

Not-for-Profit Industry

Why We Ask in Person

Let's be honest—most people do not like asking for money. In fact most of us do not like asking for anything. So, why do nonprofits not only solicit individuals for charitable gifts, but do it in person?

Asking in Person Is Unusual

These days we get solicited in lots of ways, day in and day out. Fundraising letters arrive in the mail and email solicitations hit our inbox. Our friends send us special event invitations. We get calls from those we know, such as our alma maters, and those we do not. Crowdfunding has given countless worthy projects a platform and an audience.

This can be referred to as “charity shock.” It is when everyone asks you for money and you feel you need a suit of armor to deal with the situation. There are so many worthy causes and you would like to support them all, yet if you do so, you can't give significantly to the causes you care most about.

Now ask yourself how often you have been asked in person, face-to-face, for a significant gift? Studies have shown that among board members and fundraising professionals, less than half have ever been asked. Less than half!

Now imagine how special an in-person ask is. Imagine if someone contacted you and asked to meet in person to support an organization you care about. Chances are you would be flattered. The request would stand out from the endless, mostly generic solicitations you get. It would grab your attention. You would think, “Wow, someone wants to take the time to meet me. I'm impressed.”

Asking in person is impactful because it is actually quite unusual.



Asking in Person Is Powerful

Be honest. How often do those mail solicitations go straight to the trash bin? If you know the organization or the return address, you might peek inside. It is easy to ignore a mail solicitation as no one from the organization is watching you toss it. The statistics show that only 1 percent to 2 percent of all mail solicitations result in a gift, though the results for organizations you know and support will be higher.

How about the phone? Admit it. Half the time you do not pick up the phone, and the other half of the time you hang up pretty quickly, even if you know the organization. Research years back by Kent Dove, formerly of the Indiana University Foundation, showed that even for charities we already support and care about, only about 25 percent of those phone solicitations result in a gift.

Yet that same research showed that 75 percent of in-person asks result in a gift. Three out of four. What incredible odds!

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Why is asking in person so powerful? When we are together, a level of empathy develops that is much harder to develop by letter or by phone. The letter is a one-way communication. You get it, you read it, and that is that. You do not get to ask questions and have a back-and-forth conversation. The phone is a big step forward as we can at least hear each other's voices and start a dialog. This begins to build a relationship.

When we are in each other's company, we develop an immediate bond. We find we are more interested in what the other person is saying. We want to come through for them. We want to be seen as good people who do good things. And, of course, facial expressions are key to understanding our fellow humans. In person, we develop a deeper understanding of what makes each other tick.

In an age when the smartphone is ubiquitous, and we spend more time texting, emailing, and posting than meeting in person, face time is even more precious and valuable. We crave it, and we do not take it for granted. When someone takes the time to meet with us in person, it is quite meaningful. And that is to the advantage of fundraisers.

Asking in Person Is Fruitful

Think about donor rosters in annual reports and on donor walls. Take note of the names that grace programs, rooms, and buildings. I can assure you virtually none of those gifts was requested by letter or phone call. Many charities have a story about a donor who made a whopping gift by letter or phone call, and those stories are memorable because they are so rare and surprising. Without question, the largest gifts at most organizations come from asking in person ... and those gifts are larger than they would have been otherwise.

Further, the beauty of individuals is we tend to give to the same charities for many years, often in increasing amounts. Unlike institutional funders—foundations, corporations, and government sources—we are pleased that organizations can use our funding over the long haul. We get that almost everything we support will require charitable gifts going forward. And we do not tend to change our focus areas or take a year off to contemplate our corporate navel. We are very loyal. And, to top it off, according to Giving USA, of the more than \$390 billion given in charitable gifts in the United States in 2016, almost 88 percent came from individuals.

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Asking Individuals in Person Is Where the Money Is

Does your organization spend most of its time cultivating and soliciting individuals? If you are like most organizations, you are probably knee-deep in proposals to foundations. You might be applying for government grants and looking for corporate contacts as well. Think about how much time you spend going after the slice of the pie that represents 12 percent of the available charitable gifts and how much time you spend on the 88 percent. Chances are you are not optimizing your efforts.

As for individuals, the first attempts are often around special events, direct mail, and crowdfunding, which means you are getting lots of small to mid-sized gifts. However, as with everything in life, the Pareto Principle applies: 80 percent of the benefit derives from 20 percent of the effort. This means 80 percent of your individual gifts will generally come from 20 percent of your donors. For capital campaigns, the ratio can be 90 percent/10 percent or higher. Therefore, if you are soliciting individual gifts, are you spending 80 percent of your time soliciting the 20 percent of your donors who will contribute most of the dollars?

Chances are you are not spending enough time on individual gifts and, if you are spending the time, you are not spending it on the donors who will make the biggest difference.

So, the next time someone recommends writing another proposal, sending out another letter, or creating a new event, think twice and invest that time in cultivating and soliciting individuals face-to-face.

The preceding is an article by Brian Sabers, president, of [Asking Matters](#).

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.

Pat Koepke, CPA
Not-for-Profit Practice Leader
734.427.2030
pkoeper@cndcpa.com

CND Cole, Newton
& Duran
Certified Public Accountants

Cole, Newton & Duran CPAs
33762 Schoolcraft Road
Livonia, MI 48150
P: 734.427.2030
F: 734.427.3004
W: www.cndcpa.com