

Capital campaigns – do you really need a volunteer chair?



Over the past decade it has become much more difficult in Australia and New Zealand to recruit suitable volunteers to lead capital fundraising campaigns. This trend has significant implications for our sector and already some nonprofits have suffered.

What then are the factors driving this trend and how is it impacting capital campaign fundraising?

The Challenge of Securing Campaign Leadership

There are a number of reasons contributing to the difficulty of securing good volunteer leaders.

The first and most common reason is simply the expressed lack of time. The very people who qualify to lead a capital campaign are, by nature, successful, busy and always defending their time from a myriad of different claimants. These include their business interests, community projects and their private time with family and friends. A nonprofit organisation's capital campaign has to stand out in this crowd to command attention and be supported.

Other challenges in securing good volunteer leaders include: a colleague's expressed displeasure, i.e. a board chairman's opinion to a CEO; an unfavourable memory of participating in a previous campaign; or a desire to avoid having to make a leadership gift of substance.

Negotiating some of these hurdles will be discussed at another time, but firstly what is the result of this campaign leadership shortage?

Compromised Results in Leader Vacuum

Despite being unable to recruit a well-qualified volunteer leader to head up their capital campaign, some nonprofits still press ahead with the campaign.

We directed a campaign in a major city a few years ago for an education charity that wanted to raise \$3 million. However the feasibility study found they could raise only \$600,000 due to a lack of campaign leadership.

The client insisted a campaign proceed with a target of \$1.2 million. No campaign chair was identified and the result was \$400,000 raised at a cost of \$100,000. The reason for the poor result? No campaign chair.

We are currently working on a large multi-million dollar campaign for a national charity that we inherited from another consultancy. It was largely failing due again to not having an appointed campaign chair. When we took up this assignment it was conditional that we work to recruit appropriate volunteer campaign leadership. This has not been easy, but the campaign will not succeed without it. Maybe in a future article I can update you with a successful recruitment story.

These are just two examples among a number of others I am aware of where leadership has not been recruited and as a result, the campaigns suffered.

Campaigning Without a Volunteer Leader?

If, despite your best efforts, you are unable to secure a well-qualified volunteer leader, the question arises: can a campaign be run without such a person?

From the examples above, and my own many years of running capital campaigns in Australia and New Zealand – clearly no.

It is hard enough running a campaign where strong leadership is in place, let alone compromising such a fundamental principle of capital campaign fundraising. The single most critical factor for success in a capital campaign is having the right volunteers to chair the program and lead its committees.

A capital campaign requires three key elements. The nonprofit provides the case, the campaign director provides the 'how to' expertise, and influential volunteer leaders provide the entrée to donor prospects. If the volunteer solicitations for support go missing, the campaign loses its peer-to-peer edge and basically neuters the campaign into a major gift program, wipes a zero off the target and will take three to four times longer to run.

Campaign leadership is required for community entrée, peer-to-peer leverage, and cost effectiveness in raising the target. If you can't find a good leader, think very seriously about embarking on a campaign. You may need to pause, reassess, and look at other options to put you in a position to find a good campaign chair.

About the Author – Craige Gravestain

Craige has worked as a professional fundraiser for 17 years and his experience covers sponsorship, bequests, grant writing, strategic planning and direct mail. His specialist area however is capital campaigns. In 2002 he co-founded Xponential Philanthropy (xponential.com.au), a fundraising consultancy operating throughout Australia and New Zealand, and the firm has been associated with award winning capital campaign programs. Craige has also presented at conferences and workshops in Australia, New Zealand and the USA.

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