fundraising career, I was at lunch with a prospect. We both knew I would be asking for money and we were both prepared. When the time came (I knew this because my heart started beating through my chest), I gathered my composure and asked him for \$5,000. This was more than he had done previously, but I was really confident he could do it.

After I asked, I sat back, proud of myself, remained quiet as you should do, and waited for his answer. Two seconds later he said “Sure!” and then he added “What a relief ... I thought you were going to ask me for \$10,000.” I smiled awkwardly. “I would have given you \$10,000,” he said, “if you had asked for it.”

“Can we start over?” I asked hopefully. “Next time,” he said.

You had better believe that I have never left money on the table since that moment. The worst thing they can do is say no, remember? Your job is to ask, their job is to decide. It is OK for you to make their decision difficult; not impossible, just difficult.

your program is accomplishing right now and what would be possible with a specific, tangible investment by the donor. Your case statement will help define the gap, though it is never a substitute for real, live conversations with your prospective donors.

8. Once this work is complete, the next step is to assess your prospects—both organizationally and individually. I suggest the activity below to help you begin to see the universe of prospects you already know and are in relationship with right now.

## The “Ask”

The next step is to plan for those asking moments you’re about to have! Even with all the experience I have asking people for money, I cannot tell you how it will go exactly. But I can tell you a few things that will be helpful. You should also reread Paradigm Shifts Five and Six as you prepare.

As I see it, there are six things that all prospective donors will want to know before they decide whether to invest in your work or not. These questions are relevant whether you are asking in person, over the phone, in a letter, or at an event:

- **Who are you?** How are you connected to the organization? Why are you here?
- **What does your organization do?** What is the mission and vision? What are the organization’s values? What is its history?
- **What is your organizational story?** Why would a donor care? How does your organization’s work connect to what the prospect cares about—what they are passionate about?
- **What is the gap?** What amazing work are you doing now? What else could you do if this donor invested time, talent, or treasure?
- **What specifically are you asking this donor to invest?** Do you know what you want? Have you done your homework? Can you quantify what you need from them?
- **What will the donor receive for their investment?** Are you offering recognition? Have you imagined how you will thank them for their generosity? How will the organization express its gratitude?

Now preparing answers for most of this will be fairly easy. It requires work, but if you have taken the steps I’ve outlined, much of it is already done. But one piece requires a little more effort. This is the piece that allows the life-changing work of your agency to shine through with all the emotion and passion you experience in doing the work.

### **Case Study: NYAC Thank-a-Thon**

The end-of-the-year holidays are a great time to ask people to invest resources in your organization. Most people are starting to wind down a bit at work and generally seem a little more receptive to thinking about others. Some will be experiencing the “joys of the season” and others will just be grateful the year is over!

If you’ve invested the time in cultivating your individual donors and prospects, the end-of-the-year holidays (it is also the end of the tax year) can be an appropriate time to ask people to invest in your organization’s important work. You’ll want to plan ahead as you aren’t the only one who hopes to benefit from the holiday spirit.

There are countless ways to do an end-of-the-year appeal and it really just depends on the resources available to you. As has become a consistent theme for me here, I would recommend a simple approach. We used this two-step method (based on an idea from Terry Axlerod and *Raising More Money™*—more about Terry and her work follows later in this section) in my own organization, the National Youth Advocacy Coalition (NYAC) this past year and it was a phenomenal success.

This is the e-mail I sent to our staff explaining step one of the concept and defining the parameters of the activity:

To: All Staff and Board  
From: Development Team  
Re: Holiday Thank-a-Thon

I know Thanksgiving is here and we’re all very busy, but let’s remember what this season is all about! We’ve had a tough year like so many, but we’re still here and our work is better than it has ever been! Fortunately, we have had a lot of people in our corner helping us.

Most of us remember when someone tells us “Thanks” and really means it, and as the holiday season begins, what could be better than expressing our gratitude to the people who make our work possible. NYAC has had hundreds of donors this past year, and we are going to call them all.

YES! All of them—just to say THANKS!

Holiday cards are great (and our biggest supporters will be getting those and handwritten notes, too), but a personal phone call makes an impression, it leaves a warm feeling behind.

So our development team is pulling together the list and we have scheduled next \_\_\_\_\_ for NYAC’s First Annual Thank-a-Thon!! We’ll start at 11 a.m., break for a potluck lunch at 12:30 p.m., and then finish the calls between 2 and 5 p.m.! Board members will be making calls from their homes in the evening that same week.

We want everyone to be excited and well organized. It is important that we all tap into our own holiday spirit and bring our most positive energy that day! Everyone will be participating. We’ll all be making calls from our desks and leaving messages will be fine.

We don’t expect to reach everyone in person.

What are you telling the donor with this call?

- We noticed you invested in NYAC.
- It means a great deal to us.
- We appreciate you very much.

The actual script looks like this:

*“Hi, may I please speak to \_\_\_\_\_? My name is \_\_\_\_\_. I’m a member of the staff/board of NYAC—the National Youth Advocacy Coalition. I’m just calling to say thank you for your wonderful support this year and in the past. It has been a really tough 2004, especially lately, but your involvement has helped us to stay in the fight!*

*This year we’ve grown. We’ve been able to offer terrific new resources and technical assistance to youth organizations all around the country; and we’ve made a real difference in the lives of thousands of LGBTQ young people. Your support helped to make that possible. Don’t hesitate to be in touch with us if you have any questions or ideas. You can find us on the web at \_\_\_\_\_ or please give our development director a call at \_\_\_\_\_. Thank You and Happy Holidays!”*

You’ll need to stick to the secular “Happy Holidays” as we don’t know who believes what, but you can feel free to personalize the thank-you as much as you would like.

If you actually reach a real person, they may chat a bit. You should be prepared with a few general facts, but don’t think you need to take a crash course before you’re qualified to get on the phone. You can always refer specific questions to someone else for a call back. If someone has a complaint or wants to make a gift right now, \_\_\_\_\_ will handle those calls right away—just buzz them with the quick details and they will pick up the call.

That’s it. Simple, right? I promise that this will be a day that all of us will remember. Gratitude is a blessing that is shared by everyone who experiences it. And remember:

*“To educate yourself for the feeling of gratitude means to take nothing for granted, but to always seek out and value the kind that will stand behind the action. Nothing that is done for you is a matter of course. Everything originates in a will for the good, which is directed at you. Train yourself never to put off the word or action for the expression of gratitude.”—Albert Schweitzer*

*“Gratitude is something of which none of us can give too much. For on the smiles, the thanks we give, our little gestures of appreciation, our neighbors build their philosophy of life.”—A. J. Cronin*

When the day came, we met as a team for a few minutes in the morning to pass out lists, answer any questions, and really get people excited about what they were about to do. By lunchtime, I could tell it was a huge success. Staff members were telling stories about their conversations and talking about how great it was just to tell people thanks. I think I underestimated the positive impact this event would have on staff and board members’ morale. We also heard from all kinds of people about how impressed they were with this simple event. We received lots of feedback like this e-mail message:

*“Dear Craig, A quick note to say thank you for the phone message you left last week and for the holiday card. I’ve been around the not-for-profit world a long time and your call and card are acts of generosity not often seen.”*

This particular donor asked to meet in person and a month later made a \$1,500 investment in our organization—six times what he had ever done before! Now, I can’t promise results like this one every time, but I can tell you that more people had positive things to say about this year-end appeal than ever before.

Step two of this strategy consisted of our regular year-end newsletter mailing one week later and the end-of-the-year direct mail appeal just days after that. The entire approach worked beautifully.

### **Activity 3: Write a Two-Minute Speech**

I want you to come up with a new story. A story from where you sit within your program. I don't mean you had to necessarily experience it firsthand, but you need to have been close to it and it needs to have touched you, personally. What have you experienced in your program that chokes you up, that makes you mad or hopeful, what is it that brings you to work every day with an unstoppable desire to do more for the people you serve. This is the story you should tell. This is the one that will cause your prospective donors to stand in the gap with you, investing and involving themselves in the amazing, life-changing work of your organization.

There is no real formula for the activity of developing the story—your two-minute speech. I suggest you find an hour or two where you can sit alone without interruption. Get yourself into a space where you can be reflective. Relax. Think about why you do what you do. Try to remember why you got involved in the first place. Think about those moments when the work is unbearably difficult—when you might be thinking about changing jobs—what keeps you there? What motivates you to tough it out?

Is there a person that comes to mind? A person who said “thanks” one day? A kid whose life was a mess when he first came to your program and now he is succeeding in ways unimaginable? Is it a volunteer who pops into your head? Is there a client whose life has been changed? Make a few notes. Draw a picture. Let yourself feel the emotion you want to cultivate in the person you'll be asking.

When the story becomes clear (and it will), write it down and practice telling it. First, practice in front of the mirror. Then in front of a colleague or two, practice in front of a friend or your significant other.

Ask them for their feedback. You want this story to be powerful. It needs to be brief—two minutes at most! And you want to tell the story in a way that will move even you every time you tell it. It can't be phony—I don't want you to pretend to cry. This isn't about making people feel guilty or sorry for the kids you're working to help. This is the real deal—heartfelt emotion turned into passionate commitment. You don't need to fake it. When it's real, you'll know it, and the people listening to you will know it, too.

## **Telling Your Story**

Most of our organizations already have them—they are the stories that we tell over and over again. The ones that still bring tears to our eyes. They have become mythical. We don't even know sometimes if they are true, but they have awesome power to move people to action. The activity on page 40 can help you develop a story that speaks to your organization.

Don't wait until the system is perfect—it will never be perfect. And don't let your fear about hearing no stop you from asking for what you need. Get out there and ask again. And again. Ask until your program has all it needs to carry on its life-changing work!

*For over 15 years, Craig Bowman and his firm, Common Ground Consulting™, have been providing world-class consulting services for community-based and national nonprofit organizations. Craig is an expert in organizational assessment, development, and management issues; and has provided on-site technical assistance and capacity building to nonprofits in the United States and abroad. On the Web at <http://www.consultcommonground.com>.*

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