

The Art of Solicitation: Turning 'The Ask' into an Opportunity

By Ron J. Huddleston
President, The Huddleston Group

Over the last few months, we've delved into the intricacies of donor stewardship, discussing what it takes to find, educate, and retain donors. If you've been diligently implementing the strategies and protocols from my previous articles, congratulations—you've laid a strong foundation. Now, it's time to take the next crucial step: making the ask.

For many development officers, solicitation is the most challenging part of the job. The fear of rejection can be paralyzing, and the thought of asking for money can feel overwhelming. But mastering the art of solicitation is essential to becoming a successful fundraiser. If you follow these suggestions, you'll not only overcome your fears but also excel in your role, achieving greater success in your fundraising efforts.

Understanding the Fear of Asking

Let's start with a fundamental truth: the primary reason people make significant philanthropic investments is that they are asked. Yet, the fear of rejection often holds us back. It's important to remember that "no" is a normal part of the job. Embracing this fact is the first step towards becoming a successful fundraiser.

To excel in solicitation, it's crucial to understand that every "no" brings you closer to a "yes." Each interaction, regardless of the outcome, is an opportunity to learn and improve. Reframe rejection not as a failure, but as a step in the process of building meaningful relationships with potential donors.

The Role of Volunteers in Solicitation

Successful campaigns often involve a small group of dedicated volunteers, typically Board or Development Committee members, who play a significant role in gift solicitation. There is no single personality type or style that defines a successful solicitor. What matters is understanding the basics of effective solicitation and being ready to seize opportunities.

Volunteers must be well-prepared, knowledgeable about the organization, and genuinely committed. They should be able to articulate the case for support and connect it to the interests and needs of their prospects. Building a healthy, open relationship with the professional staff is also essential for seamless collaboration.

Preparing for Successful Solicitation

Preparation is the cornerstone of successful solicitation. Here are key components to focus on:

1. **Stay Informed:** Keep up-to-date with the organization's needs and the specifics of your campaign.
2. **Know Your Prospects:** Understand your prospects' interests, needs, and giving history.

3. **Build Relationships:** Establish a rapport with your prospects and ensure they know you value their time and interest.

When preparing for an ask, consider these steps:

- **Set the Asking Level:** Work with your team to determine an appropriate ask amount.
- **Engage in Social Niceties:** Break the ice with casual conversation before diving into the solicitation.
- **Ask Directly:** Use a straightforward question like, "Would you consider a gift of...?" and then wait for their response.

Tips for Effective Solicitation

Here are some practical tips to enhance your solicitation efforts:

- **Be an Advocate, Not a Beggar:** Believe in your cause and communicate that belief passionately.
- **Start with Likely Prospects:** Begin with those most likely to say yes to build confidence.
- **Be Direct and Positive:** Let prospects know why you're reaching out and assume they will make a significant gift.
- **Plan the Setting:** Choose a comfortable, interruption-free environment for your meeting.
- **Be Friendly Yet Passionate:** Show your genuine enthusiasm for the cause and your personal commitment.

During the conversation, ask open-ended questions to engage your prospect's interests and concerns. Relate the mission of your organization to their values, and don't forget to ask for a specific gift amount. Aim high, as prospects often adjust downward rather than upward. Listen carefully after making the ask and follow their lead in the conversation.

Handling Objections

Objections are a natural part of solicitation. Here's how to handle them:

- **Denial:** If a prospect says no, listen actively and seek to understand their reasons. Keep the door open for future conversations.
- **Information Gaps:** If a prospect feels they need more information, provide it promptly and make another appointment to discuss further.
- **Institutional Concerns:** Address any concerns about the organization honestly and work to understand and mitigate them.
- **Timing, Amount, Purpose:** Be flexible with payment schedules, gift amounts, or purposes to better align with the prospect's capacity and interests.

Celebrating Success

When a prospect says yes, celebrate the achievement! Formalize the gift with a pledge card or a letter of intent. For larger gifts, a detailed gift agreement may be necessary. Ensure that all terms and conditions are clear to both parties.

Closing the Deal

The sales cycle for larger gifts can be long, sometimes taking a year or more from the initial ask to the final close. During this period, maintain close communication with the prospect. Provide any additional information they request and keep them engaged with the organization.

The Importance of Stewardship

Stewardship is the key to sustaining long-term relationships with donors. Acknowledge gifts immediately with thank you notes and personalized messages from key figures in the organization. Clearly communicate the impact of their contribution through reports, newsletters, and updates.

Stewardship involves more than just saying thank you. It's about showing donors that their gifts have made a tangible difference and connecting their values with the organization's mission. This respect and ongoing engagement are vital for cultivating future gifts and deeper commitments.

Board members and key volunteers can play a crucial role in stewardship by participating in thank-you visits, hosting on-site tours, and staying attentive to individual donor interests. Effective stewardship lays the foundation for future solicitations, turning current donors into long-term supporters and advocates.

Conclusion

Solicitation is an art that combines preparation, passion, and persistence. By embracing the fear of rejection, preparing thoroughly, and engaging prospects with genuine enthusiasm, you can master the art of asking. Remember, every ask is an opportunity to build a relationship, and every no brings you closer to a yes. Celebrate successes, handle objections with grace, and always steward your donors with care. With these strategies, you can transform the daunting task of solicitation into a rewarding journey of philanthropy.

Ron J. Huddleston, CFRE, FAHP
President
The Huddleston Group
www.thehuddlestongroup.com
ron@thehuddlestongroup.com
