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Nonprofit Strategies



SAN LUIS OBISPO COUNTY COMMUNITY FOUNDATION

Direct mail puts foot in the door

By Barry VanderKelen

When soliciting donations, direct mail is a fundamental technique of all fundraising programs. However, nonprofits that don't integrate direct mail into an overall fundraising strategy are missing out on additional financial support.

Direct mail is an inexpensive way to raise money. While the response rate is low, it doesn't take many donations to exceed the cost of the mailing.

Direct mail is an example of the "foot-in-the-door" technique. Social psychologists argue that getting someone to do something relatively small makes it more likely that person will do something larger later when asked.

These people have already indicated they care about the organi-

zation through their donations. If asked in an appropriate way later, these people will probably respond with larger donations.

Mining donor lists for patterns of giving will generate a list of people who ought to be contacted more personally.

Face-to-face solicitation is the most expensive way to raise money, but it is 10 times more effective than direct mail.

With tight budgets and reduced staffing, nonprofits send letters and don't follow up. It is rare that a large donation is received without the donor having been asked. There are, of course, occasional surprises, but relying on surprises is not a prudent method of budgeting.

Here are some steps to take to integrate direct mail into a larger fundraising strategy:

- Review the effectiveness of your direct mail. Will your response rate increase if you use stories to animate the mission?
- Analyze donor lists for patterns of giving. Who has given consistently over three years or more?
- Recruit a small group of volunteers to visit the regular donors. Why are these people regularly supporting your organization?
- Make follow-up a regular report at board meetings. Peer pressure works throughout life, not just in high school.

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Resource Use

- Support nonprofit leadership
- Board development/training
- Strategic planning

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Barry VanderKelen, Executive Director of the San Luis Obispo County Community Foundation writes a bi-weekly column to help strengthen nonprofit organizations in the community.

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Each column is reprinted as a one-page handout for use by local organizations. Barry can be reached at 543-2323 or by e-mail at barry@sloccf.org.