Are You Contacting Your Best Donor Prospects?

By Sasha Daucus

Looking for new donors is vital to any organization that depends on donations. Could you be overlooking some of your best potential donors?

If your aren't asking the people who have benefited from the paid services that your organization offers, then you aremissing a great source of donations. For instance, hospitals can ask former patients and their families, schools their alumni and performing arts groups their box office customers.

These people are have already shown that they value your organization, "low-hanging fruit," says Laurie Anderson Mann, in [Fundraising's Best Side Kick: Your Box Office](). She encourages people to confront the obstacles to making this 'ask'. "Often, complicated fundraising techniques are devised simply because people hate to ask directly for money, but asking is the most effective technique," says Mann.

To make the case, it's important to let people know that their fees do not cover all the running expenses of your organization.

"The majority of people who are users of an organization begin with the belief that the fees they pay are the primary, if not entire, support of the organization. More often than not, that is far from the truth," says [Tony Poderis](), former director of the Cleveland Symphony Orchestra, and retired fundraising consultant. "Users of an organization who gain an understanding of how small a percentage of the total costs their fees cover and who have the economic wherewithal to do so can become an organization's most responsive donors."

According to the [Theater Communications Group's *Theatre Facts*](), in 2006, about 64% of the total income of the average U.S. not-for-profit professional theatre was earned. That leaves a gap of 36% which must be covered somehow. 52% of the earned income of those same theaters came from the box office. "The systems are in place to process money through the box office, so why not leverage those systems to build your incremental donation base? Theatre buffs have a credit card in hand at the time of ticketing, so it is a terrific opportunity to turn audience members into patrons," says Mann.

Let People Know About the Need For Donations

To make a strong case, explain that only a percentage of the costs are covered by their fees. Make this concrete, by telling them the cost of paid services if their fees were set to cover all expenses.

For instance, at the Irish Repertory Theatre, ticket sales and other earned income covers about 60% of the theatre's running costs. The rest comes from donations. Without donations, tickets would need to be priced at around $100. If that were the case, many seniors, students, and families with children would be unable to attend performances at this family-oriented theatre.

Turn Ticket Buyers Into Donors

[Irish Repertory Theatre]() is a FundRaiser Professional user, which includes a special [Wintix integration module]() for pulling box office customer names out of Wintix box office software. The mission of the Irish Repertory theatre is to bring works by Irish and Irish American masters and contemporary playwrights to American audiences.

"We always try to turn ticket buyers into donors," says Patrick Kelsey, managing director of the theatre.

FundRaiser has helped make this easier. Ticket buyers are entered into FundRaiser from Wintix box office software using an 'updater' program. This ensures that development staffers have the names of prospects who have bought tickets, without the need for double entry. Says Kelsey, "running the updater is easy."

"We can see ticket buying habits; and we have the ability to respond to a donor or groups of donors with notices. We can easily tell who has given and who hasn't. FundRaiser has become a central component for us. I use it to extract various lists, for instance for opening night, or for donor prospects," states Kelsey.

Irish Repertory approaches ticket buyers in several ways, and allows time for trust to build. "If it's the first time that someone pays us a visit, then they have to get to know us. Once they come two or three times, they see that they are getting consistent quality theatre; a good theatre company to return to, over and over again, and to bring their family to," says Kelsey.

Fundraising experts recommend giving people several avenues to donate. At the Irish Repertory, "We give people who are buying tickets information about becoming a friend of the theatre. If they don't want to do it right then and there, then they see the information in the program and the lobby about becoming a donor. They can also contribute through the website." FundRaiser's integrated online donations features help with recording and following up on these contributions.

The theatre also keeps people informed with a newsletter for each production, and specific mailings for annual giving and the capital campaign.

At the Irish Repertory, Kelsey says that about 15% to 20% become donors after a few visits.

Feed An Actor

Another tip for turning ticket buyers into donor is to make your request for funds specific. For instance, donors might be asked to give the price of single seat in an auditorium, the cost of repairing a square foot of the roof, or to "Feed an Actor" for a week, month, or even a year.

Name A Theater Seat

'Named gift' opportunities can also help. The Peninsula Players, FundRaiser Select users with the Wintix Integration Module, offer donors the opportunity to name a seat in the auditorium. Peninsula Players invested in FundRaiser when they began their capital campaign in 2003 to construct a new theatre. They wanted it particularly for its ability to communicate with Wintix box office software, as well as it tools for managing donor information.

Personalize Appeals

For working with donors, FundRaiser offers many options for personalizing appeals, for instance the ability to record both the husbands' and wives' names, and to be able to add a second address. "Because we're in a resort community, a lot of our patrons summer here and winter somewhere else, so that's been great. We have the ability to set up what their formal name will be, and how we want letters to address them," says Todd Schmidt, former executive director of the Peninsula Players.

In 2006 construction was completed on the Peninsula Players new theatre.

Generous Donors

Ticket buyers can be generous donors when they understand the need and are given the opportunity. Generosity and concern for others is a vital force. Ticket buyers will donate and still continue to buy tickets

Sasha Daucus edits the FundRaiser Software newsletter, focusing on articles that help non-profit organizations feel more comfortable with their donor management software tools. In her free time she enjoys cooking and listening to world music from the Mediterranean region.

Resources

Case Study: Irish Repertory
www.fundraisersoftware.com/solutions/theatre3_irish.html

Coding and Groupings and More, Oh My! by Larry Weaver
www.fundraisersoftware.com/library/newsletterarchives/2007fr09tip.html

Fundraising's Best Side Kick: Your Box Office by Laurie Anderson Mann
www.dramabiz.com/fund.htm

Overview of Wintix Integration Module
www.fundraisersoftware.com/products/wintix.html

FundRaiser Software offers nonprofit organizations intuitive donor management software that is easy to learn and easy to use. Three programs, ranging from simple to sophisticated, let you choose the features you need now, while guaranteeing a built-in growth path for the future. Software flexibility, budget options, and superb technical support make FundRaiser Software uniquely adaptable to the needs of nonprofit organizations - whatever their mission.

For more information on our software or to request a product brochure and evaluation CD please visit our website at www.FundRaiserSoftware.com. You may also contact us at 800-880-3454 and sales@FundRaiserSoftware.com.

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