Be Prepared!

When planning a capital campaign, it is natural to want to concentrate first on how and when the many gifts on your gift scale will be solicited because, as we all know, the final success of a campaign is judged by its bottom line – nobody ever remembers the reasons behind the results. What I always stress with my clients, however, is that if they concentrate first on setting up the campaign structure, the bottom line will be a lot easier to achieve.

I believe that organization is the key to everything in life, and capital campaigns are no exception. The first six months of a capital campaign (usually following a feasibility study) are, therefore, the most crucial. Many people feel that they can organize and build a structure as they go along, that there are merely details to be accomplished as the campaign progresses. As someone who has been hired to take over tottering campaigns at all stages, I am here to tell you that this could not be further from the truth.

There is a logical progression of tasks during a campaign. Without funding objectives you cannot write a case statement, without a case statement you cannot recruit volunteers, without volunteers you cannot solicit, without a prospect list you have no one to solicit, and so on. That is why the Preparation Phase in any campaign is so important.

The tasks accomplished in these several months (usually four to six) can make or break a campaign. If your fundraising is on a roll and your volunteers are excited, the last thing the campaign needs is a time-out for the development and research of a prospect list, for example. Also, the safest time to iron out any wrinkles or anticipate any problems is before the campaign officially starts, not after, when it's a lot harder to prevent information from seeping out to the public and having a more serious effect on the campaign.

These are just a few of the reasons that I have developed, and continue to refine, the following outline for the Preparation Phase of a campaign. Of course, all campaign directors like to believe that their campaigns are unique, and they are, but there are a few basic steps that can add structure – and improve results – in any campaign. Therefore, before you start worrying about how much money is coming in, I suggest you do the following:

Develop final funding objectives and write the final case statement.

No matter how much you think you might be able to put this off until a later date, the case statement must be one of the first things that you develop, which means deciding exactly what you need money for and exactly how much these objectives are going to cost. If your finance people tell you that it will take time to get estimates, or your program people tell you they are not ready with project details, you are not ready to start your campaign.

Create a Campaign Plan.

Although it is not certain that everyone will end up reading this document, I still believe in preparing a campaign plan so that you can look ahead, see what's coming, set deadlines and stay on schedule. It is also good to let your volunteers know what to expect, and you can even give them a one-page timeline for easy reference.

Organize your staff.

Now is the time to assign campaign responsibilities to your staff and hire new staff if necessary. If you do this now, you will be able to run the campaign more efficiently, as well as keep the annual fund on track. Make sure you have enough staff for the following areas: campaign management; writing; research; major individual gifts; corporate and foundation gifts; planned gifts; data entry and report production; gift acknowledgement; gift processing; events; and administrative tasks.

Develop files, systems and procedures for the campaign.

When the campaign is in full swing, you won't have the time to plan and set up records management and reporting details. It is much easier, and avoids chaos, to have systems in place when you need them, even if the preparation work takes a lot of your valuable time now. When you need to produce a campaign receipts progress report, you'll be happy you know exactly where to go for the information and how to compile it.

Develop campaign materials.

Your volunteers are going to need written materials to give to their prospects. Therefore, you should start preparing them now so that they will be ready when your volunteers begin to solicit. You will need planned-giving text, a campaign brochure and, possibly, a video. You should also develop standard corporate and foundation proposals and crediting guidelines for when the need arises. Another good tool is the campaign newsletter, which you can start developing now. It can help keep up your volunteers' enthusiasm, publicize the campaign and inform prospects of your exciting progress to date.

Identify, cultivate and recruit the campaign chair, vice chairs and steering committee.

Every campaign needs leadership, which means volunteers with specific campaign job descriptions so there can be no future confusion about their tasks and responsibilities. Setting up a steering committee specifically for the campaign will help you organize and implement solicitation activities. Also, a campaign steering committee is a good way to reach out to a larger community and get more people interested in your organization. Finally, you can use this vehicle as a starter for future board members if you feel the board could use a little new blood. Again, remember: recruit your volunteers now because you can’t solicit without them.

Identify and research leadership prospects.

Create a master prospect list from many in-house and other lists of wealthy prospects and community leaders, and ask for suggestions from board members and others close to you. This process takes time, and your volunteers will need to know not only whom they are soliciting, but background information on each prospect. The more you know about your prospects, the better able you will be to leverage higher gifts from them by appealing to their interests. If you do your homework now, your volunteers can get to work quicker, and the money will roll in faster.

If everything is going well so far, you may even have the time to accomplish the following tasks during the Preparation Phase:

Rate and assign leadership prospects.

Many people feel that when approaching a prospect, you should ask for an unspecified gift and take what you get. I strongly believe, however, that your results will be much better if you go to each prospect with a carefully researched ask amount. As long as you courteously ask them to “consider” a certain amount rather than demanding it, they should not be offended. Believe me, they are not new to this game, and they like to know what is expected of them – they can decide for themselves whether they want to give it or not. Research, combined with the evaluations of steering committee members, should lead to intelligent ratings of prospects.

Rate, assign, and solicit members of the Steering Committee.

Before you send your volunteers out to solicit, make sure that a group of board members has solicited them. It will be a lot easier for them to ask for money if they have proven their interest in the campaign by giving whatever they can themselves.

Train volunteers in the solicitation of prospects.

Most people feel insecure about asking for money, and even those who don’t could probably use some help. This is why I always urge my clients to participate in my volunteer training workshop, The Art of Asking. If your volunteers are more confident, they will be more eager to solicit, which means they will be more likely to complete their assignments and successfully raise money. There is also a snowball effect: The more successful they are from the start, the more their confidence will continue to grow, and the better the results will be as they progress.

You are ready to begin your campaign. Your volunteers are recruited and trained, your campaign materials are written and your reporting processes are in place. Now all you have to do is raise the money!