

Words to Live By

BY LYNN S. EDMONDS

Don't Sweat the Small Stuff

Breakthrough results come from fretting over the right things.

A professor stood before his class, picked up a large jar and filled it with golf balls. He asked his students if the jar was full. They agreed it was.

Then he poured pebbles into the jar. The pebbles rolled into the open areas between the golf balls. Again he asked if the jar was full, and the students responded, "Yes." Next he poured sand into the jar, and it filled up everything else. Again he asked the students if the jar was full, and they said, "Yes."

Then he poured a cup of coffee into the jar, effectively filling every last space.

"This jar represents your life," the professor said. "The golf balls are the important things — God, family, health and friends. The pebbles are the other things that matter, like your job and your house. The sand's everything else — the small stuff.

"If you put sand in the jar first, there's no room for the pebbles or golf balls. The same goes for life. If you spend all your time and energy on the small stuff, you won't have room for what's important to you."

What does this have to do with fundraising? A friend shared this story with me, and I thought about the challenges many development professionals deal with in their day-to-day roles. In the life of a fundraiser, the golf balls and pebbles are important things such as donor acquisition, donor renewals, warm prospects and lapsed donors.

The sand, or the "small stuff," is the obstacles that often prevent us from achieving breakthrough results in our fundraising programs. Old policy issues such as, "We can't possibly ask a volunteer for a gift," "We really can't ask for that level of gift from our donors," or "We can't spend that much on a donor mailing," are examples of the negative thinking that can sabotage success.

There can be technical obstacles as well, such as, "We're not sure of the source of those donors, so we better not mail to them," "Those segments

are too small to mail to," or "It's hard to regularly send acknowledgements — let's wait until we have enough to qualify for bulk rate versus First Class postage."

I know these are statements we hear often. But if we're truly looking out for what's important in our fundraising programs, as professionals, we first must focus on the value of the golf balls and the pebbles.

And what about the coffee? I'll get to that later.

For example

One of our clients is a regional child-service nonprofit that helps more than 10,000 children and at-risk families every year through more than 30 service and advocacy programs. When this organization decided that it required additional funding for its annual initiatives, the strategy was to segment the donor file to identify upper-level donors, then ask them for a year-end gift that was dramatically higher than any gift they'd given previously.

The organization always took a conservative approach toward its upper-level donors. But for this special appeal, the development team put aside its preconceived notions about targeting this group and, instead, fully embraced the new strategy. The program also included new creative concepts carefully tailored to this important audience.

The segmentation strategy was to ask current donors, lapsed donors and a segment of donors/volunteers for a minimum gift of \$1,000, \$2,500 or "other." The mailing package featured a closed-face outer envelope with the organization logo and an "OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT" notation on a cream-colored, high-quality paper stock. The one-page letter was personalized and thanked the recipient for his past support, and mentioned several times the importance of the donor's "continued" support and how much it was needed to accomplish the goals the organization had set for the new year.

The letters were all "hand signed," and many had personal notes written to the recipients. The reply device was a simple, cream-colored card, again with "OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT" noted, the offer



restated and the final line, "Please be as generous as possible."

Following is the outcome of this targeted, high-quality, special ask strategy:

Quantity mailed: 1,001 letters
Returns: 206 (20.58%)
Gross revenue: \$225,838
Net income: \$223,467
(ROI - \$95.27)

This organization embraced a new strategic approach that had the potential to achieve breakthrough results. And it succeeded because it eliminated the obstacles that prevented it from reaching this level of success in the past.

Test, test, test

Another golf ball in a fundraiser's jar is commitment to ongoing testing. In 2004, the

L.W. Robbins food-bank team persuaded seven of our food-bank clients to test a new format for their traditional Thanksgiving appeals. The new package would allow for greater personalization and offer enough real estate for a compelling story. The test would run against a successful control that had a history of making money in acquisition, but we had to invest in additional testing to see if we could beat the control.

The results were so strong across all seven food banks that we rolled out the new format in 2005. There was a 36.7 percent lift in response and a 4.8 percent lift in average gift. The cost per dollar raised was reduced by 25 percent.

In addition to these spectacular overall results, one of the food banks received a \$10,000 gift in

acquisition and a bequest from an acquisition donor of \$1 million.

Breakthroughs like these were achieved by development professionals who paid attention to the critical things in their fundraising lives and who didn't let the small stuff get in the way. Their strategies were driven by their golf balls and pebbles, and they increased their donor involvement and reached new fundraising goals.

And what about the coffee the professor poured into the jar? That's to show you there's always room for a cup of coffee with a colleague! Take the time to share your fundraising stories and tips with a friend! ♦

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