

Learning from Others

by Frances Cone Caldwell, GoTaP Consulting

This was to be what faith-based non-profits, churches in particular, could learn from secular non-profits but after thinking and making lots of notes, I don't have a one-size fits all answer. So I am writing about faith-based and secular non-profits might learn from each other. Having worked with both types of non-profits, in the last twenty years the focus of my work has been faith-based organizations. Like most consultants, I look at what people give and to whom, and I've found many people give their largest philanthropic gifts to their churches, synagogues, and other faith-based organizations.

The three most important pieces to keeping a non-profit, secular or religious, healthy, alive, and growing are Strengthening Communication, Building Relationships, and Financial Sustainability. I have recently added to the list two more critical pieces – Sharing Space and Vision.

1. Communication

People don't give to a sinking ship, the power company, the maintenance of a structure. They give to mission they care about, be it a hospital, a university, a school, a museum, a church, the symphony, the ballet. Some of my favorite communications come from St. Jude Children's hospital. The total focus of the hospital's literature is saving children's lives. They tell their story with great pictures and only the most powerful and powerful details of the lives being changed free of charge.

Many secular organizations tend to do a better job than most churches in telling the story. While churches are saving and changing lives they don't always show the details of transformative work. Church communications are often focused on line item budgets and uninformative announcements rather than the transforming work they are doing. The bottom line is always tell your donors, potential or current, what is being done to save and change lives with the gifts you receive. Make the message short, long copy isn't going to be read.

2. Building Relationships with Donors

There is no point in asking the wealthy to give to your organization unless you know that is where their hearts are. Just because a leader in your non-profit knows a wealthy person, doesn't mean that person is automatically interested in your organization. Donor knowledge is critical when asking for meaningful

money. The time spent getting to know someone will test your creative abilities in finding a niche in your non-profit for that donor.

Relationship building is critical – it is what will pay off with meaningful rather than perfunctory pledges or gifts. Involvement gives ownership to people and who doesn't want to take care of something that is important to them? Relationship building applies to people new to the church or organization as well as people who are already donors. Every church and non-profit has different facets and different needs. If staff and volunteer leaders make an effort to learn about the donors they will discover the special reason a donor is willing to give more. Sponsorships, scholarships, special funding are best done when a donor is personally asked to support an area meaningful to her or him.

It is difficult to know if this is done better by churches or secular organizations. While it is critical for both, some of both do it well, some need to do it better. Churches have more opportunities to build relationships because their donors often know each other. Either way, churches and secular non-profits are most successful when relationships with their donors are personal.

3. **Asking for Money**

Don't take anyone's gift for granted, if you do it will probably be smaller than it could be or even reduced year after year. If your Communication and your Relationship building is intentional, informative, and in line with a meaningful mission, asking for money will be easy and the gifts will be mature and profitable.

Successful churches and secular organizations understand and practice all of these points. Asking for money is neither hard nor scary because you have loyal and supportive donors who are part of the story they have to share. The business of non-profits, both religious and secular is serious business feeding a world full of needs. Donors want their gifts to make a difference in their own hometown, close by, and far away in a world full of needs.

4. **Sharing Space**

Secular non-profits should plan ways to bring their donors into the organization's space – if it's a school, while the children are there; if it's a hospital, special events or tours focused on the interest of the donors; if it's a performing arts venue, a thank you reception or a back-stage tour; if it's a museum, special educational or thank you events for donors only. We are great

at asking people to pay for special events but not always good at offering them a thank you event.

Sharing space is something churches have in their favor – most of their donors are regularly in their space, often multiple times a week for different activities which appeal to different interests. Most non-profits do not see their donors on location regularly each month. They need to be creative about making that opportunity relevant to their donors' interests in the mission of the non-profit.

Vision

If you don't have vision, you can't compete. Giving to progressive organizations with an eye for the future is a turn on for donors. "Don't look back, you're not going that way" is a critical mantra. Serious donors want to know what you are planning or dreaming for the future you want them to support. We live in a fast paced world and things are constantly looking different. Values are the only constant we have, so make sure your mission statement is applicable and don't rest on your laurels. Regardless of your organization, "because we've always done it that way" will NOT attract donors.