

The First Rule of Fundraising

Everyone agrees that the first rule of fundraising is to ask. Few people make a contribution without being asked for it.

But the bigger questions are who, how and when. Should you ask your mother? Should you ask her near the end of the year so she'll be thinking of tax deductions? Should you send her a letter, call her on the phone or sit down with her to have a heart-to-heart talk about your charity?

Yes, you should ask your mother, although she's probably not the first one to approach. The first group you should ask is the board of directors. Presumably, people who join your board support your goals and programs. Board members must demonstrate their support with significant (to them) financial contribution.

The second group to solicit is people who benefit from your programs. If you provide health services, ask your patients. If you run educational programs for children, ask their parents. If you operate a performing arts venue, ask your audience.

Past donors are a third group that shouldn't be overlooked. If someone contributed last year, they are more likely to contribute this year.

After you've gone to these three groups, it's time to ask your mother and everyone else whose ear you can capture.

How do you ask? A letter is a good place to begin. You can explain your programs and why they are important to the community and to your clients. But again, don't forget to ask for the contribution. And be sure to enclose a self-addressed envelope.

If you go beyond sending a few letters to your friends and associates, you may have the beginnings of a direct mail program.

Follow-up phone calls to those that haven't responded to a letter can pay big dividends, especially if you can recruit volunteers to make the calls. It's best to let people know to expect a call. Some organizations mail postcards to donors before calling.

Face-to-face solicitations are almost always a necessity when you're asking for a large (usually called a major gift) contribution. The definition of a major gift will depend on the size of your organization. For some it may be \$250; for others it may be \$5,000 or more. Board members must be involved in asking for major gifts, and they must be able to say "I made a gift and I'd like you to make one too."

Afraid to ask for money? Take a look at this advice from Kim Klein, brought to you by the Alliance for Nonprofit Management:

When should you ask? Certainly many charitable organizations send out request letters near the end of the year. Accepted wisdom is that the combination of holiday spirit and imminent tax bills will increase the chance of getting a donation.

But you should be fund raising on a year-round basis. Most large charities have direct mail programs that solicit donors and prospective donors six or more times a year.

Don't forget that most contributions from mail and telephone calls are small, in the \$10 to \$20 range. Donors at this level don't contribute for tax reasons. They give because they want to help, and their contributions, taken together, make up most of the money given to charity each year.