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Keep Your Campaign Aim True

Fundraising targets are still in sight, despite the recession

The recession has added a tricky new aspect to campaigns, but savvy fundraisers are finding success with a "business as usual" approach within a flexible framework.

By [Mary Ellen Collins](#)

Asking constituents to rally around a cause and make stretch gifts when they're already suffering unprecedented hits to their personal finances sounds more like a fool's errand than a best practice in fundraising.

The economic crisis has added a tricky new aspect to operating in campaign mode, but savvy fundraisers haven't given up, scaled back, or changed course. Instead, they've found that adopting a "business as usual" approach within a flexible framework makes campaign success a very achievable goal.

Proceed with confidence

Advancement pros agree that a recession doesn't constitute a reason to abandon a campaign. In fact, it's a pretty good time to start one.

"I'd rather be at the beginning of a campaign than the end right now," says Paul Scheff, chair of CASE's philanthropy commission and president of Catholic Memorial School in Massachusetts. "In the early stages of any campaign, you're going to see some of your best friends who love you no matter what. Bad economic news at the front of a campaign will affect you less because your constituents are less susceptible."

Nelson Cover, president of the Sheridan Group, a consulting firm, says this is a great time to lay campaign groundwork.

"The process of doing the feasibility study, developing the case, getting architectural plans if you're doing a building, and doing the strategic campaign plan can be a 24-month process. So if you're thinking about a campaign right now, you're likely to launch it during a period of recovery."

The John Carroll School in Maryland began feasibility study interviews in December.

"The board feels we have a strong, compelling case for a campaign that will

motivate our donors when the economy turns around," says Kurt Sudbrink, vice president for institutional advancement. "This is a perfect time to plan."

Sudbrink says people have willingly agreed to interviews, and judging by informal conversations, "they are excited by what we're proposing." Study results will determine the campaign amount and timeline, and activity will likely begin this year.

Institutions that were planning public launches took different approaches to timing once the recession hit. Leaders at Kimball Union Academy in New Hampshire decided to delay the winter launch after staff made a planned cultivation trip to New York City immediately after the economy took a drastic downturn in early September.

"We might have done that anyway, but the economy influenced the decision," says Rachel Tilney, assistant head of school for external affairs. The school had raised \$16 million toward its \$35 million goal before the downturn, and it raised an additional \$4 million by December 31.

Boston College's October 11 public launch remained on schedule, with an announcement that the school had raised \$520 million toward the \$1.5 billion goal. "By the time the economic downtown was happening, we had spent months ramping up for an October launch," says Jim Husson, senior vice president for university advancement. "We felt pretty strongly that it would send the wrong sign if we delayed. We also said, 'If we choose not to launch now, what becomes our litmus test for when it is okay to launch?' We had donors making very significant pledges right up to October 11, and they were very excited about going public."

Consultant Cover says that tweaking campaign timelines won't have a negative effect and that many institutions will have to extend their end dates as donors delay making gifts. "People aren't conscious of the beginning and end of the campaign," says Cover. "The organizations that make the huge mistake are the ones that defer, delay, or slow down. That sends the message, 'We're not confident about your gift, we're not confident about our success, and we're in retreat.' It says you're a loser, and people want to give to winners. If you lose your momentum, you are lost."

Steve Elder, vice president for advancement at Colorado College, which is halfway to a \$300 million campaign goal, agrees. "Some trustees brought up the possibility of calling off the campaign, but those discussions didn't go anywhere," Elder says. "I don't understand why anyone would do that. Fear isn't a very good reason. Every institution should be in campaign mode all the time. We all have the need for support, and it's not serving our students or their families for us to hold back."

Communicate strategically

The recession has reinforced the need for thoughtful communication, not only about the case for support, but also about how institutions are dealing with financial challenges.

"As many institutions did, we sent a letter from the president to all constituents to let people know we had a plan, that we had cut the operating budget down," says Steve Close, vice president for institutional advancement at Stevenson University in Maryland, which has raised \$18.5 million of a \$20 million goal. "We tried to say, 'Here's what's happening, here's what we're doing to face it and keep moving in a positive direction.'"

At Creighton University in Nebraska, staff members changed the focus of their "30-Minute Mondays," a meeting to share news of upcoming trips and plans.

"We made it a time for staff to give quick updates on what they were hearing from donors," explains Lisa Calvert, vice president for university relations. Based on that information, communications staff tweaked the messaging for phonathon scripts and for advancement officers who were in the field.

"We took more time to communicate how people's generosity made significant differences to our programs and to make sure they understood that the university was being a good steward of their investment," Calvert says.

The University of Guelph in Canada began its campaign quiet phase in 2008, and it had already developed a campaign communications strategy that turned out to be providential: They aren't focusing on money.

"We have lagged behind other institutions in developing our case, and we're using this campaign to focus on institutional strengths and vision," says Joanne Shoveller, vice president of alumni affairs and development. "We're not talking about a dollar goal; we're talking about the need to invest in our areas of strength.

"When the economy took a downturn, I was really glad we hadn't been focusing on the money," Shoveller says. "Between now and 2014, there will be time to build a campaign dollar amount into the discussion. For now, we're talking about our vision and what donors can do to move it forward. And that's working. People are showing a real desire to be supportive once the economy starts to show some improvement."

Shift in focus

Although the economy hasn't prompted institutions to change their campaign priorities, it has increased the focus on annual giving and financial aid.

"We've seen a drop in the number and amount of annual fund gifts, so we're looking at how we're branding the annual fund," says Kimball Union's Tilney.

"The way we've talked about it hasn't impressed the urgency about the annual fund upon the donors. This is about the current student experience, which is everything from the caliber of the faculty we hire to the extracurricular programs we offer. A 16-year-old still needs to be educated, regardless of the economy."

Having already included financial aid as a campaign priority, Boston College

responded to the recession by asking all departments to cut 2 percent from operating budgets so those funds could be used for financial aid. "The financial pressures we're facing allow us to treat the subject differently," says Husson. "One of the things we're seeing is people who can't make a capital pledge are stepping up their annual giving, saying that they recognize the importance of current-use dollars."

Whatever the subject of the communication, Cover stresses the importance of maintaining a positive tone. "People need to know you haven't given up. You need to talk about your strategy for success and what you're doing to combat this, and not about what you can't do."

Cultivate thoughtfully

Instead of overloading the schedule with a number of new campaign events, some institutions find that rethinking existing events is the wisest course of action. Stevenson University postponed its traditional September thank-you dinner for top donors.

"We're going to use those funds and combine that event with an April event to thank donors and celebrate the opening of the new School of Business and Leadership building, which is part of the campaign," says Close. "We want to stay in touch and show appreciation without looking like we aren't stewarding our funds in a thoughtful way."

Michael Magoon, vice president for development and alumni affairs at Peace College in North Carolina, agrees that donors are looking harder at how institutions are managing their money. He explains why Peace College canceled a holiday reception for donors of \$1,000 and up.

"We're a small college, and budget cuts hit pretty hard. Seven positions were cut, and we decided it would send the wrong messages to be celebrating when people were losing jobs and that it was most appropriate to cancel the event," Magoon says. "We got only positive feedback about the decision."

Magoon and his staff continued to emphasize personal cultivation and solicitation visits and had raised \$20 million of the \$30 million goal when they went public in October.

The University of Birmingham in England has asked development officers to make more visits than ever, according to Nick Blinco, director of development and alumni relations. The university is still in its quiet phase, has not yet revealed the campaign total, and hopes to launch sometime in 2009.

"Equally important is the need to thank and keep thanking donors and to show the impact of every donation, so we are working hard at bringing our donors close to the people and projects they fund," says Blinco. This stepped-up stewardship activity includes bringing donors to campus to meet the academics who benefit from their giving and creating an event that introduces scholarship donors to their recipients.

At Shorecrest Preparatory School in Florida, which has raised \$8 million toward a \$14 million campaign goal, director of advancement Gary Butts says, "We are determined to feed as much information as we can and do as much cultivation as we can so that when the economy turns around and people are able and willing to make a gift, we'll be there."

He has created the 1923 Society, which recognizes top donors, and an Alumni Career Day that brings graduates back to talk to students. He also invited a group of emeritus board members and parents to an informal "history lunch," at which the attendees reminisced and educated Butts and the headmaster about Shorecrest's past. Butts hopes to develop that group into supporters who will help with fundraising, marketing, and writing the school's history.

Boston College's Husson underscores the importance of maintaining connections and keeping your institution front and center with your constituents, especially during tough economic times. "The worst mistake we could make is to hit the pause button on the engagement side. When they are ready, you're right there," he says.

Solicit with sensitivity

The philanthropic spirit didn't disappear just because the economy tanked, so staff and volunteers shouldn't make assumptions about anyone's willingness or ability to give.

"People will still give, but they will give more selectively," says Kimball Union's Tilney. "If we drop off their radar, we'll be making their choice for them. Not everyone feels the pain of this downturn. There are people on the list who are ready and able to give."

Although the majority of institutions contacted for this article report an overall slowdown of gifts coming in, some, like Peace College, cite inspiring examples of supporters rallying in the face of the economic challenges. Peace chose to share exactly how economic conditions were affecting the college, and this transparency was rewarded.

"Those who are closest to the institution see the pressure on the budget," says Magoon. "Two of our key volunteers and board members accelerated their own pledge payment schedule because they know their support is more important than ever."

Development officers across the board report that their donors are willing to support their campaigns but that they are delaying making new commitments and asking for more time in which to pay off a pledge. So instead of getting caught up in the numbers, fundraisers concentrate on helping supporters fulfill their philanthropic intentions.

"We read each individual as closely as we can," says Shorecrest's Butts. "We don't want to stumble into an embarrassing situation or be premature with an ask. We recently had a lunch with several prospects. One indicated quietly that he was ready to make a gift, so the solicitation took place soon after. Another said, 'I love the school and I really want to be part of the campaign, but I

haven't been paid since June.' We will continue to work very closely with him, and when he's capable of making the gift, we'll know."

Butts' strategy is to focus on the donors, not the calendar. "Our campaign will happen when it happens," he says. "Our development plan is very closely linked to our strategic plan, and that plan is flexible. If you're not flexible in these times, you're a casualty."

Maintain momentum

That sense of institutional progress and forward motion plays a key role in motivating constituents to support a campaign. Ratcheting up the level of communication and cultivation, as well as soliciting gifts within a flexible time frame sends a positive message that the institution is rising to meet the challenges as it looks to the future.

Colorado College's Elder says, "For the college's sake, I'm glad we were in a campaign and had momentum going [when the downturn happened]. The needs haven't changed and the commitment of our supporters hasn't changed. We're still planning on making our goal, but it was our take going into the campaign that the focus isn't on the goal, it's on our mission and vision and what our supporters can do to help us realize them."

Creighton University decided to use the momentum of its recent campaign—which exceeded its \$350 million goal in December 2008—to propel the institution right into another one. Calvert says, "Rather than closing this campaign, we're resting into a quiet phase of a new campaign. We have to move forward. It's not time to put on the brakes." --

Creighton plans to announce details about its new campaign timeline and priorities once the economy begins to rebound.

Fundamentals, not freakouts

So what is the best plan for running a campaign during a recession? Return to Fundraising 101. Whether you're trying to raise a million dollars or a billion, whether you're conducting feasibility studies or closing on the last seven-figure gift, it's all about your connections to your constituents. Even in the best economic environment, campaign success depends on getting people excited about your institutional vision and helping them realize their desire to play a role in your future.

"If the economy freaks you out, it's because you're focused on the do-or-die goal-making," says Elder. "The institutions that have strong relationships with donors are going to come out fine."

IN SHORT

Gratitude 2.0. For a good example of a video thank-you at the close of a capital campaign, go to YouTube.com and search "saintbens." The College of Saint Benedict in Minnesota tells the story of "Our Place in the World: A Campaign to Inspire and Trans-form" with a nice balance of images showing both the bricks-and-mortar upgrades made possible by the campaign and the more ineffable improvements it produced for the student experience. The campaign closed in September 2008, raising more than \$82.7 million from 17,600 donors.

Laying the Groundwork. Looking to boldly go where your institution has not gone before? Learn about the importance of planning, planning, planning your next campaign in a Campbell & Company recorded seminar, "Bold Plans, Sound Strategy: Preparing for Campaign Success." Development experts Tom D. Wilson, Campbell's vice president and Western regional manager, and Trish Roth, a senior consultant, delve into the details of organization-wide planning, including how to set priorities, maximize your opportunities, and budget for unexpected needs. The seminar is available for download at www.campbellcompany.com.

Campaign Classroom. Three consecutive CASE conferences will hit Charleston, S.C., in May: Campaign Fundamentals, May 11-12; Campaign Strategies, May 12-13; and Campaign Communications, May 14-15. Professionals can attend all three for a thorough immersion in all things campaign, or choose just the most pressing topic for your institution's needs. Fundamentals focuses on donor identification and campaign data. Strategies includes sessions on the special issues and trends related to the downturn. Communications will help you maximize Web 2.0 in your campaign. Register at www.case.org/conferences before April 13 for early-bird pricing.

By the Numbers. Get the full picture of educational campaign fundraising in 2008 from CASE's annual survey report on the topic. It will be available to buy this month as a downloadable electronic document in the CASE Bookstore at www.case.org. This year's survey has 185 respondents, including 28 campaigns with goals of \$1 billion or more (up from just eight in 2007). CASE Director of Research Tracy Casteuble says this jump was "not an accident." She encouraged institutions with big campaigns to complete the survey in order to get better data on these trendsetters.

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About the Author

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