

Fear of Face to Face

If people rank public presentations as one of the most frightening experiences, I wonder where going face to face with a donor would rank.

Obviously, this is not an everyday activity of most people's lives, but it should certainly be at least a quarterly activity in the lives of many fundraisers. So many of our fundraising programmes mean that some fundraisers can go through their whole career without directly asking for a gift face to face or, in some cases, even meeting a donor!

Surely every fundraiser must understand the process, psychology and overall experience of facing up to a real donor, presenting the case and then directly asking for support. Everyone knows that the focus of all future fundraising is on understanding the donor and working from the outside in. Direct contact with donors is the only true way a fundraiser can 'get a feel' for the challenges they face in developing different programmes.

Of course the main focus of face to face meetings with donors is around major gift work, but I believe we can all learn from taking time to connect to donors and have a dialogue to seek their views and listen to their insights about giving and supporting a cause. Face to face fundraising in the street is now a well established programme, but this is delegated to commission based staff through an agency and frankly is totally focused on closing the ask as opposed to seeking a dialogue or real engagement.

So if you want to rise to the challenge and go face to face what are some of the inner fears you must face or help others to face?

Rejection: the key reason people avoid talking to donors is the fear of being rejected. While the rejection is around our case and the organisation's needs it's human nature to take this personally. There are two key things that will help minimise this chance of rejection: preparation and PMA.

As society gets crazier, faster and busier it will inevitably get harder to secure meetings with donors, so to ensure success we must invest appropriate time in researching the prospect: what is their previous link to the organisation/cause?; do we have any idea of their values and beliefs or why they have agreed to the meeting?; has our research indicated their net-worth or giving potential?; who may influence their decision? Preparation is about doing everything we need to do to be confident of our case, knowledge of the prospect and the way we are going to handle the meeting, that way when we are in the meeting we can devote sixty percent of our time to watching, listening and responding to the donor rather than trying to remember and think through our material and what we need/want to say.

The idea of Positive mental attitude (PMA) has been around for an awfully long time, but I don't think people in fundraising have still got the message, if you believe in your cause, your message and yourself and play yourself positive messages about your ability to succeed, you will have a far higher chance of winning through as your positive mental state of mind will come through in the way you present. As Henry Ford said 'whether you believe you can or you can't, you're right!'

Embarrassment: following in the footsteps of rejection is the embarrassment of asking for money, not something that sits easily with most people, hence why we have built most of our fundraising programmes to keep us one step back from it! The key to this for me is to change the thinking around what you are doing, it's not about asking for money it is about giving people an opportunity to give to something they believe in; for people to express their values and achieve a sense of fulfilment. So, the reality of most donor meetings is that you are helping them as much as you are helping your cause.

Nerves are another factor around embarrassment and there is a lot of learning to help in this area, but the key starting point is an awareness of how your nerves manifest themselves, as once you recognise the symptoms you can begin to control and manage nerves, re-channelling the energy into positive forces to help you handle a meeting.

Failure: Andre Gide said "if you want to set sail for distant lands, you have to lose sight of the shore"; in other words making an ask to donors does have a high level of risk involved in terms of failure or success. The more you want the more risk you must accept, but, as with rejection, preparation and PMA will offer considerable protection in this area. Failure is a chance to start again and to learn from the experience; it's a fact of life and charities need to be better at not only accepting this but also celebrating failure to ensure people know its OK to take risks and push harder and further to achieve results.

Lack of knowledge: whenever I am coaching fundraisers ready for a major ask they inevitably cite their fear of lack of knowledge in the meeting. A fear easily dealt with as there are only two parts: one is to prepare as thoroughly as possible and to anticipate questions/objections and second is to recognise what you don't know, to acknowledge positively the fact and to promise to get back to the donor with the answer as soon as you can after a meeting.

Facing up to a donor is an art, but one that I believe is a core skill for fundraisers who really want to understand donors and to develop programmes that meet their needs and build their loyalty to an organisation and its vision.