The 7 Deadly Sins of Capital Campaigns

"How difficult can it be? I can do it myself!" "Their capital campaign was successful; why don't we just copy what they did?" "We can buy the land next door so let's just raise our campaign goal." "Can you bring new donors to our capital campaign?" "Let's ask him for $1 million. I know he has it and we need it." "I will give $1 million…if you fire the CEO." "Why haven't we raised any money recently?"

As fundraising consultants that have worked with hundreds of not for profits on capital campaigns over many years, we have heard these words and others like them. And that's when we know the organisation is likely headed for trouble with its capital campaign. It is an indication of one or more of the SEVEN DEADLY SINS of capital campaigns.

#1: Envy

"Why can't we just copy what they did?"

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to capital campaigns. What works for someone else may not be right for you. Depth of relationships, staff capacity and volunteer engagement are just some of the other variables needing to be taken into account. Philanthropy is dynamic and every donor has unique needs and values that they want to meet.

So how do you find the approach that is just right for you? Most often it is through a well-organised planning process that includes a campaign readiness assessment (CRA). The assessment will help to design a capital campaign plan that is just right for you, including a starting goal, timeline, organisational structure, budget, and resourcing plan.

#2: Gluttony

"Let's just raise the campaign target. What's a few more million?"

Goals are benchmarks for success that an organisation must exceed to have an unqualified success. One of the keys to a successful capital campaign is the belief by campaign leadership and donors that the campaign will be successful. A clear and believable campaign strategy is vital for donor buy-in. The temptation for organisations is to set their campaign target on what they want, rather than what is possible.

Temptation can come in the form of over enthusiastic donors "This will be easy, how much more do you want?" One organisation doubled its campaign target from our recommendation and were highly disappointed when advocate fatigue set in with the campaign only 5% over our original projection. A bloated goal will only lead to perception of failure when maybe you reached your full potential.

#3: Lust

"We want a consultant who can bring new donors to our campaign"

If a consultant offers to bring you donors, wouldn't you wonder where those donors have come from? And what will happen to yours? We can say categorically that this hit and run approach to the BRW Rich 200 doesn't work. Authentic relationships drive capacity giving. Significant gifts come from donors who have a relationship with your cause. The challenge is to cultivate your donors care for your organisation, inspire them to prioritise your project and ultimately maximise their giving.

For you to reach your full potential in a capital campaign it will be because you have put your donors' needs before yours and asked them what you can do to make them happy in their giving. If you want to be successful, remember this: In love the other is important; in lust you are important.

#4: Greed

"He's worth billions. He has to be good for a huge gift"

Greed and impatience leads them to something like this: We need money. We know who has money. Let's go ask them for money. The organisation loses sight that it is not about them, it is about the donor and his or her passions. But how can you know if the donor cares, and if so what they might give? Here's a thought: **ask them**.

Do your homework to determine the appropriate ask amount. Be sure to use the combination of internal knowledge, external research and anecdotal review. The answer to the "How much?" question is simple: ask for an "appropriate" amount. It's the execution that's difficult.

#5: Anger

"I will give $1 million…if you fire the CEO."

What is your organisation's external image? How do you know? How is your internal health? It is always difficult to get an objective view from close up. A good Campaign Readiness Assessment by an objective third party not only looks at the community's willingness to give but also the organisations readiness to ask.

There are basically three types of anger that can derail capital campaigns: unknown, unacknowledged, and unresolved. Being able to uncover unsettled grievances, uncomfortable issues or internal weaknesses before launching your campaign allows you to address them head on before you try to raise money. When identified early and dealt with appropriately the effects of anger can be mitigated and sometimes even be turned into a positive.

#6: Sloth

"Capital campaigns fail not because they run out of prospects but because they run out of steam."

There are two things that are hard to do: things you don't like to do and things that you don't know how to do. I have yet to work with an organisation where we ran out of people to ask. Most often it is because the organisation simply quits asking. Capital campaigns are hard work and take prioritisation and persistence to achieve success.

The excitement in the beginning of a campaign is contagious. "This will be easy, why do we still need consultants?" But then comes the first hurdle or a series of delays and in some cases the campaign completely stalls. Do you give up or do you use everything you can to push the campaign through this period. It takes more resource and energy to drive something up hill. Don't pull back, push harder.

#7: Pride

"If you think it is expensive to hire an expert, wait until you hire an amateur."

I would hope when you need an annual financial audit you hire a CPA. When you need legal advice, you turn to an expert. Even contestants on 'The Block' get expert opinion to guide them and provide maximum opportunity for success. Why on earth would you risk millions of dollars in lost philanthropic funding by taking a DIY approach.

The greatest expense in a DIY campaign is the money that **DOESN'T** get raised. Research out of the US reports that internal, DIY campaigns raise around 50% less than campaigns that use expert counsel.

Engaging a capital campaign consultant doesn't guarantee you campaign success but it should maximise your potential. There is value in the insight and expertise that comes with experience in conducting guiding hundreds of capital campaigns that can protect you from a negative experience and provide value way beyond the amount you raise and the cost of doing so.

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