

Stormproofing Your Major Donor Programme

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Although the future is fundamentally uncertain, we can count on one thing. The tempestuous seas and gale force winds of the current economic crisis will test the seaworthiness of many charities. Some will batten down the hatches and seek refuge below deck, simply doing their best to ride out the storm. Others will wisely seek a more proactive approach to avoid ending up on the reefs and will thus have “all hands on deck” to maneuver the ship expertly until the seas again grow calm.

Recognising that there’s no quick fix for the current global recession, what are some things you might do to weather the storm and potentially come out of the tempest even stronger?

First, let’s recognise that a sovereign God is in control and both the US and the UK have weathered worse storms. This won’t be easy, but neither is it likely to be fatal.

Second, avoid the “gloom and doom” thinking that can quickly become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Don’t yield to the diseased thinking of the guy, who when asked how long had he been unwell replied, “In two more weeks it will be a month!”

Third, remember that only a relatively small percentage of donors have temporarily stopped giving entirely, and few of them are likely to be among your major donors.

Fourth, take advantage of this challenging time to review current strategies and programmes and be sure that your donor cosmograph informs a truly strategic

resource allocation framework for your charity's fundraising efforts (for those unfamiliar with a cosmograph, drop us a line at: redina@mcconkey-johnston.co.uk and we can send the information to you).

Fifth, recognise that when donors reduce their giving, your goal is to survive the cut. An who will survive the cut? Those charities that have embraced “the relentless pursuit of donor delight” and have been proactive and consistent in creating *donor loyalty*.

It's chilling to realise that even donors who indicate that they are “very satisfied” with a charity can still defect in a heartbeat. **It's *delighted* donors that don't defect.** Many charities that have performed poorly in creating value for donors will find they didn't make the cut, and sadly, most will never learn why.

Sixth, don't be a “fair weather friend” to your donors. As John Kennedy once said, “Only in winter can we see which trees are evergreen.” During difficult times, some charities are likely to neglect major donors who temporarily can't give, thereby signalling that the only thing they're really interested in is the donor's money, not the donor. If you felt that a charity doesn't care about you as a person and sees you only as a “walking cheque book”, would you continue to support them?

Because donor development, properly understood, is about developing donors as individuals (*a radically different paradigm and practice than merely developing a donor base*), this is a good time to do a reality check and confirm that those involved in your development efforts understand that development isn't simply something you do to *support* ministry. It *is* ministry.

As anyone who has spent a considerable amount of time in the field of development knows, fundraising can be complex. In fact, according to one study, more than 50 distinct disciplines now characterise the field of development. The good news, however, is that there are some simple and abiding truths that every CEO or development officer can follow with major donors. My partner of more than 35 years, Bill McConkey, shares four abiding truths which, while especially appropriate to major

donor development, apply to other donors as well. These four “keys” should be committed to memory by your CEO, fundraising staff, board members, and each staff person genuinely interested in the growth of your charity:

Four Keys to Major Donor Success

1. Get *involved* in the lives of your donors.
2. Discover what *their* hopes and dreams are.
3. Show them how your organization can be a vehicle for the realisation of *their* dreams.
4. *Challenge* them to make their dreams come true *now*.

Key # 1. Get *involved* in the lives of your donors. In major donor research conducted for my dissertation, one charity (among five) scored the highest in donor satisfaction and loyalty. Not surprisingly, this was a charity that had regular, quality face-to-face time with their major donors. While we’re big believers in direct mail, we appreciate the wisdom in the adage that “Nobody ever got milk by sending a letter to a cow! You’ve got to get close, get your hands on, and stroke!

Key # 2. Discover what *their hopes and dreams* are. The astute reader will notice that this flows naturally out of Key #1. In other words, if you truly get involved in the lives of your donors – in deep and meaningful ways – you’ll discover what is most important to them. But beware a trap that many CEOs and fundraising staff fall into. They spend so much time talking about *their charity’s* hopes and dreams that they don’t have time to learn the hopes and dreams of their donors. This puts them in a “selling” mode rather than the more desirable “marketing” mode.

Think of it this way: “Selling” is taking what you have “on the shelf” (plans, dreams, case for support, etc.) and attempting to persuade the donor to “buy” it. “Marketing” is finding out what the donor wants and then putting *that* on the shelf. This doesn’t mean that you become “donor-driven.” It means that while being driven by your charity’s mission, vision, and values, you are passionately donor-*focused*. As Peter Drucker, the father of modern management noted, “The aim of marketing is to make selling superfluous.”

Key # 3. Show them how your charity can be a vehicle for the realisation of their hopes and dreams. Let's go back to the "shelf" again. If you have discovered what the hopes and dreams of your donors are, what kind of impact they want to have and what kind of legacy they want to leave, you can now show them how different programmes or aspects of your work can be excellent vehicles for the realisation of some of those dreams.

If you have discovered what my passion is as a major donor, and can demonstrate how your charity can be an outstanding vehicle for accomplishing *my* dreams, how effective do you think you need to be as a salesperson? Not very. By discovering what's most important to me and demonstrating an interest in how you can further my hopes and dreams through a genuine partnership, you've made "selling" superfluous.

Key # 4. Challenge them to make their dreams come true now. (aka, "Do your givin' while you're livin' so you're knowin' where it's goin'.") While our **Donor Value Mapping**[®] process provides laser precision in identifying what really drives donor loyalty for a particular charity, it's worth repeating one of the greatest truths of fundraising. **Of all the reasons why people give, one is more important than any other: someone asked.**

This means that becoming involved in your donors' lives, discovering what their hopes and dreams are, and showing them how your charity can be a vehicle for their realisation isn't enough. In and of itself, that would be like hitting the ball out of the park, running to third base and then walking off the field! It adds no more to the score than striking out! Remember, in the scenario I've outlined, you're not simply asking for a gift. You're inviting good friends and partners to make *their* dreams come true.

Invest in these four keys on a consistent basis and you'll effectively stormproof your major donor program. Come economic wind or wave, you can count on surviving the storm.

To find out how **Donor Value Mapping**[®] can add significant value to your Major Donor Programme visit: www.mcconkey-johnston.co.uk or email us at: redina@mcconkey-johnston.co.uk