

January/February 2006

This document can be freely downloaded, adapted and copied for use by individual organisations. It may not be published or distributed electronically, or used for any purpose without the publisher's prior consent

Kermarquer, 56310  
Melrand, France.  
Telephone:  
+33 (0)2 97 39 52 63.  
Fax:  
+33 (0)2 97 39 57 59.

Email:  
ken@kenburnett.com

# Shaping fundraising's future, part two

## How will we consistently break the mould?

*Nature and Nature's laws lay hid in night.  
God said, Let Newton be! and all was light.*

*Epitaph intended for Sir Isaac Newton,  
Alexander Pope*

Most fundraising today is stereotyped, aimed at the lowest common denominator, the victim of formulae and formats designed by marketing people for easy mass reproduction. This is clearly unwise. Nonprofits need to avoid stale, repetitive fundraising approaches that dismay and deter donors.

So fundraisers nowadays should all aspire to be mini Isaac Newtons, to spread light into every corner of their creativity and communications thereby to illuminate that which is currently hidden but which, if we only have eyes to see it, will show us how we will fundraise in the future.

In the previous edition of *Contributions* I put forward the notion that if fundraisers aspire to constantly and consistently inspire their donors they must first be accomplished in the art and science of innovation so that they can regularly 'break the mould' and effectively break free of the repetitiveness that holds them back. I outlined my belief that there are ten main components to a strategy of successful innovation, which I described as:

1. Making the 90-degree shift compulsory in all fundraising training.
2. Recognising that the old ways have to change.
3. Getting rid of gimmicks and so-called involvement devices.
4. Getting competitive.
5. Celebrating the right to be wrong.
6. Getting used to taking risks.
7. Taking action to breed a positive culture of innovation.
8. Investing appropriately in innovation.
9. Learning from others.
10. Getting your board fully behind your innovation strategy.

For this follow-up article I'd like to look at each of these in detail.

## Make the 90-degree shift

The 90-degree shift is nothing more complex than developing the ability to see things from your donor's point of view rather than (or in addition to) your own, or your organisation's point of view. It is putting yourself in your donor's shoes, seeing your communication, your fundraising and even your role as a fundraiser through your donor's eyes rather than through the eyes of your CEO, or your head of finance, or of fundraising.

Sounds simple enough and might even be deemed easy and trivial (though uncomfortable, perhaps). But in practice fundraisers find this an inordinately difficult thing to do effectively and with consistency. Once you start to practise the 90-degree shift, nothing you do will ever be the same again. You will forever see things differently, which of course is a basic prerequisite of constructive change.

## The old ways have to change

As soon as we make the 90-degree shift it becomes apparent that our old ways simply have to change. Much too much fundraising looks like everything else that's ever gone before. If the beginnings of success is to be different and the beginnings of failure is to be the same then fundraisers are routinely failing their donors because so much of what we are producing is formulaic, derivative, or just plain dull.

This will not do. It is a wonder that so important a business as ours has managed tolerably well for so long without having a robust, effective culture of research and development ingrained in its character and personality alongside those old stalwarts of mission, vision and values.

## Get rid of the gimmicks. Search out ideas that will lead to genuine involvement

We do however have plenty of shallow gimmicks masquerading as authentic innovations, as real routes to engagement and involvement.

If you don't know the difference between a gimmick and a genuine involvement device then you haven't yet quite mastered the 90-degree shift. Donors can immediately spot the inclusion of a cheap trick, something that's nothing whatsoever to do with the cause they are being encouraged to support. They may respond anyway, but invariably this'll be in spite of rather than because of the gimmick you included. If they are influenced to respond because you've included a phoney involvement device they won't stay with you for long thereafter, particularly if next time you stop relying

on the gimmick and leave it out.

Examples of gimmicks that fundraisers frequently include with their solicitations are name and address labels, or those ubiquitous seals and stickers that are so frequently found in today's fundraising direct mail pieces, and that all too often are given more prominence than the cause in the appeal presentation. There are many others. Usually, their chief characteristic is they are wasteful and gratuitous.

## Get competitive

Just like you, your competitors are seeking out the most viable innovations, the new recruitment ideas and the best initiatives for more cost-effective donor attraction, bonding and development.

Only they may be better at it than you, may be taking it more seriously, may be investing in it more substantially...

It'll pay you to watch your competition closely, to stalk their output, to make sure that whatever tricks they may be up to, you're always at least one step ahead.

## Celebrate the right to be wrong

Being wrong is not necessarily a bad place to be. Before you get to kiss the princess you'll probably have to get up close and personal with quite a few smelly frogs. Don't be repelled by this. Get used to it, maybe even enjoy it. If you're not making any mistakes, chances are you're probably not making any progress. So embrace failure and learn from it.

## Get used to taking appropriate risks

Most nonprofits are inherently risk-averse. We operate risk limitation strategies, as if all risks are a vice and their avoidance invariably a virtue. But if you always play safe you not only lead a dull life, you also never advance. Taking risks is a bit more than just allowing yourself to be wrong every so often. It's about facing up to the consequences of failure and taking the calculated risk anyway as that's the only credible way to advance. This is very distinct from gambling. Many nonprofits talk as if they thrive in an environment where risk is ever present. But few live like that and even less would be comfortable so to do. Life at the edge is decidedly just for the few. Not every organisation needs to be in a constant state of risk, but assessing the risk level most conducive to your organisation and its people will be key to the success of your innovation strategy.

## Breed a positive culture of innovation

Innovation doesn't just happen. Mostly it comes about quite deliberately by following a tried and trusted process of trial and error. So encourage it in your workplace. Make it clear that you're in the market for fresh ideas, that anyone can have one, that good efforts and heroic failures too are encouraged and will be rewarded. Document the fundraising innovations you most admire or that you think your organisation can learn from. Train your staff in the skills of brainstorming and blue-sky thinking.

## Invest appropriately

You can occasionally innovate on the cheap. Some of the greatest innovations will come about at ludicrously low cost, while others will simply be a license to print money so their development costs will pale into irrelevance. But these are rare, and hard to stimulate, far less plan for. So it isn't wise to starve your innovation strategy of the oxygen of adequate funding. Only a fool is unwilling to invest adequately in the future. If you think education is expensive, try ignorance.

## Learn from others

Do your homework. Don't neglect to study what's around you and also to look further afield too. Most of your competitors won't do their homework very thoroughly – despite the fact that most of the best ideas are just waiting to be copied and plagiarism, while arguably the most sincere form of flattery, is also a lot less expensive than original research.

## Get your board on board

Most boards are a barrier to innovation rather than a breeding ground for ideas and inspiration. But you can work to change that. So devise a plan to get the full weight of the board behind your innovation strategy. Show them why it's important, where the opportunities are, what you're aspiring to beat and why you think that now or soon, thanks to your efforts at innovation, it might be possible. If you can inspire them, chances are you can inspire most of your other donors too.

\* \* \* \*

Put these ten strategies into practice and you still may fail to come up with 'the really big idea'. Life is like that. But you'll have a much better chance of doing so than you did before, and for sure – thanks to the search and the culture of innovation you have developed – you will come up with lots of smaller but nevertheless important ideas that will each get you just a little bit ahead. And that could give you all the advantage that you can possibly need over your less adventurous, less far-sighted competitors.

