Winning Words

A Volunteer’s Guide to Asking for Major Gifts
Going for the Gold

A training manual for volunteer fund raisers
by James Gregory Lord

Americans Olympic runners and volunteer fund raisers have something in common: Both represent a noble part of the American character.

When you raise funds for a cause in which you believe, you exercise your right to develop the land of nation you want. The fact that you care strongly about your institution to give it your time, your talent, and your substance makes a truly remarkable statement about the American character as well as your own.

To succeed, however, you must prepare. Runners train for races, and fund raisers need practice as well. So here's a handy checklist of techniques that can prove useful in preparing for and making a fund-raising call. You will want to practice them before you go for the gold.

On your mark
Here are some steps to follow in preparing for your first visit.

1. **Pick a partner.** Two solicitors are often twice as convincing as one. Take a staff member along, or recruit someone who has given to your campaign and who also knows your prospect.

2. **Research your prospect.** Try to find out as much as you can about your prospect before the visit. What are your prospect's interests? What aspect of your institution best relates to those interests? How can you stress that relationship in your visit?

3. **Set your asking figure.** Your campaign chair or your institution's development office should provide you with this. This figure is usually determined by an anonymous committee of top volunteers. This group has probably worked with a list of the various levels of contributions that will be needed to meet the goal. It will also have determined, to the best of its ability, the level of commitment your prospect is capable of.

4. **Make the appointment.** Beware of the telephone. While it's all right to phone to make an appointment, don't let yourself be drawn into discussing your purpose over the phone. Major gift commitments are never made over the wires; there's no substitute for a face-to-face conversation.

5. **Set your objectives.** On your first visit, you'll probably want to accomplish two things: First, you'll want to discuss with your prospect an aspect of your institution that will interest him or her. Second, you'll want to introduce a level of investment and a commemorative opportunity for consideration.

Don't ask for a commitment on your first visit. Use this time for cultivation. Make plans to get together with your prospect after he or she has had time to consider the "think about" figure.

Get set
As you get ready to make your call, think about the reasons why you really believe in your institution. Consider how you will convey your enthusiasm about its value and worth to society.

Here are several personal characteristics that you, the successful fund raiser, need to project:

- **Enthusiasm.** If you exude enthusiasm and self-confidence, you can go a long way toward convincing a prospect that this is a worthwhile opportunity to give and to take a voluntary private-sector initiative.
- **Courage.** It takes courage to ask for a major commitment.
- **Patience.** Almost all major investments require prolonged negotia-
To give away money is an easy matter and in any man's power. But to decide to whom to give it, and how large and when, and for what purpose and how, is neither in every man's power—nor an easy matter. Hence it is that such excellence is rare, praiseworthy and noble. — Aristotle

A purse is emptied, the heart is filled. — Victor Hugo

The Home Stretch

1. Introduce the "suggested asking figure." One way to do this is to mention a named commemorative opportunity that would be of interest to the prospect and that is at the appropriate financial level. The opportunity can be named to honor the donor, the donor's family, an individual, a corporation, a foundation, or another organization. Don't say, "This is what we have to do." Say, "We would like to suggest naming the XX project" or "giving XX dollars." Then you can say that this is proportionate with what others are being asked to consider.

John D. Rockefeller, Jr., the great philanthropist, had helpful words on this subject:

I do not like to have anyone tell me what is my duty to give. There is just one man who is going to decide that question—who has the responsibility of deciding it—and that is myself. But I do like a man to say to me, "We are trying to raise $4 million, and we are asking you to be generous of giving (blank) dollars. If you can see your way clear to do so, it will be an enormous help and encouragement. You may have it in mind to give more; if so we shall be glad. On the other hand, you may feel you cannot give as much... if that is the case, we shall understand."

2. Discuss giving methods. You can remind your prospect that his or her commitment can come from stocks, securities, real estate, or gifts-in-kind as well as cash. Although federal tax incentives are rarely a prime motivator for a donor, a tax advantage can help you to convince a donor to make a more significant contribution. You can also suggest to the donor that making a philanthropic gift is more effective than paying taxes and letting the government decide where the funds ought to go.

3. Provide a rationale for the gift. Remember that if a prospect is going to make an out-of-the-ordinary commitment, he or she needs time to get used to the idea and to develop rationales to use to justify this extraordinary investment to others.

For example, in one campaign, a volunteer provided a gas company executive with the following rationale: "Your company's face-setting commitment could stimulate other companies and banks to give more. This would make the community a better place to live. In turn, would be good for the utility's kind of consumer-oriented business.”

The executive’s colleagues bought the argument.

4. Assess the prospect's reaction. Your prospect may react with an excuse or an objection. (See "Every Excuse in the Book—And How to Avoid Them"; p. 39.) Don't treat such a reaction as a "no." Be patient. Remember that an objection may simply mean "not yet." Your prospect may have a sharply negative reaction to your request. Listen without judging. Try to help your prospect see how he or she can influence the institution—and more—by participating in the campaign.

5. Make an appointment for a second visit. One way to make an appointment for a follow-up visit is to say, "I can appreciate that you will want to think this over before you make a commitment. How would it be if I came back at the same time next week?"

The prospect may also have questions that you can answer. This gives you an opportunity to say, "I don't know the answer to that, but I can find out. Let me talk to our campaign chair or whoever the appropriate person..."

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The use of money is all the advantage there is in having money.

—Benjamin Franklin

A bit of fragrance always wins to the hand that gives you roses.

—Samuel Pepys

The Technique of Soliciting

by John D. Rockefeller, Jr.

I have been brought up to believe, and the conviction only grows on me, that giving ought to be entered into in just the same careful way as investing, that giving is investing, and that it should be tested by the same intelligent standards. Whether we expect dividends in dollars or in human betterment, we need to be sure that the gift or the investment is a wise one and therefore we should know all about it. By the same token, if we are going to other people to interest them in giving to a particular enterprise, we must be able to give them adequate information in regard to it, such information as we would want were we considering a gift.

John D. Rockefeller, Jr. (1874-1960) delivered this talk to the Citizens Family Welfare Committee of New York City in 1933. Pictured is his father, John D. Rockefeller, patriarch of one of America's most philanthropic families.

First of all, then, a solicitor must be well informed in regard to the salient facts about the enterprise for which he is soliciting. Just what is its significance, its importance? How sound is the organization in which it is being conducted, how well organized it is? How great is the need? An accurate knowledge of these and similar facts is necessary in order that the solicitor may be able to speak with conviction.

It is a great help to know something about the person whom you are approaching. You cannot deal successfully with all people the same way. Therefore, it is desirable to find out something about the person you are going to: what are his interests, whether you have any friends in common, whether he gave last year, if so how much he gave, what he might be able to give this year, etc. Information such as that puts you more closely in touch with him and makes the approach easier.

Again, one always likes to know what other people are giving. That may be an irrelevant question, but it is a human question. If I am asked for a contribution, naturally and properly I am influenced in deciding how much I should give by what others are doing.

Another suggestion I like to have made me by a solicitor is how much it is hoped I will give. Of course, such a suggestion can be made in a way that might be most annoying. I do not like to have anyone tell me what I am to do to give. There is just one man who is going to decide that question, who has the responsibility of deciding it, and that is myself. But I do like a man to say to me, "We are trying to raise $4,000,000, and are hoping you may be desirous of giving (blank) dollars. If you see your way clear to do so, it will be an enormous help and encouragement. You may have in mind to give more, if so, we will be glad. On the other hand, you may feel you cannot give as much, in view of other responsibilities. If that is the case, we shall understand. Whatever you give after thinking the matter over carefully in
He gives not best who gives most, but he gives most who gives best. If I cannot give bountifully, yet I will give freely, and what I want in my hand, I will supply by my heart.

—Arthur Guiseck

Five Strategies to Avoid Excuses
Stone stressed that it's best to avoid situations in which excuses arise in the first place. "You should eliminate the reasons for excuses before you get them," he says. "You need to focus on your sale." Stone spoke of ways to do this, and we have organized them here into five strategies.

Strategy No. 1: Only talk with prospects you know on a first-name basis.

If the prospect knows you, he or she knows you know all the excuses and whether they're manufactured or real.

For example, if I call on the president of a major banking institution, he knows me, he knows my company, he knows my account is large and I'm a prime customer, and so on. So he already knows he's going to give. The question is how much.

That's why the best person to call on a top prospect is a board member who has some sort of rapport with the prospect and to whom the prospect feels an obligation to talk.

Strategy No. 2: Call on your most important prospects first.

A leadership gift from a top prospect will raise the sights of the prospects' peers. For example, if you're going to make calls on banks in Chicago, you should be aware that there's a pecking order among them and call on the major banks first. If you go to the third largest first, you're going to insult and embarrass the two larger banks, and the third largest may only give you $10,000 because you're not in a position to put pressure on it to do better.

Then, too, you'll have quite a time getting $50,000 from a major bank because you'll have to say, "I've talked to...

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No. 3 and they're making a $10,000 commitment.

So you go to the top business establishment first and set its sights based on your belief that it's capable of making that $50,000 commitment. Naturally, you need to be very well prepared on the topic of giving capabilities when you make your calls.

Strategy No. 3: Decide in advance exactly how you're going to approach the prospect.

The two things you need to concern yourself about in deciding your approach are (1) the amount the donor is capable of giving, and (2) the reasons why your prospect should be interested in giving to you. The best way to determine the amount is through a small committee of board members who can evaluate the donor's giving potential. The group should assess the donor's ability to make a sizable commitment rather than his or her willingness to give. Certainly, the development officer may provide information.

You need to appeal to the donor's vulnerable areas. For example, if a leading Chicago executive went to Harvard and we want him to give to Roosevelt, we can say, "You should do this as a public service for the city of Chicago and the Midwest."

Or, if we're approaching someone who made her money here in Chicago, we can say, "We appreciate the fact that you are helping to educate people who will then make a bigger contribution to the Chicago community. You're giving to an institution that provides top education at reasonably low cost to people who will help make Chicago a better place to live and do business."

Strategy No. 4: Decide who should assist you in making the call.

If possible, it's always good to have another board member and the institution's president accompany you.

That's because, first, if the two board members know the prospect, the prospect has a difficult time—in fact twice as difficult a time—turning you down. Second, the president's presence will also demonstrate that the donor's support is important to the institution. Also, the president will know intimately the university's programs and will be able to speak from a professional and comprehensive knowledge of the institution.

Three people are also helpful because two can keep the conversation going while the person who's doing the asking takes time to think.

Strategy No. 5: Come to the call well-armed with background material.

If you're asking for a high figure—say $1 million and up—you've got to make a presentation based on that. You can't walk in and say, "Please give us $1 million." You've got to present the program, and you've got to present a lot of specifics. Be sure you've got a flip chart or its equivalent for a well-organized presentation. You need to assure the donor's interest and clearly show how the gift will benefit the donor, the donor's family, or the donor's own institution.

Keep in mind that when you're fishing for a whale, you don't use a minnow for bait. You have got to be sure that the prospective donor identifies with your own consuming interest in the fact that he or she is able to make this gift. Try to give a surge of romance to the project, an idea of something that will capture your donor's imagination. In other words, if you bring a flip chart of financial data, also bring a beautiful book of artist's renderings of a possible building, student scholarship beneficiaries, or other specific examples of what the gift will do. This book should be prepared with skill and taste. Don't dignify the project with a mimeographed report bound in a paper cover.

Finally, of course, your own conversation should show the significance of the university's interest in what the donor could have in mind.
Answers to Six Common Excuses

Stone also spoke about ways to counter prospects' reasons for not giving. We have organized them here into common excuses and good responses.

Excuse No. 1: I just don't have time to see you.
Response: Try to give the donor reasons why he or she should see you: "It would be mutually beneficial for us to meet. There is no way we can put the scope of the institution and its value to our community into our literature. This campaign could have special benefits for you, and I would like to have just 10 to 15 minutes of your time to outline these benefits. I want to outline for you the things this institution is doing, the kind of students we have, and the reasons for our campaign."

Try to appeal to the prospect's vulnerable area. For example, if the prospect has worked his or her way through college, you might say: "Some 85 percent of our students are working to put themselves through college. I think you might have an interest in supporting their efforts."

Don't ever allow yourself to make a telephone call for a large contribution. Only use the phone to solicit smaller sums. Don't let a donor say, "I'll call you back" or "I'll send you a check." You won't get the largest gift you can that way. Say: "I don't want to bother you every year. I just want to come in and explain our campaign. Surely you can give me 15 minutes, so let's set a time."

Excuse No. 2: Our budget is especially tight this year.
Response: "Well, we're in a five-year giving program, and consequently we are not here for this year but for future years. The university will go on for years after today, and thus we're introducing this five-year fund-raising program. And if you are a responsible member of the community I know you would want to support your local institution."

Excuse No. 3: I am supporting state universities with my taxes.
Response: "Basically, America works in education as it does in business. Would you let the state run your business? I know that, by virtue of your being a business or professional person, you know the value of the private enterprise system. Don't you want to see it that students have the choice to be educated by private higher education so that the values of private enterprise are sustained?"

Excuse No. 4: (for corporate calls) We give money to institutions that send us employees. We have looked into our records, and while XYZ institution sent us 130 employees last year, your institution sent us one. Consequently we feel our giving should be 100 to 1.
Response: "I think it would be wonderful if you'd tell us about why you think this is so. In addition, we'd like to offer placement services to your corporation on a more personal basis. The president of the university here will call on-line with his people to serve your corporation better if you promise to call on-line with your people to hire his graduates."

Excuse No. 5: I'd like to give you $5,000 (from a person who should be giving at the $1 million level).
Response: "It's better to turn down the gift or to postpone it until you've solicited your other major gifts. If you accept a gift of this type, you will open the door to other rejections. You allow another person who should be giving at the $1 million level to say to you, "Well, if so-and-so gave you $5,000, I'm not going to give you $1 million or $100,000 or $50,000."
Response: "I appreciate this offer. I just can't take that contribution, at least not at this time. It would be unfair to the campaign to accept it now, as we are presently looking for leadership gifts of $50,000 or more. Please let me call on you again later."

Excuse No. 6: I'd like to think it over.
Response: "Try to set a deadline with the prospect. Otherwise the prospect may delay a response for several months, at which point the flavor of your meeting will have faded. Say: "Certainly, I'd like to have you think it over. Why don't you call back in a week or 10 days to set up another appointment?"

If you're soliciting a corporation that you know has a contributions committee, say: "When does the contributions committee meet?"

If the meeting is on January 10, say: "I'll call you back on the 11th, and we'll get their evaluation of the gift."

Conclusion

As a fund raiser, you should enjoy the prospect of a "sale" as much or more as you would a business sale. Unless you feel that you are going to get a kick out of bringing home a significant contribution, you will only devote lukewarm attention to fund raising on behalf of your institution. It's most important for you, as a volunteer, to feel you are accomplishing something on a grander scale than simply giving money or contributing your ideas to an institution's board. The fact that you are able to bring funds to back up your interest in the institution is, to me, a crowning achievement of service.

If you serve as a trustee—no matter how important or wealthy you are—you need to think not only of giving but also of getting funds. As a board member, you really are its ambassador of good will in the community. Case.
Some Common Donor Questions...

...and Some Good Answers

How much am I expected to give?
You are the only person who can decide what your gift should be, but we do have some hopes, and we wonder if you might consider giving XX. (Name a specific giving opportunity, such as a scholarship or a mini-computer for the science department.)

What would that cost?
If you'd like, you could do that for $XX a year for XX years.

Are all commitments expected to be on an XX-year basis?
This is only the suggested pay period to make it more convenient for donors. You may wish to spread your gift over XX or XX years, which would be perfectly satisfactory.

This is a bad time for me since I'm heavily committed to a couple of other causes.

Perhaps you would like to delay the start of your payments and finish up in XX or XX years. Would this help?

What if I am unable to complete my pledge?
If there are any changes in your circumstances and you wish to change your commitments, such changes will, of course, be honored. Just drop a note to us explaining your request.

May I keep the Letter of Intent and send it to you?
It's really no trouble at all for me to stop back as soon as you have made a decision. Would you prefer to make it Thursday evening or the following Monday during the day? [Note: If you keep the Letter of Intent out of sight until the prospect is ready to pledge, there is less tendency for the prospect to ask that it be left.]

May I pay my pledge in cash now?
Of course you may, but would you be willing to repeat your payments again next year and the year after? This is an XX-year capital gifts campaign. We are hoping we can count on you for backing during each of the XX years of this special program.

I cannot give anything at the present time.
It is not necessary to give something immediately. You may make a pledge with payments to start at some future date: next month, next year, etc.

What about annual giving?
We hope our alumni will continue their strong support of annual giving and at the same time make an exceptional effort to support the campaign.

This piece was taken from the "Rollins College Volunteer Guide."