Back to Basics: The Case for the Case

In a major centennial capital campaign I worked on several years ago, the campaign chair would continually tease me about the arduous process of developing a good case statement before embarking on a feasibility study. “Why is this taking so long?” he would ask rhetorically, with a twinkle in his eye. Then he would quote me: “So we can save time!”

Good-natured kidding aside, the principle is still an excellent one. When it comes to preparing a case statement, if you take time, you’ll save time. And money. In fact, a well thought out, well-written case statement is one of the most economical tools available to capital fundraisers.

How does it work? The case statement’s value in soliciting funds is, of course, very clear. What is less well-known is the critical role the case also plays in nearly every other important aspect of a capital campaign, from strategic planning to market research, to cultivating leadership, to garnering publicity. When a fundraiser understands – and employs – the full range of the case statement’s functions, spending hard-won time and difficult effort on its preparation becomes an investment that will pay off again and again throughout the course of a campaign.

Getting the case off the back burner and into the center of attention isn’t always easy, however. Recently I was asked to help out with a $10 million campaign for a local social service organization in which, I was told, the long-range planning process was completed and case statement had already been drafted. With a little bit of editing, the director of development assured me, the case could be submitted to the campaign planning committee for their final okay. In a week it could be mailed out to prospects for the upcoming feasibility study.

Together, the development director and I fine-tuned the document, making it polished and concise. But when the planning committee met, I watched this well-worded case crumble. There was nothing wrong with the writing. It was the campaign objectives the committee didn’t like.

How did this happen? As it turned out, staff had tried again and again in the long-range planning process to get the trustees to confer on their campaign’s funding objectives. But it was only when they saw their case in print that the group really began to debate their funding priorities. The feasibility study had to be postponed while a new case statement was prepared, but in the end a committee got a better case built upon a more realistic assessment of priority financial needs.

Now, no one would recommend writing the wrong case first in order to get your trustees’ attention. Instead, I mention this story to illustrate the powerful role the case statement can, and should, play in a non-profit’s long-range strategic planning.

Nothing concentrates the mind like putting pen to paper. By focusing key leadership on certain fundamental questions, the case statement fosters sound campaign planning and, what's more, provides a unique opportunity for staff and trustees to carefully assess a non-profit's organizational health and future direction. The long-range planning process may have addressed the non-profit's wish list, but the need to develop a case statement sometimes forces the kind of financial planning that must precede any campaign.

"What is our mission?" "How are we fulfilling it?" "How does our work compare to other, similar organizations?" "What could we be accomplishing five years from now and how should we get to that point?" "What, therefore, are our financial needs?" Which are our financial priorities?" "Given additional funding, how exactly will we put it to use?"

Basic questions like these are remarkably revealing. Too often, however, volunteer boards feel that basic case statement queries are beside the main point, that is, the fact that "we need money." Nothing could be further from the truth. Donors give to real needs with real arguments behind them. The more roundtable debate case statement queries provoke about an organization's needs, goals and priorities, the better it is for the upcoming campaign.

Volunteers who are eager, during the initial stages of a capital campaign, to get the planning process quickly out of the way may be making a mistake. The decisions they'll make during the preparation of the case statement become the underlying foundation for their organization's future. If these decisions are hasty or shoddy, this foundation will quickly collapse. If instead the decisions are solid, they'll provide strong support for success – in the campaign and in the future.

After this initial goal setting and case preparation process, the next step in capital campaign planning is the feasibility study. At this point the case statement, still in draft form, becomes a sort of trial balloon.

In a feasibility study, a non-profit sends the "minicase" – a brief version of the initial draft – to a select group of its most concerned constituents for their review. In confidential interviews, usually conducted by outside counsel, these select insiders, including major donors, board members, and corporate and community leaders, discuss their response to the proposed campaign's overall aim, specific funding objectives and dollar goals.

The result is a wealth of invaluable information. A feasibility study can reveal unanticipated enthusiasm, unrecognized needs, unforetold obstacles or untapped resources for a capital campaign. Based on this research, campaign organizers can refine or recast their plans to better meet their community's needs. Perhaps, for example, an additional service or facility should be included among the campaign's funding objectives. Or maybe the pledge period should be longer, or the campaign goal higher.

Whatever the outcome – whether the feasibility study has suggested a larger or smaller, longer or shorter, more or less ambitious fund-raising drive – the benefit of testing the case before launching the campaign is certain. When, further, this test is based on a complete and compelling early draft of the case, it will produce the most useful results. Such careful gauging of a community's likely response to a proposed campaign is top-notch market research, and it can save (or earn) non-profits literally millions through its capacity to inform and improve fund-raising decisions.

The third function the case serves during the initial campaign planning process is cultivating leadership. Volunteers and major donors, who debate, define and review the developing case statement come to make the cause their own. Active and involved in the campaign's creation, they grow increasingly committed both to its mission and success. Thus, if the initial planning process is handled skillfully, a campaign may have cultivated a cadre of informed, involved and enthusiastic lead participants well before the first solicitations for the leadership gifts even begin.

Following the feasibility study, the minicase is amended to incorporate changes suggested by the study, and fleshed out to present a thorough explanation of the campaign's goals to major donors whose substantial gifts will go to create the campaign's nucleus fund. This full-blown statement is the case in its most familiar format. However, with just a little editing, the statement can also be used to create a variety of documents tailored to reach an array of campaign audiences. Its text can supply ready language for clear and concise corporate and foundation proposals, engaging speeches, press releases, and a lively and compelling brochure designed to reach the broadest constituency during the public phase of the campaign.

Thus, as a finished document, the well-worded case continues to hold multiple benefits for fundraisers. The core statement of a campaign's mission, the case finally comes into its own as the major written document for attracting gifts, and the hard work put into the initial planning stages becomes well worth the time and effort.