



7 Accelerators for Faith-Based Fundraising

BY JOSH BIRKHOLZ

As philanthropy grows increasingly complex and high-net-worth giving continues to change the nonprofit landscape, faith-based charities have an opportunity to grow their fundraising production in very significant and achievable ways.

Much of my career has been spent designing and implementing program-redefining change in the higher education and healthcare sector. From my early days of evangelizing data science to my work in growing transformational gifts and organizational design, I've seen many successes and some false starts. In the last five to seven years, I've adapted and applied principles to the faith-based nonprofit sector and landed on some key directions. As an active donor and volunteer in this sector, I am especially excited to share what I've learned. With that in mind, here are seven accelerators for faith-based fundraising.

1. Pursue Depth Out of Breadth

A core principle of relationship-based fundraising is aligning donor interests with organizational priorities. For many emerging faith-based nonprofits, I've seen difficulty wading through the universal worthiness of their offerings. Basically, since every program is worthy, every program is pitched to every donor. As charities develop their base of support through digital marketing, direct appeals, events, and so on, broader messaging may be an initial entry point. Soon, and perhaps earlier than most think, it is important to deepen the relationship building around the areas of interest with the most traction for each donor.

A major gift donor may give modestly to many areas but will make significant gifts to their top area. Engaging with them in making the best gift to their passion area and replicating this approach across the major giving prospect pool will net more giving than broad-based solicitations. This is even true at the congregational level. The first bit of advice I always give congregations, even though I do

not tend to work with them from a professional capacity, is “ask people individually.” Break away from universal appeals and go one-on-one to invite donors to give to specific areas aligned with their specific interests.

2. Find the Ripple

Many donors, perhaps most but especially newer donors, prefer to give where direct recipient value is apparent. For example, in higher education this would be scholarship gifts that benefit students. Giving food to a food shelf brings the expectation that someone will eat that food. Giving to support a new emergency room will directly benefit residents of the community.

In our experience with high-net-worth donors and mature philanthropists, a different impetus is more primary. A very common motivation for these populations is sustaining or systemic problem solving. In other words, giving that will solve a big problem, the effects of which will alleviate the core issues requiring recipient benefit. For example, giving to the top organization researching a disease will increase the odds that a cure is discovered and thus

benefits many people. Endowing top faculty positions will make sure the institution is able to continue attracting top talent, which will benefit many students. Giving to research to field test sociological factors leading to community-wide poverty may reduce poverty across many communities. High-net-worth donors give to things with positive ripple effects.

In a secular setting, I will often observe the unsaid need for credit by the donor, or “I helped solve this problem.” In most faith-based circles, personal credit may not be the motivator, but the need to solve something in a way that provides sustained impact (the “ripple effect”) most certainly is. Paired with the previous concept of relationship depth, imagine how compelling an ask would be if it were something like: “We have this big, meaty problem, that if it were solved, would net returns for generations to come. You came to mind as maybe the one person who could solve it. Should we see if there is a path here for you to make that happen?”



3. Build Donor Community

In recent years we began asking a new question in our campaign planning study interviews and donor sentiment survey projects. We asked, simply, “Are you friends with other donors to this institution?” When we reviewed the responses and compared against giving patterns, it turns out those with friends had both higher giving and higher potential lifetime giving. So much of engagement strategy is between institution and donor. Putting the same effort into donor-to-donor engagement will certainly accelerate your program.

**I RECOMMEND CONSIDERING
THE WORDS OF MARKETING GURU
SETH GODIN:**

“People like us do things like this. There is no more powerful tribal marketing connection than this. More than features, more than benefits, we are driven to become a member in good standing of the tribe. We want to be respected by those we aspire to connect with, we want to know what we ought to do to be part of that circle. Not the norms of mass, but the norms of our chosen tribe.”

4. Invest in Prospect Development

Although it might seem odd, when I evaluate a fundraising program, my first litmus test for major gift program maturity is the presence and strategic positioning of its prospect development program. Nonprofits that raise big gifts are fueled by early pipeline coordination. For those unfamiliar with the discipline, prospect development consists of dedicated staffing to identify potential prospects, research them to

find their potential, manage the assignment process to the field fundraisers, track the prospect cultivation process, and provide solicitation decision support.

Every superhero has the “brains at the base” or the “person in the van.” Spiderman has Ned Leeds. The Flash has Caitlin and Cisco. Batman has Alfred and Lucius. Fundraisers have their prospect development professionals keeping them informed, offering strategy, and providing intel for the mission.

Some faith-based nonprofits have differences of opinion when it comes to prospect research and screening. All seem to agree it is a matter of resource stewardship to focus fundraisers on prospects most likely and able to give the gifts. From my observation, the concerns are about the public perception of using tools and technology to prioritize. Instead, those with concerns will prioritize qualitatively, based on existing self-governed giving patterns, or through referrals from other donors or stakeholders. I would suggest that using tools and technology are also a matter of good resource stewardship. Some have the ability to give. We have the privilege to help identify them and give them an opportunity to use their abilities. Doing this at scale will lift your program and give this opportunity to more people.

5. Equip Mission Partners

A common model, especially in Christian mission and campus ministry nonprofits, is the personal support raising model, commonly called “ministry partner development” or “MPD.” Essentially, these programs consist of program staff crowdfunding and maintaining a support community to fund the work. The model has few analogous examples in other sectors. The one exception is the emergence of student engagement teams at universities. These teams deputize students to build social followings, deliver custom video and engagement, and raise money from alumni and friends. Programs we’ve



built at universities have been outraising even the student calling program right out of the gates.

While we continue to research and find ways to transform personal support raising models, I have a few initial recommendations:

EQUIP FUNDRAISERS WITH TECHNOLOGY TO PROVIDE CUSTOM ENGAGEMENT EXPERIENCES.

In fact, our partner company [firstname.co](#) has built a perfectly aligned tool for personal support raisers called Mercury.

CONSIDER PREDICTIVE SCIENCE TO FIND THE DRIVERS FOR YOUR TOP SUPPORT RAISERS.

With major gift officers at large programs, we will often compare activity data of the top 20 percent with the other 80 percent. The top 20 percent often produces most of the revenue. This analysis helps us find which activities lead to the most success. This same methodology would work with support raisers.

FOLLOW THE PRINCIPLES OF BUILDING DONOR COMMUNITY.

That community building is key both within the support raiser cohort specifically and with institutional donors more broadly. Have both the missionary and the organization be part of “the tribe.”

6. Become Students of Wealth

I take great joy in being part of the fundraising community. I often say we are like teachers for philanthropists. When many donors look back at their gift, they consider them among the most significant things they’ve done in their lifetimes. As fundraisers, we helped them find that satisfaction in giving.

For new fundraisers, they feel the job is fulfilled in the ask. Certainly, gifts are rarely given without an ask. But great fundraisers realize they are truly philanthropic advisors. Many donors do not really know how to give—or at least give to their potential. Many will not think past writing a check that’s on hand. They may not be thinking about

their securities, private company equity, real estate, corporate giving programs, or deferred instruments. As a fundraiser, you will be more effective if you study how wealth is held and how different assets might be gifted. Start by talking to your prospect research team. Read some introductory books on assets (e.g., Virginia Morris' *Guide to Money and Investing*). Invite mature donors or board members to speak to your team or help you one-on-one. Commit to becoming a lifelong student of wealth.

7. Bring Donors into Your Ministry Equation

In every nonprofit sector donors desire to share in the success of the mission. In recent years, nonprofits have grown increasingly skilled at "impact language." Certainly, donors are more likely to give to solutions than to needs. Demonstrated impact in solving problems is a very compelling narrative. Often, however, the donor feels they are just giving money and the charity gives impact.

It is so critical to consider the donors as part of

your ministry. They are not funding your impact. You are producing this impact together. Bring the donor story into your narrative. Try and step back and let their gifts have the impact alongside the organization. These stories will give more satisfaction to your donors, and others will see them and be inspired. Behind every gift is an investment with the hope of a return. The return is not financial. The return is significance, love, or satisfaction in making someone's life better, and sure hope in the worthiness of mission. Don't hide this impact under your bushel.

Let's Talk

I would love to talk to you about your journey in development. Do these accelerators resonate for you or your organization? Do you want to learn more? I certainly do. My education and innovation grow every day because of the interactions I have with the people and the different perspectives I encounter. Throw in a little data science and the magic happens. Drop me a note or reach out to my amazing team at BWF. It is our privilege to help.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Josh Birkholz, chief executive officer of the global fundraising consultancy BWF, is a leader in big philanthropy and innovator for the business

of fundraising. In his 15 years of consulting for the leading nonprofits, universities, and healthcare centers around the world, Josh has redefined how we look at modern program design, fundraising in a smart economy, and branding in the high-net-worth marketplace.

Josh is widely regarded as a trailblazer of 21st-century development strategies, having authored the sought-after book *Fundraising Analytics: Using Data to Guide Strategy* and contributing to the books *A Kaleidoscope of Prospect Development* and *Return on Character*.

Josh is the chair of the Advisory Council on Methodology for Giving USA. He is an instructor at the Rice University Center for Philanthropy and Nonprofit Leadership. He won the Crystal Apple Award for Teaching Excellence from CASE. And, he is a recipient of the prestigious Apra Visionary award for his contributions to prospect development.

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