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FundRaising Success

An Untapped Gold Mine: Business Networking for Event Fundraising Success

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If you, like most event fundraisers, are tasked to meet ever more challenging goals from your major fundraising events in a time of diminishing returns, why not start the new year with a fresh perspective?

Let's face it: It's hard to take responsibility for raising more when the relationships that lead to success are often out of your hands. Generally, when it comes to special events, the executive director and the board do the heavy lifting of securing honorees, major sponsors, golf foursomes, etc., leaving the development and special events teams to handle follow-up and lesser commitments. This top-heavy approach can lead to a gap between the major contributors and more modest supporters who may be below the radar of the board. This target range presents a golden opportunity for you to contribute by bringing supporters to fill the gap while also bolstering funds that are raised in the upper and lower brackets of the event donor pool.

What is it, then, that those higher-ups have that you don't that allows them to tap the deep pockets of major event donors? How can you develop that same skill? It's very simple, yet at the same time, hard to attain. The fact is that it's all about connections — personal and professional. In the case of your board, people with money and power are connected to others with similar levels of influence.

Remember the adage that "[like likes like](#)"? It's true. Your board members bring connections that add value to their participation in your organization. Do you bring the same?

How can you strengthen your value to your organization with your own connections of significance? How can you bring relationships to the table to help support special events at all levels? In the process, how can you add value to your own professional profile as you further your career, be it with your current organization or elsewhere?

The answer is ... Get out of the office! Leave the safety of your cubicle, and join the vibrant world of business networking. This remains a largely untapped gold mine for development and special-event professionals from nonprofit organizations. Business networking provides an open-ended opportunity to cultivate your own connections to facilitate success with your events.

There are so many organizations where your profile as a representative of a nonprofit organization will be welcomed — dedicated lead-generating groups, women's organizations, rotaries, chambers, industry panels, trade groups, etc. To get started, check your local papers or ask some of your board or committee members where you might start.

Find a group or groups you like, and dig in. Get to know the members. Join a committee. Make a presentation at a program. These are golden opportunities to build prospect lists, recruit committee members and connect with potential sponsors. The people you meet may or may not be at the level of major donors. They are likely, however, to know and/or do business with potential honorees, larger sponsors and more midsized businesses that might benefit from event sponsorships. Once you develop the connections and ask for specific introductions, you'll be surprised at the willingness of your new associates to open doors for you.

In networking it is always best to start by giving referrals and by making introductions. Soon, you will get referrals from those you helped first. Remember, your own board and committee members are already in your network. They may make excellent connections for your new acquaintances if you approach introductions as having potential mutual value. When you develop a reputation of providing reciprocal value to those you meet, word will spread and you will be known as a valued networker. Everyone you meet is a potential event attendee. Some of those people can open doors to contacts or contribute directly to help you meet your goals.

Good networking takes several years to hit its stride. To be successful in this social, but “what’s in it for me,” world of monthly or weekly obligations, breakfast meetings, evening programs, and scattered one-to-one luncheons, it’s important to participate regularly and not expect immediate results. Try not to fall into the trap of saying you have no time for this ... If you don’t make time, you’ll never grow your footprint of connections and influence (except, perhaps, with the person in the cubicle next to you).

A few tips to enhance the value of your networking investment:

1. If you attend with a colleague, split up when you arrive. Do not work the room together or sit together during the program. Remember, you already know each other. You are there to make new connections.
2. Don’t let your agency hold you back if it doesn’t cover costs for dues or meeting fees. Consider these relatively modest fees an investment in your future. When you weigh the relationships you will build to make you a more seasoned professional with a strong sphere of influence in the community, the cost is nominal.
3. Develop a strong elevator pitch that goes beyond the mission of your organization. Promote your events and opportunities for involvement. Tell compelling stories of the work of your organization. You might be surprised in turn when someone in the crowd seeks you out to share stories of how he or she has been touched by the work you do. Invite participants to join your committees, contribute auction items, attend events, provide pro bono services, and introduce you to potential journal advertisers and sponsors. Remember, in return, you offer an opportunity for your new colleagues to make significant contributions that showcase their own skills while meeting like-minded professionals to extend their networks.

It’s time that event fundraisers expand their thinking from serving as in-house resources to building connections in the business community. Go out there and “tap the gold mine.” As with most endeavors worth pursuing, it’s hard work and it takes time. The rewards, however, are unlimited.

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