



NO PEERS PLEASE, WE'RE BRITISH

This November, the Institute of Fundraising and the Association of Fundraising Professionals offered a joint conference in London entitled *Global Perspectives on Major Donor Fundraising*. Amongst the many questions regarding US vs. UK fundraising practice, perhaps the hardest to clarify concerned fundraising by peers, or volunteers. How much should British charities rely on volunteer asking by Trustees, committee members, or donors?

Peer to peer asking is a cornerstone of major gift fundraising in the US in part because Americans prize community very highly. Anyone who has ever moved into an American neighbourhood knows that newcomers may receive welcoming gifts and invitations to Thanksgiving dinners. Thus an investment banker, a plumber, and a successful writer may live side by side, cross paths at church, and work together on a campaign committee, asking each other and their friends for high-level gifts. Regional campaigns (i.e. for a local hospital) thrive on this kind of volunteer asking. Donors feel committed to a visible, community goal, and friends giving together can form the cornerstone of a campaign, much as neighbourhood campaigners and donors did for Barack Obama.

Volunteer asking for major gifts seldom works as well in Britain. A few networks – very traditional ones, or those where the donors have unusually strong links through shared values, business activity, or background – can create the same sense of transcendent community that an American community can achieve almost effortlessly. Seventy-five percent of British major donors today, however, earned their money rather than inherited it. They are often foreign-born, or married to a foreign-born spouse, or outsiders to the

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traditional areas of privilege – independent-minded people who may object quite strongly to being asked to give money to charity by somebody with whom they have no deep reciprocal arrangements based on charity and neighbourliness.

Village fetes, auctions, sports challenges, crisis appeals, policy and advocacy campaigns, and direct marketing do not require high-end, private asks -- and the British are superb at them all. A major gift ask, however, can feel distressing to a volunteer, like moral as well as financial arm-twisting. A volunteer who asks risks violating two precious British values: minding one's own business, and maintaining an impeccable sense of timing. A rejection may therefore be perceived as the *asker's* fault for asking incorrectly.

Major gifts, moreover, pose risks for donors, too. Those who give large amounts of money away in the UK may be suspected of imposing their own views, or of seeking attention – or worse, a peerage. A recent gift of £30 million to an Oxbridge college earned the unfortunate donors scathing attacks (including a comparison in *The Times* to Stalin). No wonder British volunteers avoid asking – who would risk failure in their friends' eyes, while inviting those same friends to risk being vilified by the public!

How, then, can the British best use volunteers? Sometimes, passionate volunteers make brilliant asks for the right cause. All too often, however, charities that try in effect to outsource their major gift fundraising to volunteers find that whilst volunteers may be willing to host dinners or lend their name, most will delay or totally avoid direct face-to-face asking, even after careful training.

Based on our experience with major asks on both sides of the Atlantic, what matters most in Britain, we believe, is not *who* asks, but *how*. Most major donors want a direct line to the Chief Executive, whether or not the Chief Executive asks: this builds a powerful sense of trust and connection. Donors want cast-iron reasons why you need the money, a



good explanation of how money is spent, and great follow-up. They want to be *asked to consider giving* rather than *told that they must*.

The good news is therefore that, while volunteers who will ask are a priceless asset, you can get by with a rock-solid case for support, a willing Chief Executive, and skilled fundraisers who can really listen as well as ask themselves. Meanwhile, invite your volunteers to become part of the charity family. Ask them to speak to small groups about why *they* give, or to endorse proposals or lend quotes. Don't push it if they offer to open a door (for example with an introductory letter) but not walk through it (for example by accompanying you on the visit). Report back faithfully.

And above all, welcome their advice (even when you can't follow it). If there's one adage that holds just as true in Britain as in the US, it's this: when you want advice, ask for money, and when you want money, ask for advice.

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