

but they felt the need was genuine. We did the study in fall 2008, and in January 2009 the board voted to go forward with the campaign, even though things were down—and going down.”

Although Geever said this type of campaign should traditionally take two years, she advised a three-year campaign

timeline. After eight months, the organization had raised \$3 million, which included initial gifts from board members and a \$2 million, noncompetitive state government grant. As they continue their solicitations, they leave the door open for additional asks when the economy turns around.

Another of Geever’s clients, a humane society, had plans

Strengthening Your Major-Donor Program

BY KATHERINE M. BELLA, CFRE, AND
LAURA JASON, CFRE

As you begin to implement your New Year’s plans, you need to consider last year’s sobering economic realities. At the same time, you also must take into account that a majority of economists believe that the long road to recovery has begun and thus employ new strategies to realize your goals.

There are favorable statistics to note for development professionals seeking major gifts. Planned-gift, major-gift and direct-mail and solicitations had the highest levels of success in the current climate. Benchmarking data clearly indicate a positive relationship between the amount of time spent by fundraisers in communicating with potential donors and the more successful response rates when the “ask” was made: the highest performers in this regard outperformed their counterparts by as much as 86 percent. Carefully building relationships with prospective donors, demonstrating sensitivity to their circumstances, and offering flexibility to help them structure a gift were shown to produce the most positive results.

Given the new realities of today’s economic climate, as well as the relative uncertainty about exactly when you can expect improvement and to what extent it will improve, consider the following positive steps to take now to strengthen your major-donor program.

1. Polish Up Your Organizational Image.

Most nonprofits see themselves as “the best kept secret in town.” Given the economic climate, increasing an organization’s public visibility has never been



more important. This is the time to assess your organization’s image in the community. Invest in ways to raise awareness and position the organization as strongly as possible to help raise funds. For those organizations able to afford a public relations firm to aid in this process, progress can be made quickly and with significant results. Other organizations may have staff or board members who can provide their expertise in this process. Regardless of how much money you have available to spend and how much may depend on volunteer help, this is the time to focus on building the organizational image of your nonprofit in the community it serves. Donors and donor prospects need to know who you are, what you do and why their philanthropic investment will make a difference in helping you to fulfill your organizational image.

2. Invest in Prospect Research

Given today’s challenges, prospect research is more important than ever.

Not only will it be crucial to carry out the usual level of research before soliciting a donor prospect, but it also will be even more important to get information about donors’ giving in the last 18 months to see how the economy is—or is not—affecting their giving. When you rely primarily on anecdotal information in order to craft your strategy, you do your organization a disservice. Coupling anecdotal information with well-researched data is critical.

3. Strengthen Your Case for Support

The most effective cases for support have always been built on an organization’s ability to present its history, successes and current needs in a way that compels a prospect to give. Now it is even more important that the message be well articulated, illustrating the organization’s unique ability to carry out the program. Including concise financial information that demonstrates organiza-

for expanding its existing facility and building a second, new facility in another part of the community in order to accommodate significant increases in pet adoptions, admissions and surgeries. However, the organization's stakeholders advised a more temperate approach.

"The feedback from the community in the feasibility study

was, especially when there are economic challenges, let's go one step at a time," Geever says. So the humane society launched a three-year, \$4 million campaign to renovate the current facility. If that is successful, it will transition right into another campaign. Still in the initial fundraising stage, the organization has raised \$300,000 within the first several months.

tional sustainability must prove to donors that their philanthropic investment will show a strong return. Materials should be attractive and inviting, without appearing lavish.

4. Build Your Prospect Pool

This is a time to focus on current donors and to invest in acquisition. It is critical to provide the highest level of stewardship possible to keep current donors and cultivate those who you think have capacity to give in the future. Be creative in developing ways to bring the program to your donors and your donors to the program, so that they become partners in building organizational success. While it may take longer to get a gift, and the level may not be as high as it would have been two years ago, working hand-in-hand with donors will strengthen the long-term relationship with them and help sustain their support.

5. Finesse Your Ability to Make the Ask

Today's economy has greatly affected strategies around making the ask. Many donors have seen severe reductions in their assets. Others are much more tentative about their giving, not knowing when the economy will turn around. Others have been minimally affected by the economic downturn, having invested more conservatively. It is so important to be in close dialogue with your donors to understand their situation and how you can help them with their plans.

Asking will take more finesse, with solicitors needing to be well-practiced in negotiation. Volunteer and staff solicitors will need to be much more savvy about the financial implications of the project being considered. They will need to show quantitatively, as well as qualitatively, the difference that a donor's gift can make. Given donors' financial situations, one

might receive a gift at a much lower level than would have been true two years ago when times were better. Others may take much longer to decide on a gift amount and will require patience by the solicitor and organization. Donors also may choose to give in "rounds of funding," similar to how a venture capitalist would invest. Donors adhering to this philosophy may give a smaller gift to a capital campaign during the first solicitation, but be open to a second gift the following year once the campaign proves itself and/or the donor's financial situation has improved. Solicitors' ability to listen to donors' needs and concerns and offer options will heighten the organization's success while helping donors make the choice that is right for them.

6. Build Your Volunteer Leadership

Nonprofit organizations' need for effective fundraising volunteers is at an all-time high. Now is the time to recruit and train volunteer leaders who can aid your organization in fundraising. With high unemployment rates, look for potential candidates who are currently unemployed or have retired early. Volunteers' connection to major-donor prospects and their willingness to ask for a gift, or accompany a staff leader on a call, will make a significant contribution to the success of the major-donor program. It has always been important for solicitors to have made their own gifts to the campaign before soliciting others for support. That commitment is even more crucial now.

7. Create a Strong Internal Infrastructure

This is the time to strengthen the internal infrastructure of your organization to put it in a position of greater strength for fundraising success. The executive director or chief executive officer should

be trained and coached by development staff or counsel to optimize his or her ability to raise funds. The development staff should be adequately trained. Investment in their skill building, as well as team cohesiveness and effectiveness, is key to a successful development effort. This is also the time to work with staff as a whole toward thinking like a full development team. Each person in the organization must see how he or she fits in with the development goals and how his or her input and engagement can help the entire organization. Donor databases should also be assessed and upgraded, if necessary, to meet the demands of the program.

8. Revise Your Development Plan

As the new calendar year begins, regardless of when one's fiscal year starts, this is the time to create an optimistic plan for the future. Take some time to reflect on these various components of a development program and create a plan that is ambitious, yet realistic, for the year ahead. Think about both qualitative and quantitative goals for the year, as well as investments that will be important to make in 2010 in order to reap the rewards when the economy is stronger.

Your role, as development professionals, is to work in concert with the organizations you represent and the donors who have an interest in supporting the missions of these organizations. The work has never been more important, and with well-thought-out planning, you have the ability to fully optimize the potential of your donors, both now and in perpetuity.

Katherine M. Bella, CFRE, is principal of The Bella Group in San Francisco, www.thebellagroup.net. Laura Jason, CFRE, is principal of Laura Jason Consulting in Menlo Park, Calif., ljason2@earthlink.net.