

How Independent School Philanthropy Can Survive the Pandemic

By: Mark Cohen
Malvern Bank - Senior Vice President

The coronavirus has impacted nearly every aspect of our lives. But how it has impacted philanthropy – to charitable organizations and for-profit entities such as independent schools alike – may surprise you.

In May 2020, just a couple of months into the pandemic, more than half of organizations polled by the Association of Fundraising Professionals said they expected to raise less money in 2020 than they did in 2019.

However, a Fundraising Effectiveness Project survey found that overall philanthropic giving rebounded in the second quarter of 2020, boosting total giving in the first six months of the year by nearly 7.5% compared to the same time period in 2019. The 2020 Fundraising Effectiveness survey also noted that the number of donors had increased by 7.2% compared with the same period the previous year.

But it wasn't all good news, as Fidelity Charitable, an independent public charity, reported that two-thirds of the donors it surveyed in 2020 decreased or stopped volunteering during the pandemic. And, according to Kevin Scally, chief relationship officer at Charity Navigator, "The pandemic has been extremely detrimental for (organizations') abilities to raise funds."

So – it's been a mixed bag for organizations that typically have been the beneficiaries of philanthropic giving. I believe that the organizations that were most successful at fund-raising in 2020 were those that excelled at the fundraising "fundamentals" – chief of which is understanding that the #1 reason people do not get what they want in life is...that "they have not *asked* for it!"

I borrowed this insight from Laura Fredricks, the founder and CEO of The Ask® and author of several books including "Winning Words for Raising Money" and "The Ask for Business, for Philanthropy, for Everyday Living." In one of her books, Fredricks, who is a special consultant for Malvern Bank and has been a speaker at many of our events, shared her "10 Essential Characteristics of an Exceptional Asker." I thought these 10 characteristics were so valuable I wanted to share them with you.

1. Believe 100 percent in your ask.

Just because you have agreed to make an ask doesn't necessarily tell the potential giver of your 100% commitment to your organization's mission. Your confidence, enthusiasm and body language tell the giver a lot. (More about body language in characteristic #7.)

2. Speak with both passion and compassion.

Speaking with passion is always an attractive and alluring characteristic. When you speak from the heart, you let the person know that you are genuine, you care about them, and that you are enthusiastic about *their* potential role in advancing your organization's mission. That will draw givers closer to you, and they will intently listen to every word of your ask. And, compassion is a trait all givers will appreciate – but be careful not to be overly dramatic when sharing your compassion about others or your cause.

3. Listen to each and every word.

A good rule to follow is “There is more power in listening than in talking.” That's why Fredricks advocates an ask based upon two sentences followed by a question. The two sentences spell out the giving opportunity and relate it to the potential giver. The question is the *specific* request for funding. This “two sentences and a question” process ends with a question so that the potential giver can respond. That invites a dialogue – and an opportunity to “listen.”

4. Prepare for how the person will react to the ask.

A big part of the preparation for any ask is knowing how to respond to the potential giver's reaction to your request – whether it is positive, maybe, no, or a definite no.

5. Take the time to do the ask in person.

Yes – it is far easier to send a text, email, written proposal, or to make a telephone call. But, in Fredrick's experience, you have a 75% greater chance of getting what you want if you ask in person.

6. Treat each ask as a special moment in time.

This is your one chance to get exactly what you want from the potential giver. So, why would you blow it? If you do not treat it as something special, a great opportunity, why should anyone listen?

7. Be mindful of body language, dress, and tone of voice.

You can trim your ask down to “two sentences and a question” and then sabotage your ask by wearing inappropriate clothes, slouching in your seat or speaking in a timid tone of voice. Regarding clothing, never wear anything that would send the signal that you didn't think enough of this special moment to look your best, even in casual clothing. And, your body language should reflect your engagement in the conversation: interested, alert, attentive, and positive.

8. Follow up with each ask until there is an answer.

Have you heard the expression “The fortune is in the follow-up”? The meaning of this saying is that if you don't follow up, you most likely will not get what you seek. According to Fredricks, significant money is left on the table after an ask because the asker did not follow up and receive an answer.

9. Thank the person regardless of the response.

It can be difficult when you receive a “no” response to your ask – but here is where the exceptional asker shines. Regardless of what you hear after your ask, always, always say thank you. After all, the person did make time for you and deserves a thank you.



10. Embrace that the “win” is that you made the ask, not the result.

By focusing on the ask and not the result, you remove your anxiety about getting a yes. This serves several purposes. First, you will be concentrating on all the elements listed previously (e.g., believing 100 percent in your ask; listening carefully; body language). Second, you focus on staying present during your ask and avoid the urge to get it over quickly so you get your response. Third, you will appear and sound more confident if you focus on the ask.

Armed with the right fundraising tips, I wish you and your independent school great success in your 2021 fundraising efforts.