Fundraising for the Mission

THE WINGS CENTER AT EAGLE RANCH

CARRY THE PASSION OF THE MISSION

When I first arrived in Georgia to start Eagle Ranch, I purposed in my mind never to ask anyone for money. I was petrified of the thought of doing that! I instead wanted to raise funds like the world-renowned George Muller of Bristol, England, who famously said, "I will never ask for money but will pray it in."

Little did I know at that time that the Executive Director will always be the chief fundraiser for an organization. Now, I try to dissuade founders from outsourcing this role, especially in the early days of their organization (many do). No one carries the passion of a mission like the founder, and passion is what resonates with people.

Today, Eagle Ranch's budget is over $6M a year. Although we have an exceptional Director of Development, I was the chief fundraiser for our mission for nearly forty years while I served as the Executive Director.

WHY PEOPLE GIVE

People give primarily for three reasons: need, vision, and relationship. It is very simple; effective fundraising begins and ends with these three basic principles. There is no "silver bullet," no shortcuts to a sustainable fundraising strategy.

1. NEED – Be able to describe a discernible need that is independently verified. Your organizational purpose is to meet that need.
2. VISION – Your vision for wanting to meet this need must make sense to your constituency. It needs to be simple and focused. Too big a vision compromises credibility and exhausts donors. You want the vision to be such that a donor asks, "What's next?"
3. RELATIONSHIP – These can be relationships you have or those of your advocates: Board members, Advisory Board members, friends, or other donors. We call that capturing the "halo" of others. In other words, their network becomes your network. The trust they have in your advocates becomes the trust they have in you.

DONOR RELATIONS: LOVE THE GIVER

Always remember to love the giver and not the gift. This is a constant theme throughout scripture (i.e. the widow's mite). Often, people who give little in the near-term may later remember you in their estate planning.

The most effective fundraising strategy is to get potential donors on site. They may not have an accurate view of the feel and look of your organization. So many times, when people come to Eagle Ranch, they comment, "I never knew that it looked like this!"

Here are a few best practices to keep in mind:

- Immediate follow-up and thanks to every donor is important. A quick response to a donor's gift communicates thankfulness. Gratitude is a lost art and will set you apart!
- Do not manipulate donors for funds. Have an open-handed mindset when asking for money. Don't come across as desperate. Simply share the vision and let God do the rest.
- Be careful not to treat donors like an ATM machine. There are so many stories where donors felt taken for granted, and they never gave to that organization again!
- A good (and appreciated!) practice is to follow up with pictures and notes of appreciation after donors have funded a project.
- Be careful about putting all your eggs in the basket of those who give significant sums to you. You never know when they are going to pivot to a new organization.
- Do meticulous research to determine your full cost of a project before making an "ask." Nothing is worse than getting caught in "hidden" and unanticipated costs.
- Always make your financial records available to your constituency. If you are resistant, ask yourself, why? This is a great litmus test of your stewardship!
- Always be honest with your constituency. No one's life is perfect. Transparency builds trust.

REMEMBRANCE IS THE KEY TO FAITH

As a Christian ministry, we have always believed that God is our ultimate provider—not a roaring economy, wealthy donors, etc. So many times when we were at our wits end and did not know how we were going to continue to fund our ministry, money would be there, many times exactly what we needed!

I am always struck by how many ministry leaders begin to panic when bad economic times are on the horizon. Either God is our ultimate provider or He isn't. I almost enjoy these downturns because it recalibrates where our dependency is.

In the early days, our budget was about $100K, and I was concerned that we wouldn't be able to raise those funds in the course of the year. But time and time again, I have seen God's provision, and it has given me faith so that even now when our budget has risen to over $6M, I rarely worry about ongoing finances.

BE A GOOD STEWARD

Very few things can bring God the most glory or the most disgrace as the way finances are handled. Be careful, because your stewardship of Kingdom dollars is being “watched” by the world.

Keep solid donor records and set this up on the front end. There are many tools available that can help with this process. As your organization grows, good record-keeping and automation of specific tasks will pay huge dividends in time and money (and sanity!). Additionally, good record-keeping honors the donor when you can confidently share their giving history or something they told you three months ago. Stewardship in this area is important.

Not only is raising or increasing the “inflow” of funds important but, so is “outgo.” You need to be a good steward of both. Money going out of your ministry is as real as money coming into your ministry. Are you being a good steward of how funds are being allocated?

OPERATING DEBT FREE

Operating debt free is attractive to donors because it is such an anomaly in the for-profit and not-for-profit world. It sets you apart! Reasons to operate debt free are:

- People give sacrificially to the mission, not to service a debt.
- It is easier to raise capital funds than operational funds, so why borrow toward a capital project and pay a debt service with operational funds?
- God can provide before a project as well as after.
- It creates a sense of urgency and buy-in for the community to fund a project if it’s going to become a reality.

BROADENING YOUR SUPPORT BASE

As your organization grows, you can use many creative strategies to broaden your support base, such as:

- Share your vision through speaking engagements.
- Establish a Memorial/Honor Program.
- Pursue appropriate media coverage.
- Use your Board of Directors to introduce you to their networks.
- Make the regular distribution of a newsletter an organizational discipline.

- Make it easy for people to give to your organization through:
    - Direct withdrawal.
    - Envelopes in newsletters.
    - Ability to process credit cards.
    - A giving form on your website.
- Be strategic in your execution of special events:
    - Be careful about over-emphasizing special events. They are weather – and volunteer – dependent and require a lot of time to plan and execute.
    - Developing a follow-up strategy in conjunction with planning the special event is imperative. Your highest ROI for an event is usually embedded in sound execution of a follow-up strategy.
- Be very careful in the use of volunteers to fundraise. You never know if they are accurately communicating about your ministry. However, strategic volunteerism can increase organizational capacity and is a gateway for future donors.

SPECIAL PROJECTS & CAPITAL GROWTH

Use a specific needs list to secure funding for operational and small capital projects. People love to give to specificity! These funded projects can help offset some of your ongoing operational costs.

- Remember it is easier to raise capital funds to construct buildings than it is to build a dependable solid base of operational support.
- Be careful about your capital growth outsprinting your operational support base and staffing.
- Be wary of depending on free labor. It is difficult to hold volunteers accountable and to your timeline.
- Include a significant contingency (15-25%) in every capital project.

GRANT WRITING

Hire a part-time (8-10 hours per week) person to research and write grant proposals. Many times you can get on a foundation's or corporation's annual funding cycle if you have someone dedicated to monitoring grant timelines. This individual should easily "pay for themselves" in their first year of employment.