

So You Think You Can Dance... with Your Donors and Prospects?

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Most of the conversations I have with development professionals these days revolve around the state of their acquisition programs.

And currently the state of these acquisitions, like the state of our economy, is not as sound as we all would like. What do we counsel them if their acquisition results disappoint? Well, it may not be all that palatable, but since you asked...

Unfortunately, fundraisers don't always make a compelling case for support. Sometimes, they're also reluctant to actually ask for the money. Even savvy fundraisers who do these things right may not be bringing in the number of new donors they'd like, or getting healthy upgrades and more frequent gifts from the current donors.

This seems patently unfair, doesn't it? After all, fundraisers work hard for the money. They're committed to their organization, passionate about its mission, and proud of its accomplishments. (Give yourself a pat on the back, all you fundraisers!)

But the intensity of their emotional investment often causes the dreaded fundraising affliction, "endo-organizational myopia" or, in layman's terms, focusing too close from an inside perspective.

I'm recommending to all our patients, uh, clients, that they consider this remedy: think like a prospect; think like a donor.

When we write copy for our clients, one of the first things we ask is "who will sign the letter?" Next, we try to learn what we can about the signer and his or her role within the organization. This way, we can see the organization through the signer's eyes, because one of the hallmarks of a good letter is an authentic "voice".

But it doesn't end there; to write effective fundraising copy, we also need to look at the organization from the prospect's or donor's perspective. What is it that they want to know? Often, it may not be what the organization chooses to tell them. And there's the rub.

So, when you're planning your next appeal, remember that good dancers must be able to dance the Frequency Fandango with one partner and the First Gift Foxtrot with another. Although these dances may be dramatically different, the best dancers can effortlessly follow their partners' lead in whatever dance the partner chooses to do. And they do it without looking at their feet.

Realize, too, that the most popular dancers may not be the best ones. They might be the ones who don't mind sitting out the next one, just to get to know their partner a little better while standing around the punchbowl.

So, make sure that you communicate often, ask questions, listen intently to the answers, and that when you finally ask a donor or prospect to dance, you've got their dance down cold.

Let's put an end to endo-organizational myopia in fundraising. Don't hang back with the wallflowers, thinking you can't do it. Ready? Chin up, shoulders back, smile, and dance with your partners!

But if you need a few lessons, you know who to call: they don't call me Twinkletoes for nothing.

