

The Art of Asking: How to Solicit for your Organization

During my many years in the fund-raising profession, I cannot tell you how many times I have heard campaign volunteers say, "I'll do anything for this organization, but please don't ask me to solicit." Volunteers are often hesitant to ask their peers for gifts, yet soliciting individuals is one of the most important factors in the success of a campaign. Individuals alone give over \$100 billion annually to charities. Clearly, there's a lot of money out there for charitable purposes, but your organization won't see any of it unless you ask.

As a development consultant, I have conducted many workshops to teach volunteers that asking for money need not be a dreaded experience. In fact, with careful preparation and a few tricks of the trade, soliciting can be satisfying and even fun. The following are some suggestions to make the solicitation process less intimidating, even for the most reluctant volunteer.

Do your research. Before the solicitation visit, learn all you can about the campaign and your prospect. Your goal as a solicitor is to convince your prospect of the importance of the campaign and the urgent need for funds. To do this effectively, you should know the dollar goal of the campaign, familiarize yourself with the case statement, and be able to put it in your own words. It is equally important to know all you can about your prospect, including the suggested ask amount and any special interests. Remember, the more you know about a prospect, the better your chances of receiving a large gift for your organization.

Make your own gift. I cannot stress enough the importance of pledging your own gift before you begin to solicit others. Your gift solidifies your commitment to the campaign and can serve as an excellent talking point during your solicitation visit. Mentioning your own contribution can help you leverage a larger gift from your prospect. You might say, "I have decided to make this campaign my major giving priority because of its utmost importance to the community. Perhaps you could do the same?"

Plan to visit the prospect in person. A personal visit is the most productive of all solicitation methods. Fund-raising wisdom teaches that for every dollar received from a direct-mail solicitation, an organization could have received \$12 had a phone call been made and \$50 from a personal visit. By making an appointment to meet directly with your prospect, you can share campaign materials and judge his or her reaction to your request.

Tailor your solicitation to the prospect's interests. Educate yourself about the many possible ways of giving which may appeal to your prospect. Think about naming opportunities, family gifts, planned giving, and multiple-year pledges. For example, if a prominent alumnus of your University wants to have his name associated with the school, you should discuss with him the possibility of a naming opportunity. If the relatives of a recent patient in your hospital's emergency room

want to express their gratitude for your services, ask them to consider a family gift. Remember that gifts can be structured in a number of different ways; listen carefully to the prospect's comments in order to determine the most appropriate type of gift.

Ask for a specific gift amount. Be absolutely sure to ask for a specific gift amount. It is always best to ask for more than you expect; people are rarely offended by the suggestion that they can make a large contribution. One of the most effective methods for requesting a pledge is to say, "Could you consider a gift of ____?" This approach encourages the prospect to think for a moment and invites a positive response without a definite commitment.

Another useful approach is to divide the amount sought (\$150,000, for example) by the pledge period and ask, "Could you consider making a commitment of \$30,000 each year for a period of five years?" This helps the prospect determine how he or she will pay for the gift, and it will be easier for him or her to hear the smaller dollar figure. If you find it difficult to ask, remind yourself that you are not "begging." The money is not for yourself, but for the organization. You are seeking funds to help your organization carry out its mission and to ensure its excellence in the future.

Soliciting can be a positive experience if you keep in mind the fruits of your labor. You are contributing your time and energy to strengthen the organization and help it fulfill its goals. Remember the more you solicit the better you will become, so pick a name on your list, make the appointment, and go for it!