

How to be '15 minutes ahead'

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What follows is a short selection of ideas you can use to enable your nonprofit organisation to be just far enough ahead of all the others to ensure you have all the success you need.

Please note. This list is very far from definitive. Use it to stimulate thoughts and ideas and add your own ways to be '15 minutes ahead'. Look not for big ideas and major breakthroughs. Instead seek out the easy wins and incremental advances that can be found in abundance whatever your field or fields of endeavour. All of what follows will not be relevant for each organisation. Adapt these ideas to suit your own needs and circumstances.

Good luck!

In understanding your strengths and weaknesses, relative to those of your competitors

1. At regular intervals test your own nonprofit and others in your area that you admire or consider as competitors. Devise a formal way of monitoring how they respond to donors. Copy the best of their systems. Avoid their obvious mistakes.*
2. Set customer service standards and targets that ensure your organisation gives faster, friendlier, more appropriate and better service that will delight your donors.
3. Get yourself on the mailing lists of organisations that you think you could learn from.
4. Ask for advice and support from other nonprofits. Take advantage of the generous spirit of sharing that prevails in our business area.
5. Sole fundraisers or those in smaller organisations can often find willing mentors among staff of the larger organisations. It does no harm to ask.
6. Practise creative plagiarism. Search out great new ideas and copy any that might be appropriate for you.
7. Adapt, don't just adopt.
8. Don't neglect the possibility of copying from commercial service providers. Sadly, nonprofits don't lead the way in being customer-friendly.

In understanding and listening to donors

1. Meet your donors at every opportunity. Ask their opinions and listen to their advice. (Obvious, I know. But most don't

do it. Yet it's the best form of regular research. And it builds trust, confidence and loyalty. And it's free!

2. Make yours a listening organisation (train yourself/colleagues in donor care, offer your donors a say in formulating your strategy, encourage feedback, comments, questions and complaints, regularly research your donors' views and lapsed donors too, survey and measure donors' satisfaction, keeping simple indices which in time will become key performance indicators (KPIs), the regular data you use to monitor fundraising performance – you'll be ahead in this, because most fundraisers only measure their performance in money received now).
3. Set up an annual rolling research programme so you can monitor your donors' attitudes over time. Improvements in donors' understanding of and feelings for your nonprofit can be one of your KPIs.
4. Get your thinking right (and encourage your colleagues too). Work on attitudes as well as techniques. Make the 90-degree shift, to see everything you do through your donors' eyes. This takes constant practice.
5. Make sure you are giving your donors what they want, not what you want them to have.
6. Here's another example of the 90-degree shift. Your donors also have to understand you, so they can trust you and have confidence in you and your organisation. This will be essential if donors are to let you have the information and permissions you will need from them, to practise true donor relationship management.

In providing an appropriate, responsive, customer-led service to your donors

1. Set high standards for donor service in your organisation. Publish these, and make sure all staff know of them. Let your donors know too.
2. Make sure your 'thank you' and 'welcome' procedures are the best anywhere. Get a hold of Penelope Burk's book *Donor Centred Fundraising* (www.donorcentred.com).
3. With a little help from Penelope's book, create the best 'thank you and welcome' policy ever, in your organisation.
4. Get 'thank you' letters and acknowledgement out within 24 hours (48 at most). Etc, etc.
5. Take action to secure the vital second gift. Remember a donor's prime needs are
 - to know the gift was received;
 - to know the gift was 'set to work' as intended;
 - to know the project/programme is having the desired effect.
6. Set up a donor support helpline. Have it operate at times most convenient for your donors, not for you. An answering machine outside office hours is a start.
7. Show your people. List named individuals, their job titles, photos and their phone nos in your annual report, newsletter, or wherever appropriate. Invite contact on appropriate

- issues. The message is 'We're here to help you'.
8. Switch from monologue to dialogue. Ask donors to give their views. Put a contact number and name at the end of every article in your newsletter and annual report. Offer further information or follow-up.
 9. Teach your staff how to be loyal to donors. Involve everyone from the receptionist/switchboard to the CEO.
 10. Be proactively accountable. Publish 'the standards we set ourselves' in your annual report.
 11. Make sure all your job titles and donor segment descriptions are the kind donors would be comfortable with (I have come across organisations who, in addition to that hideous sounding group, 'lapsed donors' – would you want to live next door to a lapsed donor? – have labelled groups of poorly performing donors as 'the residue', 'the sediment' and even 'the dead pool'. Nearly as bad as the fundraiser who signed his letters under the grand title of 'Director, donor targeting and segmentation'.

In effective communication

1. Learn and practise the fundraiser's (somewhat lost) art of story telling. Promote 'experience' fundraising.
2. Elevate the importance of communication with donors in your organisation. Let everyone know how crucial and valuable it is in building the relationships that will sustain your nonprofit, and what steps you are taking to make your organisation's communications as good as can be.
3. Aspire to say less, but better. Only send communications that are important and worth receiving (that your donors will want to receive, rather than what you want them to have). Cut your draft copy in half. Study communication using short, easily accessible formats and reader-friendly design/layout.
4. If you're not an expert communicator, study to become one or employ someone who is. Focus particularly on techniques for and barriers to readability, so you can make it as easy as possible for donors to access the important information you send them.
5. Never be dull, boring or long-winded. Few donors want to know how you are restructuring the computer department.
6. Let your passion shine through.
7. Outlaw bad pictures. If something isn't interesting, don't send it.
8. Try to understand and focus on the major motivations that have attracted your donors in the first place. Most organisations have several; often these are quite different from each other and from other organisations. Then, build strategies addressing those motivations into your future communications. For example, a nonprofit serving children with multiple disabilities may have donors who are there because of a professional connection, because they feel sympathy or pity for the children, because they have a family member with this condition, because they are angry that

more isn't being done, and so on. Addressing these fundamental motivations creatively will ensure your donors get more, and your fundraising results will shoot up.

9. Never send anything you think your donors might disapprove of (sounds obvious advice, but many organisations don't always follow it).

In giving your donors choices

1. Consider introducing file segmentation by demographics, behaviour and by choice.
2. Make sure you systematically gather your donors' phone numbers, email addresses, mobile phone numbers and all other communication data you might need. (This may seem unnecessary advice, but again lots of organisations don't do this.)
3. Offer the chance for donors to choose when/how often they hear from you.
4. Let your donors choose what they want to hear about from you. If your nonprofit works in several different areas it may well be that some donors are only interested in a specific campaign or issue. They will respond better if you communicate about what interests them. For example, many donors to overseas development NGOs are involved because they have a connection with a particular region or country. If you support CARE because of their work in Somalia, where you once lived, you may not be even slightly interested in what they're doing in Guatemala.
5. Some organisations might consider it appropriate to allow donors to choose whether or not they receive graphic, possibly upsetting pictures or descriptions of their work.
6. If a mailing or telephone preference scheme exists in your country offer potential new donors a short information sheet that explains it, so if they wish they can opt out of unwanted communications.
7. If you fancy being 15 miles ahead, start agitating for a face-to-face fundraising preference scheme, where donors large and small would be able to choose to opt out of solicitations.
8. If you have the courage, allow your donors to opt out of further appeals. Or of any communications of any kind.
9. Create a regular, short electronic newsletter. Offer donors the opportunity to receive news updates by email.
10. Allow them to choose whether or not to receive your annual report. Offer it in a variety of formats (the technology that will make all of this easy and affordable is coming soon).
11. Offer an 'Xmas only' option to donors who consistently give to you just once a year or less.
12. Create a special 'info only' group for supporters who don't want to receive regular appeals. Encourage them to opt in when they're ready.
13. Test once a year communications on your donors' birthdays.
14. If you can, offer large print to donors with poor eyesight (the enlargement function on the office photocopier might help

here).

In developing appropriate products and propositions for your donors

1. For the bulk of your general donors, try to make it as easy as possible for them to support your cause. Focus on automatic methods of payment so you don't have to send them troublesome reminders (and they don't forget to send their gifts). Donors on automated payment systems stay 2-3 times longer than donors who have to renew annually.
2. Set up a monthly giving scheme, with tangible benefits and good reasons why donors should join.
3. If your organisation is not a well-known and readily trusted name, try offering a one year 'trial period' for monthly donors, promising that after 12 months you will contact them and offer the option to cancel. This will get over donors' universal hurdle of not wishing to make a completely open-ended commitment. Or you could try offering this option to people who have already turned down the open-ended payment option. In the trial year, of course, nonprofits will have a real incentive to communicate so effectively that one year on, hesitant new donors will all wish to stay.
4. Get hold of Harvey McKinnon's great book on monthly giving. It's called *Hidden Gold* (Amazon.com).
5. Develop a legacy giving programme with its own specific communications scheme.
6. Many nonprofits now have really effective electronic communications strategies and are successfully developing relationships and raising funds online. (Copy what other nonprofits are doing in all these areas.)
7. Form a group of former employees of your organisation. Develop their skills as volunteers to help promote your cause. I know of one major British nonprofit through whose portals have passed some of the country's finest and most talented fundraisers. Most have moved on to pastures new, but not wishing to lose contact with this pool of talent this nonprofit is now in the process of developing a group of former employees so they can call on their unique skills as volunteers. The former staff are a bit flattered, and very enthusiastic.

In general

1. Have your donor database properly profiled at least once each year. You need to know your donor file inside out so you can make sure you have the most useful information available on your donors and what they are doing. Very often organisations have lots of information on their donors but don't know how to access it or what to do when they have it, e.g. lifetime giving and lifetime values (LTG and LTV).
2. Identify the real donors. Ask fewer people for more money

for better reasons.

3. Abolish negative thinking and outlaw defeatist phrases such as 'That'll never work here'. If you think you can, or if you think you can't, both times you are right (think about it...).
4. David Ogilvy once said 'The only difference between a good surgeon and a great surgeon is knowledge'. Great surgeons just know more. So it is with fundraisers. So keep well informed. Never imagine you know it all, or even close. Most fundraisers don't read the books available to them. You can gain many advantages by choosing the best from a large and growing body of knowledge. Even when they've paid to attend conferences, many fundraisers don't bother to take notes. They think they will remember the important bits, which of course they forget almost before they've left the room (as a seminar leader, I see this very often). Only one in 40 or so *really* learns enough to change what they do. The rest nod in agreement but change nothing. Practise quality listening. You are in a field where this skill is quite rare and mastering it will give you an important edge.
5. Get hold of the ten best books in fundraising because they're full of ways to be 15 minutes ahead. Apart from my books (obviously – I have to live!) make sure you have on your desk most of Mal Warwick's books, anything by Kay Sprinkel Grace, Bernard Ross' *Breakthrough Thinking* and George Smith's brilliant book on fundraising creativity, *Asking Properly* (all on Amazon.com or Amazon.co.uk). Plus the others I mentioned earlier.
6. Learn also the lessons of history and experience. Modern fundraisers think they started it all, so it's all right for them to imagine they know it all too. But this is a mistake. There is little that might confront you in your fundraising career that hasn't been experienced, tackled and resolved by some other fundraiser before you. Most of those who've been there and done it before will be only too happy to share their knowledge and experience with you, if you ask them nicely.

*How to test donor service is covered in detail in my book *Friends for Life* - see www.whitelionpress.com

Some of the above is adapted from *The Zen of Fundraising*, a new book by me, published in March 2006 by Jossey-Bass Inc (www.josseybass.com)

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