

Not-for-Profit Industry

Seven Fundraising Resolutions to Ensure You Raise a Lot More Money in 2020

There is still time to adopt new and productive habits for 2020. Below are seven fundraising resolutions for you to consider, all discussed more fully in Jeff Brooks book, [How to Turn Your Words into Money](#).

1. TRY NOT TO EDUCATE DONORS

When you try to educate people into giving, they don't give. And they don't become more educated. Most people, most of the time, have no interest in becoming more educated. In childhood we are forced to learn what adults decide is important. After that, each of us sets our own learning agenda. Somebody else's idea of what we should learn blows past us like a light breeze. In your mind, your organization's mission is one of the most important issues facing the world. To almost everyone else, it is a distraction from much more interesting topics, like, say, the history of golf.

2. BE SPECIFIC WHAT YOU ARE ASKING FOR

Make your fundraising as much as possible like shopping, using specificity and concrete details. Ask the donor to do something she can see. Let her provide a needed item. Ask her to take an action. Give her the opportunity to create change. Make progress toward an understandable goal. Meals for hungry people, not elimination of food insecurity. An abstraction like "hope" is not a fundraising offer. Don't let your call to action be vague like this: "Your gift will provide hope for hurting people." That is like trying to sell a box labeled "Shoes" but refusing to provide size, style, or color information.

3. FOCUS ON ONE PERSON (WHICH CAN BE AN ANIMAL, TOO)

A good fundraising story is about one person. It is not a village, a neighborhood, or a drought-stricken region. It must be one person we can look in the eye and feel empathy toward. If your story is about the big picture, you short-circuit your donors' ability to feel connected. The



human brain can only take in one person at a time: One hungry child, not World Hunger; one polar bear that can't find a patch of ice, not Climate Change; one homeless person who needs a place to stay, not Homelessness; one person fighting to overcome cancer, not Cancer. This one-person rule is nearly ironclad. If you stretch your one person to two—say, you have a story about a girl in need and you make her baby brother the costar—you weaken the story and the response.

4. MAKE THE DONOR THE HERO

Many fundraising stories make the organization the hero. It is a way to showcase the effectiveness of the group. The thinking is, if I show how great our organization is, donors will understand and be moved to give. This sounds reasonable, but is a big mistake. The assumption is wrong. Donors don't give because you are excellent. They give because they are excellent, and you help them realize their awesome selves. When you tell an organization-as-hero story, what you say is mostly irrelevant to donors. At best it is boring. Sometimes it is even annoying. But there is more downside. The pronouns get out of whack. The word "you" disappears and the unpleasant "we" creeps in. Professional jargon like pandemic, sustainable, and civil society sprouts all over the place. And almost always there are bullet points used to organize complex information about processes.

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5. TRY NOT TO BE CLEVER

Cleverness is epidemic in journalism and advertising. Clever, punny headlines turn reading some news sites into a frustrating lost-in-the-funhouse exercise. This state of affairs is brought to you by people who are bored with being clear and literal. They also may have discovered that it is beyond their skills to be plainspoken and exciting at the same time. In your fundraising, avoid wordplay (“We are doing asbestos as we can”), symbolism, and abstraction. Ultimately, cleverness doesn’t work in fundraising because it is about you, not your donors. It is the technique of self-centered show-offs, not people who raise funds and connect donors with causes they care about.

6. RECOGNIZE THAT MY DIRECT MAIL APPEAL IS A DISTRACTION

You are being paid to spend hours every week giving close and critical attention to your fundraising. By comparison, for donors you are an occasional envelope in a crowded mailbox. One subject line in a long list of emails. A disruptive phone call during dinner. If you are lucky, you have your donor’s attention for a few seconds. This means one thing: if your message is not self-evident in the few seconds of attention you have, it can’t get across. So keep it simple. How simple? Rule 1: Make only one call to action at a time. If you are asking for money, don’t toss in an invitation to your event, or a planned giving offer. Rule 2: Make sure your call to action can be expressed in one sentence. Or less. Save the rain forest. Give a needy child a book. Support Parkinson’s research.

7. RECOGNIZE THAT MY DONORS ARE OLDER THAN ME

When you write fundraising copy, you are not talking to people like your pals. You are communicating with people like your parents, your aunts, and your grandparents. Think about the ways you talk with your elderly relatives. Tone, vocabulary, subject matter, allusions—it is different, probably very different from your discourse with coworkers and friends. This is a social adjustment we all make without thinking much about it. But in fundraising you have to be conscious of the difference. One obvious approach to avoid is hype. Most advertising is aimed at younger audiences, which is why it employs so much hype—big, bold, exciting claims like Best! First! Biggest! Newest! Your donors were not born yesterday. They know that something claiming to be the greatest ever probably is not so great.

The preceding is an article by Jeff Brooks, a creative force in fundraising for more than 30 years, and author of [How to Turn Your Words into Money](#) and [The Fundraiser’s Guide to Irresistible Communications](#).

Contact Us

If you would like to discuss how Cole, Newton & Duran’s not-for-profit team can help your organization with your accounting, tax, or consulting needs, please feel free to give me a call.

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