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Breakthroughs in search of an audience

Some confessions of a conference junkie

Amongst professional fundraisers and their suppliers, wherever in the world they congregate to practise their profession or promote their wares, there exists it seems a near insatiable appetite for fundraising seminars and conferences. On the face of it these events are designed to improve their professional performance and even enhance the career prospects of those lucky enough to bear the badge that proudly proclaims 'delegate' or, better still, 'speaker'.

Some of these conferences are really rather grand, even sumptuous affairs with all the razzamatazz of show-time, bright lights, spectacular effects, theatrical video and audio shows and seemingly endless supplies of fine wines and exotic foods. To fundraisers who would experience these extravaganzas, it further seems, cost is no object, neither is frequency, quality, nor reputation of speakers, standard of content, nor even relevance of subject matter. Inconvenience of location or timing, perhaps, will deflect a few, but even these irritations wouldn't deter most determined, ambitious fundraisers from shifting heaven and earth (or at least any planned meetings with potential donors) to attend one of their many industry conferences, where they can gather in conducive surrounds and convivial atmosphere to feed their addiction to fundraising, to meet, interact with and listen to, even sometimes learn from their peers, or at least those among their peers brave or foolish enough to take the stage in an attempt to teach 'fundraising' to this most demanding and discriminating of audiences.

But justification if it's needed isn't hard to come by, although in practice many if not most fundraisers will still fall short. If you can get just one really good fundraising idea from just one of these seminars, the cost, time and raised-to-be-dashed expectations all become instantly worthwhile. If you get more than two, you're well ahead. Five, and you've hit paydirt.

The speakers, I sometimes think, are the sad acts of these events. From the oldest most overexposed sages and gurus (who believe me are usually still a bag of nerves pre-performance) to new instant stars plucked from among fundraising's freshest faces in 'Big Brother' style (and with similar star qualities), all vie for our admiration and approval and most of all, for our positive

evaluation. Subjects ranging from posture and grooming for fundraisers to how to stay sane, serene and savvy in the face of change, with every possible nuance of theme and content in between, are all accompanied by a score sheet upon which delegates dissect, rank and score presenters in terms of relevance, content, presentation skills, use of visuals, quality of handouts and sometimes other attributes too lurid to mention here...

The poor, timorous presenters live or die by the casual verdicts of these damning documents. It's enough to send speakers to drink (if they weren't most likely to be found in the bar anyway).

For my sins if not for a living (it would be a meagre one for sure were I to attempt it), I lecture around the world on subjects allied or akin to fundraising, marketing and communications for nonprofits, and have done so for 20 years or more. Over this long time I've learned more than a few tricks of the speaker's trade and most painfully have come to accept that presentation counts for far more than content in this topsy-turvy world. After all that time I've at last become almost proficient or at least acceptable at the public speaker's art, and I've nearly mastered my nerves and dread of exposing myself before a gaggle of my peers, enough to be reasonably good at it, even if not to earn sufficient to forgo my day job.

Speakers on the fundraising circuit gain many benefits, not always the most obvious. Sure, I get to travel a lot to exotic places like St Louis and Baltimore, Budapest, Nairobi and Melbourne, always in economy, with chin on knees. I've become an expert in finding small flat surfaces on which to balance the almost inedible eats they give us, without disturbing my sleeping, over-large and obnoxious neighbour. I get to hang around dismal, airless airports for hours on end and to frequent seedy, glum, cheap hotels, utterly indistinguishable wherever I might be so I can watch the same news, commercials and rerun movies everywhere. My collection of miniature soaps and shampoos from hotels around the world is the envy of my friends – well, those who don't travel much, at least – and a reliable fallback if conversation flags at dinner.

But of course there are benefits that real people might covet. As the same faces tend to show up as speakers pretty much everywhere, I get to meet and re-meet lots of charming fundraising chums from around the world. I like that. Sometimes we'll all go out to eat at a nice restaurant. Being a speaker can at times make one feel nearly famous, like when delegates leave their bags to book a seat saying 'in case it's a sell-out'. That feels good, though nowadays anti-terrorist measures may inhibit this. The 'room full' sign, something delegates dread, is for a speaker the sign of real achievement. Those who do get in leave muttering 'was that it?', or similar. But those turned away by a 'room full' sign are really impressed. 'Wow!' you hear them exclaim as they leave,

bereft, 'He must be good...'

So, when a speaker asks for a small and intimate room for his or her 'workshop', you now know what's behind the request.

When I'm in seminar delegate mode (a modest benefit as a speaker is that I usually get free entry to others' sessions) I'm shamelessly on the prowl for new ideas, constantly rummaging around for a concept I can adapt, or a new way of looking at something, or a phrase or fashion that I can latch onto to make my own. A lifelong plagiarist, for me no stone is too lowly to overturn, and I've become quite accomplished at sniffing out the unlikely ideas that others overlook or discard unappreciated. Surprisingly, I find most other delegates, perhaps because they are less experienced than I, are much less focused. In fact most seem not to have a clue as to why they are there, or what they might stumble across. Their loss, I'm sure. They wouldn't recognise a good idea if they found it in their soup.

Here's just three ideas I picked up at recent conferences:

1. **AFP Baltimore, April 2005.** From a presentation given by Dr Paul MacFadden of Yorkstown University on major donors' attitudes to leaving a bequest, I learned the three most important little words in fundraising. He asked a select group of major, major donors, all of whom had confirmed their decision to leave a big charitable bequest, if they had told the nonprofit or nonprofits they'd included in their will of the largesse that was coming their way. Almost always the answer was 'No.' He then asked why. Almost always the answer was the same. One particular mega-donor, who had decided to leave his entire estate to just one national nonprofit, put it most succinctly. The reason he wouldn't tell them, he wrote concisely on his questionnaire, was 'may change mind'. The bequest he was planning? Over \$100,000,000.00.

Those three little words apply to every donor, and alone justify whatever investment you care to make in donor stewardship.

At Paul's seminar, as far as I could see, I was the only one in that packed room who wrote those magic words down. Wisdom, it seems, is not equally available for everyone.

2. **UK Institute of Fundraising Convention, July 2005**

New York's brilliant stewardship visionary Karen Osborne of the Osborne Group made an almost throwaway remark that all but the most alert of her audience might have missed. She showed how the leading British nonprofit NSPCC has learned that internal stewardship is as important as external. She cited the example of a non-fundraising member of NSPCC's staff – the guy who makes their videos – being awarded an internal certificate of recognition as a 'Donor Delighter', because he makes such great donor-centred

videos. This, Karen reported, has the guy in question so motivated and enthusiastic he's going to make even better videos in the future. But though most organisations I know have no concept of internal stewardship, only a few of her audience would be taking that idea back home. Ideas, it appears, are selective, and only latch on to the attentive few with receptive minds.

3. Professional Fundraising Convention Scotland, June 2005. Trust and confidence expert Stephen Lee showed his highly appreciative audience that nonprofits habitually lose out because they are appallingly bad at new product development. They don't, he claimed, invest anything like as much as they should on research and testing of new products and propositions. While this elicited spontaneous applause and much nodding of heads, not many made a note of the concept. So the chances of changing the status quo in their organisations are perhaps remote.

Great opportunities, seemingly, are not visible to all eyes. Winning concepts, apparently, are inaudible to most ears.

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In my idle moments I have taken to watching other speakers and delegates at fundraising conferences. Mostly, fundraisers old and new seem to adopt a timid mode, sitting as far to the back of the room as possible to be safely out of reach, perhaps in case the speaker might choose suddenly to hit out at them, or equally serious, to ask them a question. While some take notes, others lean back with arms folded as if saying 'go on, entertain me'.

A seemingly new phenomenon is also evident, perhaps resulting from the range and choice of entertainments with which we surround the modern fundraising conference. This concerns those delegates whose employers pay their entry fees but the delegates don't actually attend any of the sessions. Other than those in the bar, perhaps. I dismiss suppliers whose staff follow this trend because I don't care how these people waste their company's money. But it does trouble me to see how common this is becoming among people from nonprofits.

But then maybe these are people who know that even if they do attend, however good the speakers and however appropriate the subject matter, they still won't learn anything. As with a horse to water you can take the student into the classroom, but you can't make him, or her, learn. Not if he or she hasn't got eyes to see or ears to hear.

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