

How Does Development Mean?

By Brydon M. DeWitt, President

The title of this issue may lead you to think that DeWitt had too much nog in his custard drink over the holidays. Whatever the truth of that, the title is meant to begin your thinking about the purpose of development in a fuller, richer, more comprehensive way. It should call us to examine our roles in the development process that are too frequently confined to the simplistic “fundraiser.” So, let’s explore this subject with fresh eyes and open minds to understand what we’re really engaged in doing on behalf of our nonprofit businesses.

The beginning of 2016 is a good time to begin thinking of development in a more all-embracing “how” rather than “what.” As I have written previously (and in my book), development is a process that helps an organization define itself, communicate its mission and needs, and involve its logical constituency in helping fulfill its mission and reach its potential. This concept encourages us to begin at the source of our organizational energy – the mission – and to reflect on how well our current programs, budget, staffing, and public outreach are in concert with it.

If this were a perfect world, using the term “development” would be an unambiguous way to define the concept and the function of the process of building a productive, sustainable nonprofit. The problem is that we are too often not talking about the same thing. Too many individuals, in the profession and out, think development is just another way to say “show me the money.” Further confounding the definition are those professional organizations to which we belong that, by their vary names, invoke “fundraising” (Association of Fundraising Professionals, Virginia Association of Fund Raising Executives, e. g.). It is my contention borne of experiences that this one-dimensional view of the process and profession often inhibits the ability of development officers to build effective comprehensive development programs at their organizations.

Development is Marketing

The leadership of every nonprofit sets the tone for their organizations, and it is especially important that they provide clear direction in how and through what means the story of your nonprofit will be told. Effectively telling your organization’s story to members of your target audiences help each of them determine how you meet one or more of their needs to connect with your mission. The story is told in ways beyond the spoken and written word. Who you are as an organization is felt through the experiences your constituents have when on campus, in your facility, receiving services, and/or attending events, meetings, which you sponsor. Often, these non-verbal experiences speak more strongly than any verbal/written

communication. I call this part of marketing “holistic” because it reveals the very core of who you are as an organization.

We know that marketing prepares the way to building the kind of interest and relationship that makes raising money possible. Each nonprofit must interpret itself and its funding needs in ways that help its constituents understand how their needs are met by being engaged with the nonprofit. This is called setting up a “satisfactory exchange” whereby both the nonprofit and the donor have their needs met.

For an exchange to be satisfactory with a nonprofit, mental and emotional needs are in play. Some donors find just the right charity to enable them to help others as they or someone close to them was helped. Others are compelled because of the suffering they witness that they want to help alleviate. Even others will support a nonprofit because it saves tax dollars or they want to part of a group they admire.

Understanding that no two people will relate in exactly the same ways to your nonprofit, you must not make assumptions about how your organization is being viewed and its relative importance to your prospects and suspects. As leaders, be purposeful in identifying particular ways that your nonprofit meets the needs of its clients, society, and constituents. A good exercise with staff members and Board members is to list as many specific offerings of your nonprofit that only you provide or that you do better than your competition. Usually there are four-five of these “value propositions.” These are the services that would be missed if your organization did not exist. These are the “connectors” between you and various members of your target audiences. These connectors provide the guidance for the marketing and communications program that will enable telling your story effectively, honestly, and well.

An organization’s development success will come as a result of defining the message and the audiences who should hear it. This process requires time and patience, for each prospective donor will become ready to be asked for a gift at his/her own pace.

So, should development be defined as fundraising? Or, should it be embraced as all that a nonprofit does to create the environment in which friends and funds can be raised? Should development officers be called “fundraisers,” or would it better to think of them as marketers who build understanding, acceptance, and appreciation of their nonprofits that facilitate needs been met in willing donors?

There is much more that can be said, but this article is meant to stimulate thinking. I’ll be happy for feedback. You can email me at brydon.dewitt@gmail.com or call (804) 364-0145.