

In his article on campaigns, Steve Manzi reminds us of some of the most important lessons about campaigns – lessons that we've found to be true in campaigns as well as fundraising in general. Refer to their website for additional excellent writings on management and fundraising.



The Five Dirty Secrets of Capital Campaigns

By Steve Manzi, Changing Our World, Inc.

Been holding them in for years. Can't refrain any longer. Must disclose the truths that are burning inside. Never before spoken out loud, they are... "The Five Dirty Secrets of Capital Campaigns." Read them once; commit them to memory; and then destroy this before anyone else sees it.

1. Campaigns Are Won or Lost Before They Start

The Campaign Planning Phase – which should begin well in advance of any potential campaign – is the essential building block upon which successful campaigns are built. This phase includes a number of components, including the establishment of institutional priorities, financial planning, internal consensus building, initial case development, lead prospect identification, and a campaign feasibility study. While each of these activities involves tremendous work, and a lot of discussions, the most important element during each step is listening. Is there agreement on and, more importantly, enthusiasm for the case? Is the financial goal based on what you're hearing through the feasibility study, or is it based on what the institution wants or needs? In essence, the chief objective of the planning stage is to develop credible plans and credible responses to any issues major gift prospects may throw your way when you finally get out there and ask.

2. The Myth of the Campaign Case Statement Publication

We agonize over the wording. We go head-to-head with the designers. We spend sleepless nights fretting over the printer. We live in secret shame, hoping that no one else will notice the typo in paragraph two on page seven.

But you know what? Almost nobody really reads the Case Statement.

Just to be clear, I'm not suggesting that that we don't need them, or that we shouldn't spend time making sure they read well and look good. What I am suggesting, though, is that they be viewed as what they are: a useful campaign tool. The most superb Case Statement in the world, no matter how impressive, can't raise money by itself.

Here's a suggestion: reduce your time spent worrying about the Case by 10%, and devote that time to accelerating a leadership gift ask. An early "top of the gift table" close will ultimately have a bigger impact on the Campaign than even a top-notch Case Statement booklet.

3. Charismatic Leaders Trump Strong Cases

Strong cases presented by weak executives or volunteer leaders face an uphill battle. Regrettably, the converse is true as well: you can raise a lot of money for a mediocre case if the leaders are passionate. The bottom line is that people are ultimately more important than the case: donors are considerably more likely to invest their charitable dollars when they believe in and are inspired by an institution's leadership. How can you best motivate campaign leadership to do the things they may least be inclined to do? Read on.

4. The Single Major Factor Behind Most Successful Campaigns is...

...a pervasive sense of optimism. Yes. I am channeling the spirits of Norman Vincent Peale and Dale Carnegie (they're also giving me tips on next week's MegaLotto numbers, but I'll deal with that in my next article). Campaigns succeed when people believe they will succeed. You already know that to be true, by virtue of the way campaigns are designed: you don't take them public until you have raised sufficient funds in the private phase, and you have clearly mapped out where the rest of the money is coming from. Prospective donors need to believe that they are contributing to a winning enterprise. As the fundraising professional involved with the campaign, the optimism has to originate with you: you're the one who has to initially impart the sense of inevitable success to the organizational and campaign leadership. If you do, you'll find that your campaign leaders will be more likely to make the calls, to set up the campaign visits, and to reflect that optimism when making the ask.

5. The Single Major Factor Behind Most Failed Campaigns is...

...the leaders were afraid to ask. They procrastinate in making calls and in setting appointments, and when they finally get to the solicitation, they don't put a specific gift amount on the table. Compare this with the single most successful capital campaign I ever directed. Throughout the campaign, I met weekly with the institution's president to review priority prospects and requests under consideration; after going through the list, she would immediately – in front of me – pick up the phone and call each of them to set up or follow up on a visit. In fact, she knew that she would be spending her summer holiday in the same seaside community as a somewhat elusive major prospect, so she made a particular point of driving each day past his vacation home until she spied him in the yard, and was able to stop and speak to him. Even I was a little apprehensive about this guerilla approach, but the president was a nun and figured that no jury would ever convict her of stalking. Besides which, it worked: we got the gift.

So the secrets are out – and I might as well come clean with my true feelings about Capital Campaigns. Yes, they're a lot of hard work, they require intricate planning, and no matter what I say, you – and I – are still going to worry about them day and night from the launch all the way up until the final pledge payment is received. But they'll also give you an incredible kick when you land the initial leadership gifts, when you surpass your interim goals, and when the venerable fundraising thermometer reaches the boiling point. Savor those moments – you and your team have earned them!

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