

The Six Myths of Major Fundraising Campaigns

Susan E. Totten, Senior Vice President

According to *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*, the arts and culture industry received 41 gifts of \$1 million or more in 2019. Ranging from outright gifts of \$1 million to a bequest of more than \$100 million, many of these generous contributions support capital and endowment campaign efforts. Observing this trend, nonprofit organizations may wonder if launching a large-scale campaign is the most reliable way to stabilize their current financial models while continuing to take steps to achieve their vision for the future. Organizations increasingly look towards new major fundraising campaigns as the solution, believing that large-scale, multiyear fundraising efforts will cover projected structural deficits.

Before undertaking a major effort, there are several common misperceptions about major fundraising campaigns that should also be considered. This issue of *Arts Insights*, the first in a two-part series, identifies, examines, and dispels six common myths that every arts and culture organization should review prior to launching a major fundraising campaign.

Myth 1: If an Organization Launches a Major Campaign, It Will Succeed

Without an objective campaign planning or feasibility study that tests a clear sense of strategic direction, cost statements, and intended organizational impacts, there is no guarantee that a major campaign will succeed if launched. An indication of donor connection, commitment, and capacity in the community for the campaign is also necessary. Embarking on a campaign readiness assessment can help an organization sell the campaign strategy and messaging to prospective donors before launching a major fundraising effort. It can also lay the groundwork for the size and number of contribution requests needed to achieve the overall goal.

Myth 2: A Well-Planned and Visionary Project Will Sell Itself

The overarching project, while important, is often times not enough to sell a campaign. A dynamic campaign leadership team endorsing and soliciting for a campaign that has specific intended impacts and outcomes is as important as the project concept itself. A campaign with a good case statement but no strong leadership is vulnerable to failure.

Myth 3: The Board Has the Capacity and Aptitude to Play a Significant Role

Board members can be a significant financial and networking resource but they cannot manage an entire campaign alone. For a major campaign to be successful, boards require staff support and volunteer leadership to take on more responsibility and work collaboratively in order to raise substantial campaign funds. Arts and culture organizations may also want to consider identifying and recruiting experienced external campaign counsel who can provide structure and guidance in support of the campaign.

Myth 4: The Existing Development Staff Will Assume a Leadership Role

Staff at all levels must be deeply involved in facilitating the campaign however, they also have extensive responsibilities for securing gifts for annual operations. Most major gift prospects need to be solicited by members of the senior leadership team or board. Major donors prefer that peers, executive and artistic leadership, and those in governance positions make a personal request for a major gift. It is therefore imperative that the board and senior leadership be ready, willing, and comfortable asking for money.

Myth 5: A New Campaign Can Replace an Under-Performing Annual Fundraising Program

A new campaign cannot succeed and subsequently energize an annual fundraising effort when annual fund donors are not already excited to invest in an organization. Without a solid fundraising program in place—one that has already cultivated and solicited a large pool of donors—a new campaign will fall flat. Successful campaigns rely on a donor base that is eager to further invest in an organization's vision for the future.

Myth 6: A Campaign Must Have a Fixed Time Period

A campaign might begin with a one-year, three-year, or five-year fundraising timetable. This can depend on many different factors such as the total fundraising goal or the structure of expected pledges. Arts and culture organizations must plan for flexibility in each phase the campaign, keeping in mind the changes in the economy, competitive marketplace, and other external factors.

Conclusion

Major fundraising campaigns can achieve extraordinary results that positively impact a community and provide an organization with a unique and strategic opportunity to develop engaged and loyal stakeholders. Resources, circumstances, and organizational and community needs can affect the success of any campaign. However, there are a number of tactics and models available to help prepare and build a successful fundraising campaign. Support and assistance from internal and external leadership is key to creating momentum and impactful results.

Editor's Note: This article was inspired by the March 2011 presentation by former Arts Consulting Group Senior Consultants Willem Brans and Lee Kappelman and shapiroassociates President Susan Shapiro at the Association of Fundraising Professionals Conference entitled: *Campaigns: Are You Ready?*



Susan E. Totten, Senior Vice President

Joining ACG in 2019, Susan E. Totten brings more than 25 years of experience in capital, operating, and endowment campaign fundraising for arts and culture, higher education, and medical institutions. Overseeing the firm's contributed and earned revenue enhancement areas, Ms. Totten has also demonstrated success in strategic planning, board development, and mobilizing resources to advance organizational mission and vision. She recently served as Chief Development Officer at the University of Southern California Radio Group, where she planned a \$130 million capital campaign. Ms. Totten previously served as Executive Director, Office of Regional Giving at University of California, Los Angeles and as the Assistant Vice Chancellor, Health Advancement at the University of California Irvine (UCI), where she managed a \$2.3 million budget and was responsible for the \$500 million goal for the Medical Centers and School of Medicine.

Within the arts and culture sector, Ms. Totten has held roles as Director of Resource Development for Opera Pacific, Vice President of Development for Pacific Symphony, and Director of Development for the School of the Arts at UCI, where she completed a successful capital campaign to endow professorships, raise scholarship funding, and renovate and build new facilities. Ms. Totten has led conference sessions at the League of American Orchestras, Association of California Symphony Orchestras, and the Council for the Advancement and Support of Education on topics ranging from capital campaign planning to annual fundraising best practices. She holds a bachelor of arts in English literature from the University of California, Berkeley, where she also focused on art history and languages.

Contact ACG for more information on how we can help your organization plan for its next major fundraising campaign and achieve its long-term contributed revenue goals.

**(888) 234.4236
info@ArtsConsulting.com
ArtsConsulting.com**