

Fundraising Follies  
1989

Three years ago I inherited a sum of money that I decided to share with an array of worthy organizations: social service programs, political groups and charities to which I'd previously been able to donate only small quantities of my time. I didn't give the money anonymously, but neither did I give it for any grandeur (and in the proportional scheme of things, the amounts given were not grand). I consciously avoided most angles involving the use of my name or participation in some luxurious party that went along with many funding requests.

I didn't want or expect and thank you notes, exactly, although I had been strictly raised to write them. Dear Aunt Betty, a sample note might begin, Thanks for the \$10 you sent for my birthday. I bought a hula hoop, a diary with a key, and a chocolate ice cream soda at the candy store, and the rest of it away in my bank account for college. (My youth was a long time ago.) The point of such a note, according to my mother, who was so savvy at business as she was sadistic at parenting, was to include the donor in the shared appreciation of how you used and benefited from her gift and in some strategic, cleverly subtle sense let her know that you spent it well, should she ever be inspired to give again.

Not so with most organizations today. No sooner do you give small sum but what comes back to you but a shrieking plea for MORE!! No thanks yours, no explanation of how your money was used, just an unrelenting proliferation of mass produced, impersonal junk mail—and nightly phone calls in the middle of dinner—all requests for more donations and the mail, in such quantity and volume and so slickly and expertly produced that I figure that I could not have given any of these groups any more than it has since cost to stuff my own mailbox all these years with subsequent solicitations for more money. Which I don't have and so which makes the initial contributions self-canceling. Worthy as the organizations may be, I don't want to give money for what amounts to just cutting down trees—something I also gave money to prevent.

Imagine this: Dear Aunt Betty, As the result of your recent contribution to my birthday fund, I am now giving you the opportunity to sponsor my upcoming Christmas/Chanukah as well, as either a dear relative, favorite aunt, or best family connection ever, according to the following scale of payments. You pick. As you know, I am a worthy niece and there is so much that a successful winter holiday involves. Should you contribute at a high enough level, I will print your name on the invitation to an elaborate Fundraising party I'm throwing for the pre-holiday luncheon I intend to hold to amass funds for the holiday eve bash which will itself collect monies to ensure my next year's donations get off to a promising start. Of course, your level of contribution will determine how close to me you'll sit at these events. Sincerely, your loving niece.

Perhaps I don't understand enough—or just cannot accept—these ways of the fundraising world: that organizations value most people who can connect them with money. Boards of Directors are not comprised of folk most dedicated to an organization's mission, or who work hardest for the organization, but rather those who either have themselves or are connected to others who have big money (often related) to donate, that so much of the money collected is spent raising more money, and that most donors like to see their names in print and have parties to go to to exhibit their generosity. I left a career in the social services in no small part because of the bureaucracy of fundraising, the perceived and proclaimed need to spend money on tangibles that donors can see ( their names on a plaque, bench, building) rather than on salaries of those who work in those buildings and other unmeasurable qualities of service. I did once offer to wear the name of the donor of my needed raise on my back each day, if I could actually get that raise, but my offer went ignored. Isn't that how it works in car racing. It is often the case that the fundraising, like an addiction, takes on a life of its own, so that procurement of money takes over even when what the money will be spent on remains unknown.

I know that our government's priorities are skewed and that worthy organizations need money from individual donors to exist. And fortunately junk mail is now recyclable in certain locations. But like my friend who wants PBS to hook up an electronic system whereby people who have already paid membership can keep on watching regular programming during pledge breaks, I'd like to be able to donate to some worthy organization in exchange for a promise to never hear from them again.