

Capital Campaigns: Breaking Through the Campaign Clutter

Orchestrating a capital campaign is an exciting, challenging and -- in today's market -- daunting task. With many organizations competing for attention, how can you ensure your message is heard and acted upon?

To conduct a campaign in a crowded market, focus on creatively using these six elements of successful fundraising:

1) Define Your Case for Support

More than ever, organizations must clearly define their case for support. Central to fundraising strategy is the creation of personal, customized and relevant messages that resonate strongly with current and prospective donors. Donors want to support organizations they feel passionately about and that can demonstrate the difference their investment makes.

2) Establish and Strengthen Relationships

At the heart of successful campaigns are personal relationships. Lest we forget in the buzz of prospect segmentation and research and electronic moves management, this is a relationship business. It is important to make the most of relationship- and donor-building efforts.

“The ‘top-down and inside-out approach’ has never been more applicable,” said Julie Carter, Senior Director, Development, Wolf Trap Foundation for the Performing Arts. “It is important to develop and maintain relationships with your core group of supporters, listen and respond to them. Use your knowledge of this group as the campaign’s foundation.”

3) Lay the Groundwork

Arena Stage prepared for its current campaign for years. “Nearly a decade of intensive planning went into the effort prior to its launch,” said Michael Hill, Campaign Director, Arena Stage. “We worked to lay the groundwork: building basic infrastructure, conducting a feasibility study, and generally understanding what it takes to conduct a major campaign. We invested in planning and I believe those efforts will ultimately lead to the campaign’s success.”

Additionally, it is important to be responsive to the philanthropic climate. Pay attention to external factors, be flexible, and try to anticipate economic and donor developments during a campaign period.

4) Differentiate Your Campaign

Think creatively about positioning your campaign. After the above steps have been taken, take a look at the marketplace. Once you've completed a competitive assessment, position your organization differently – focusing on the difference your mission and vision make to the community!

Hill noted that the positioning of the Arena Stage campaign sets it apart. “Arena Stage is situated as a catalyst for rebuilding a ‘forgotten district’ of the city,” he says. The facility will sit along the waterfront in the southwestern section of Washington D.C., playing an integral role in the re-development of this area.

The size of the campaign goal can also be used as a positioning tool. It may behoove organizations to consider a smaller goal that is attainable in a year or two. By segmenting a campaign into components, the goal may be easier to achieve in the current economic climate. Such a campaign may also stand out among large, comprehensive campaigns.

5) Set Realistic Expectations... And Then Reach a Bit Higher

“Organizations should be realistic about their campaign goal and base it on their donors right *now*, not on what the donor base is expected to look like when the campaign is complete,” said Carter. We also suggest adding a realistic “reach” goal predicated on likely stretch gifts, which when committed, will motivate other donors to follow suit.

On the other hand, knowing when to “think big” and have a substantial goal can help draw new attention to the funding case. Civic and philanthropic leaders, however, want to see significant corroboration and business plans for large funding needs and future organization sustainability.

6) Train Your Volunteers

Successful campaigns require recruiting and training motivated, committed volunteers. “Results of board and volunteer training can be seen from a campaign’s early stages. A group of solicitors who are comfortable making calls and asking for gifts from the beginning will help give the campaign a solid start,” said Carter.

Remember that peer-to-peer modeling can provide the best training and offer volunteers a memorable experience.

While the fundamentals of successful fundraising are even more relevant in tight economies filled with numerous campaigns, your organization’s ability to be responsive to the changing philanthropic climate will affect how you approach these basic elements. Creatively applying these basics to your situation will help make your campaign a stand-out success.