

Fundraising: Face your fears and do it anyway

Considering a move into fundraising? CultureHive asked **Catherine Holden**, Director of External Relations at National Museums Scotland, to reflect on the highs and lows.



Photo: This four-storey *Window on the World* installation was the focus of a public appeal to complete the fundraising campaign as part of the £47 million transformation of the National Museum of Scotland.

When I tell people my job involves fundraising, their reaction tends to be tinged with horror. ‘Oh,’ they say, ‘I could never ask people for money!’

Which is only human. I remember having exactly the same thought when someone suggested that my next job might just, sorry about this, I’m afraid, face up to it, very possibly, have to involve, yikes, fundraising.

Which brings me to the First Mistake of Fundraising – seeing the whole thing as a problem. For you, and for your hapless targets. At first glance, it can all feel a bit Highway Man. Or at best Robin Hood – still stealing from the rich, but at least to give to the poor. Both scenarios involve the (potentially violent) extraction of gold, dripping from unwilling - and usually evil – victims.

In fact, effective fundraising is less ‘Stand and Deliver’ than ‘Group Hug’. People who give money to good causes are actually good people. They would be, if you think about it. It’s less ‘Us and Them’ and more ‘Us and Us’. We’re all in it together. Fundraising is essentially identifying what’s great about what you do, that others might want to support. It’s about ‘them’ feeling so good about the picture they see, that they want to be part of it, to make it happen together, to become ‘us’. Instead of hinging on an embarrassing ‘Stick ‘Em Up’ moment, fundraising is more a process of growing understanding.

Potential supporters - whether individuals, charitable trusts or corporations - have plenty of choices for their hard-earned cash - a house in the country, a fast car, an advertising campaign, the arts organisation down the road, serious medical research, ailing kittens... But we need to convince people of the value of our vision, and unearth its benefits for us both. And when they agree – well, how fabulous is that.

So put away your fears. ‘Hey kids, let’s put the fun back in fundraising!’ It might not be as simple as that, but it’s a start. People will not support you if the process is fraught, painful and unhappy. When you meet great fundraisers, they love their job. That’s because they love people – the colleagues they work with, and, yes, the people they ask for money. And, just as importantly, because they love their Cause, whatever that may be – from saving lives, to saving cats, to yes, funding the arts.

In these straightened times, haunted by global recession, fundraising is becoming a reality for ever more organisations and managers. If your job doesn’t involve fundraising now, it may well do soon – either directly or indirectly.

However fundraising is not just about combating cuts. Generating more of your own money is an economically wise way to manage that possibly risky dependency on one source. It’s also a way of helping your organisation to expand, grow, innovate, develop – to be more ambitious.

So how do you create that upward spiral?

You might think fundraising is all about selling. What story can I flog? What can I get people to pay for? But in fact, it’s much more about listening. Who are my audiences? What makes them tick? What ideas do they have? What do they want – for themselves, for the wider world? And it’s about thinking: What makes us special? What do we have to offer? How can we link that up with the people we know?

In other words, it’s not all that different from marketing. Good news for AMA members! Instead of working to achieve a visit, or a ticket sale, or a click, or a Share or a Like, you are working towards a gift.

At this point I should come clean, and admit I’m not a born fundraiser. I started out in marketing – first with fizzy drinks, then with theatre, then visual arts, then museums. But my role has broadened over the years. I have worked alongside fundraisers in most of my roles, and for the last ten years have been leading a Development team. I have learned a huge amount from their insights, skills, experience and attitude.

Fundraising is a professional discipline. Done well, it is a well-oiled machine. From research and analysis to planning a staged campaign, from effective communications to slick event management, from skilful form-filling to sophisticated number crunching. Of course it has its jargon, its tried and tested modes of best practice, its well established processes – often built in America. But all this can be learnt.

Some basic personal attributes will also take you far. What makes a good fundraiser? Empathy. Enthusiasm. Interpersonal skills. The ability to create a compelling vision. To enlist colleagues in building a Case for Support and fielding the right expertise. The 'Dateline' capacity to put the right staff member with the right prospective donor. (Who will get on with who? Who will be interested in what?) A great contacts book – nurtured and developed with care. Plus it never hurts if you can stage a fab party!

Far from horrifying, fundraising can be extremely rewarding.

There's no clearer KPI than hard cash. If you're doing your job well, the tills are ringing. You are helping colleagues to keep their jobs, to realise their projects. This will be recognised by your peers and from the top. The conceptual thermometer on the building will be rising. The Blue Peter milk bottle tops will be filling the hopper: guide dogs will be trained.

That's not to say the job is not without its pressures. Either the money is coming in, or it's not. If it's not, it's hard. Most fundraisers know this from personal experience. In 2005 we launched a campaign to enable a £47 million transformation of the National Museum of Scotland. It was going well. The coffers were filling. But halfway through, hello 2008: the recession hit. Everything stopped. Our beautifully orchestrated campaign ground to a halt. Entirely outside our control, a giant handbrake had been applied.

And meanwhile builders were building, objects were being bought, the opening date was being set. The project was continuing and we had to raise the money. The top tip here is 'hold your nerve'. Keep talking to your donors and prospects ('cultivating' and 'stewarding' as it's called in the trade), keep listening, and, at the right moment - keep asking.

Ah, The Ask. The scary bit. The worst bit. Or is it? 'Making the ask' can be the best bit of all. Here in Scotland, when my team secure a major gift, I can almost hear ringing in the room that great line from The Proclaimers' song 'Let's Get Married' – 'When we're old, if they ask us "How do you define success?" [I'll say]: You ask her and she says Yes! You ask her and she says Yes!'

Of course you need to get The Ask right. It needs to be to the right person, for the right project, for the right amount, at the right time. And a great deal of work goes into getting to that point. It's called the Cultivation Pipeline. And as anyone who's seen Sunshine on Leith will know (spoiler alert!), sometimes they say No. Which isn't great. But it's not the end of the world. They may say Yes later, or for a different project, or when their personal circumstances change.

So in our capital campaign we kept going, and used the temporary stall to look at other things. We updated our Membership scheme, developed a Legacy plan, launched Patrons, improved our Sponsorship proposition, restructured Corporate Membership. And despite the hiatus, we were fine. We regained momentum. Donors stayed with us and more joined in. In fact we ultimately raised £1million more than our capital target - alongside six-figures annually in revenue - despite the recession.

Which means another set of tools in the great fundraiser's armoury are flexibility and resilience. Keep learning, keep looking outwards, come up with new options. However well you prepare, at least some of the people you hope might be interested, won't be interested. They'll have other priorities, or may not be convinced by what you've got to say. You'll get knock-backs. You'll research a lot more prospective givers than you'll convert to donors. But that just makes the ones who do give, who do get it, who do get you, who do 'join the team', even more special.

I've known fundraisers in my team reduced to tears at an Ask – not by the Nos, but by the Yeses. When you're offered a precious gift by a much valued donor there's genuine delight - that you've found someone who shares your vision, that together you are going to make something good happen - and genuine gratitude for their most wonderful (and essentially entirely optional) generosity.