

# **How to Make Asks and Get Them to Say “Yes!”**

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There's no doubt about it... making asks can be one of the most intimidating tasks for any fundraiser. The thought of sitting down across the table from someone and asking them to give your organization \$5,000 or \$50,000 is enough to make many people eschew the profession all together.

Yet, the ability to make a fundraising ask in person and/or on the phone is one of the most essential skills any professional fundraiser can possess. Sure, writing great grants is important, holding seamless events is too... but nothing compares to the ability to make a cogent, non-threatening, inspiring fundraising ask.

Remember, depending on where you live, individual fundraising constitutes between 60-80% of the total fundraising revenue for non-profits in your nation. A significant portion of this giving (and a vast majority of the largest gifts) is the result of direct, personal fundraising asks. As a development professional, executive director, board member, or even a manager on the program side of an organization... you need to know how to make a good fundraising ask.

### **Taking the Fear Out of Fundraising Asks**

Making asks can be scary, but it doesn't need to be. The most important advice I can give you to help you take the fear out of making asks is to practice. Not only will practicing asks help you overcome the anxiety that naturally comes from making asks, but it will also make you a better fundraiser... you'll have your spiel down pat, know how to anticipate objections, and know how to craft a customized ask based on the prospect you are approaching.

I always advise new front-line fundraisers and those who are not comfortable making asks to spend time practicing: first by themselves, running through ask scripts, writing out answers to common objections, imagining themselves sitting across from a donor and asking for money. Then, I suggest they practice with other members of their team, either other development staff or some of the program staff, or even with trusted volunteers.

Finally, I encourage them to get out into the field making "real" asks... preferably along with an experienced member of the development staff who can sit in on the asks and help do an analysis after the fact: What went well? What didn't go well?

Remember... asking for money for your non-profit isn't dirty, slimy, or unethical. Your non-profit does good work. You need money to continue to do good work. You need to fundraise. Without making asks, there is no fundraising, and without fundraising, you don't get to continue carrying out your mission.

### **It's Cultivate, Then Ask... Not the Other Way Around**

The success rate for your fundraising asks will increase dramatically if you understand and implement this one basic rule: prospects should be cultivated before they are asked.

Many development professionals, particularly those new to the game, try to “score” big donations quickly by making asks first, before any relationship is built. These folks hope that once the person says “yes and writes a check, the donor can be cultivated to build an ongoing relationship.

The scenario usually looks something like this: your new development associate meets a potential donor at your annual fundraising event. This prospect came as the guest of another donor to your organization. The development associate does a follow up call the week after the event to thank the prospect for coming, and to set up an in-person visit (so far, so good). At this meeting, after some good conversation, your development staff member makes a big ask for your new capital campaign.

Big mistake.

The development associate is mistaking the fact that the prospect came to an event and knows a current donor for a true relationship with your organization. This is *not* a relationship with your non-profit. It is the *start* of a relationship. Asks like these rarely work, and when they do result in a gift, it is usually a one-time gift without any ongoing support.

Don't make this mistake. Cultivation comes first. Then you make your ask.

## **The Ask Principles**

As you plan your asks, keep these key principles in mind:

### People Don't Like to Be Sold

Whether it is a used car salesperson, an insurance agent making a cold call, or a non-profit fundraiser making an ask, people don't like feeling as if they are being sold something. That's why the best salespeople use conversations to draw out wants and needs from buyers, and then present them with a product or service that fills their needs. That's why insurance agents make most of their sales through referrals by friends, family, and current customers. And that's why non-profit fundraisers need to cultivate first and ask second.

People don't want to feel as if your non-profit is “selling” them something. They worry that they will make a donation to you and wake up the next day with “donor's remorse.” The best way to overcome this fear is to build a relationship with your prospect. Find out what *they* are interested in... what programs or services that you offer are most important to *them*... how *they* want to give. Make your cultivation and your ask about them, not about you.

### People Want to Give

While people don't like to be sold, they *do* like to give. People like to give to non-profits. Giving makes them feel good, and provides them with very real psychological and/or spiritual rewards. Make it easy for them to give. Paint a compelling picture. People want to give and be

helpful in general, and if you build a relationship with them and paint a big enough vision, they will want to give and be helpful specifically to your organization.

### People Don't Give Unless They Are Asked

This is a key point that needs to be driven home for every organization: for the most part, people don't give unless they are asked. Rare indeed is the situation where your non-profit receives a sizeable donation from a person or company without first asking that person or company to donate. People want to give, but they won't give unless you ask them.

Far too many non-profits set up fundraising events and hope for the best, without making any real asks. Sending out invitations to a fundraising event is the weakest possible form of an ask. In fact, it's almost a non-ask. Asking people from your board and support networks to co-host the event and sell 10 tickets each... that is an ask. Asking companies to sponsor the event at \$1,000 a pop... that is an ask, too. Just slapping stamps on invitations? Not really an ask.

The other major problem I see with non-profits is the belief that because they are doing good work, if they just get their name out there, get brochures into the right hands, get a couple of good stories in the local paper, and spend some time at events and tours talking about how much money you need to keep operating, that the money will come rolling in. Nothing is further from the truth. Mentioning how much money you need is not an ask. Talking about how much money you need, then directly asking someone (in person or on the phone) to give a certain portion of that amount... that, my friends, is an ask.

Asks are questions. Asks mention specific amounts. Asks are just that... asks. People don't give unless they are asked.

### People Want to Understand Where Their Money is Going

Prospects feel much better about saying "yes" to your asks when they understand where their money is going. If you ask someone for \$100,000, he or she wants to know what that money will be used for. If you need a host committee member to sell 10 tickets to your event at \$100 per ticket, they want to know why you need to raise another \$1,000 for your non-profit.

Do you know why you need the money? Does your staff? Can your staff, board, and fundraising volunteers all explain in a succinct and clear manner why you need to raise the money that you are currently trying to raise?

How much does it cost you to serve one more meal, do one more operation, accept one more child into your school, provide one more scholarship? Whatever your non-profit's mission is, break down your program budget into bite sized chunks. If you are approaching a donor who has a heart for serving the poor and asking her to make a \$50,000 gift to your soup kitchen, and you can explain that \$50,000 will allow you to serve another 25,000 hot meals this coming year, that's far more powerful than simply asking for the cash for general expenses.

Also, be transparent with your donors. Your prospects (particularly your larger donor prospects) will understand that a certain portion of every donated dollar goes to cover overhead expenses. Keep these expenses reasonable, and be willing to share with donors what percent of their donation will go to overhead costs.

### People Want to Know that They are Making a Difference

If your non-profit doesn't have a big vision... if you're doing the same thing this year as last year, serving the same number of people, or carrying out the same activities... it's going to be very hard for donors to understand why they should make a big donation to your organization.

Donors want to know that they are making a difference and moving the dial. It's easier to make asks and raise money when your organization has a big vision and can articulate that vision for donors. Allow your prospects to make a big impact by donating to your organization. If you ask them to make a big gift to simply maintain the status quo they will likely donate elsewhere.

### People Need to Have Their Objections Answered (Even If They Don't Mention Them)

Just as in sales, your donors *will* have objections when you make asks. And again, just as in sales, they may not always voice those objections. It is your job as a non-profit fundraiser to anticipate those objections based on the relationship you have with the prospect and to answer them quickly and convincingly.

Some of the most common objections donors have are: not thinking that their gift will make a real difference, not trusting that the organization will use the money as they say they will, not thinking the organization will be able to accomplish its mission, worrying that once the organization receives the money, the donor will stop having input at the non-profit, and not understanding the terms and conditions of the gift agreement.

The best thing your development staff can do, if they anticipate an objection in the donor's mind, is bring it out into the open and answer it. For example:

*“Mr. Welsh, it seems like you're concerned that you won't have ongoing input into the Help-a-Student Fund at our organization once your \$1 million gift is used to establish it. My suggestion would be that we create an advisory board for the fund, and that you chair that board, which will have oversight over the use of the funds. Would that be something you would be interested in?”*

Notice that you're not giving Mr. Welsh a seat on your organization's board of directors (though that may be a possibility depending on the size of the gift and the size of your organization). Instead, you are creating an advisory group to oversee the fund being created with Mr. Welsh's sizeable donation.

## People Want to Give to Organizations They Trust

It is imperative for your non-profit to establish trust with your prospects and donors. People give to organizations they trust. Nothing is a bigger deal-breaker than a lack of trust. The way to develop trust is through the ongoing cultivation process, as well as being totally open and transparent with your donors.

Offer facility tours... people want to see what goes on in your office. Print up annual reports including full financials... donors want easy access to your financial information. Gather data showing the effects of your work... people want to be sure that your non-profit is making a difference, and the only thing that really proves this is cold, hard numbers.

Last, but not least, be accessible. If a prospect or donor calls your office, and no one answers, and no one calls him or her back for a week, you're going to seem unprofessional and unworthy of a donor's trust.

## People Give Based on Relationships

Remember... fundraising is all about relationships. People give based on relationships, both relationships with your organization as well as relationships with people at your organization. Take the time to build inter-personal relationships with your prospects. Spend time getting to know them. Then make your asks.

## **Planning the Ask**

Before you make any ask of a donor or prospect, be sure to ask yourself the following questions:

**1. Who Am I Asking?** It's important to know your prospect. Who are you asking? What do you know about this person? During your cultivation of this prospect, did you find out what parts of your cause matter most to him or her? Have you crafted an ask tailored to this specific prospect, based on his / her interests and desires?

**2. What am I asking for?** How much money are you asking this person to give to your organization? During the cultivation phase, did you figure out what this person's giving capacity is? (Or, did you at least research their capacity online?) What type of gift are you asking for: Capital campaign? Annual fund? Endowment? Planned giving? Are you asking for a one time gift or a multi-year commitment? What terms and conditions? Do you have a gift agreement prepared?

Also, go into your ask with the following mindset:

**Understand That There Will Be "No's":** And that's ok! Fundraising is like baseball... even the best and most experienced practitioners receive lots of "no's." Don't let them get you

down. They're part of the game.

**But Expect a Yes:** Attitude matters in fundraising. If you go into a fundraising ask assuming you will get a no, you probably will. Remember, your organization's mission matters! Go into every fundraising ask expecting a yes and asking for a yes.

**Show People How They Can Make a Concrete Difference or Reach a Concrete Goal:** People like to know that their donation is doing something specific and concrete. If at all possible, ask them to contribute to help do something specific, even if it is only to help you reach your own personal fundraising goal. For example, "Would you contribute \$50 to pay for 25 meals for the homeless?" or "I'm trying to raise \$1,000 for the Boy Scouts. Will you donate \$100 to help me reach that goal?"

### **The Process: Anatomy of an Ask**

Great, you say: I've built relationships, I've planned out my ask. Now, tell me... how do I actually make an ask? The best way to make an ask (any ask, whether for money, time, volunteer hours, or anything else) is by following these simple steps:

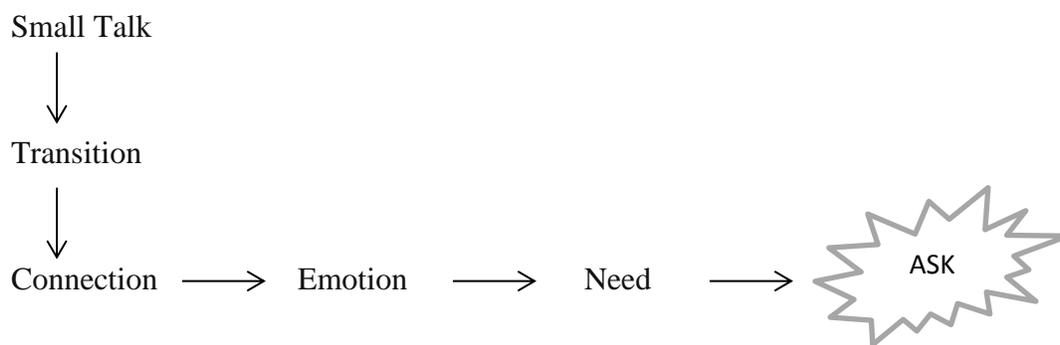
1. Get the pleasantries out of the way. Talk about the kids, the family, work, the last time you saw the other person. Get the small talk out of the way first.
2. Make a transition. Once the small talk is out of the way, make a transition so that people know the topic has changed to something far more serious. Good transitions include, "Listen... I want to talk about something important," "I've got a serious question for you," or, "Jane, I need your help."
3. Make the connection. Once you've moved into more serious conversation through your transition, remind the prospect of the connection that you personally have with the organization, and that they have with the organization (if they have one). For instance, "Jim, as you know, I've been on the board of the Farmer's Assistance Fund for three years now..." or, "Colleen, you've been to three events at the Rising Sun School now, and have volunteered at our annual community day..."
4. Make them cry. Ok, that's a little overboard. But you want to make sure that the person you are talking to understands the impact of your mission. Remind them what your charity does, and why it is important. Good examples are, "Samuel, every day, hundreds of people are diagnosed with XYZ disease, and each year 2,500 will die because they can't afford the medication they need to treat their affliction" or "Janet, I'm heartbroken when I look into the faces of these former child soldiers. I see such pain, and I can't believe we don't have the resources to help

every single one.”

5. Make them understand why you need what you are asking for. This is the background for your specific ask. Why are you asking them to come to an event? (“We’re trying to raise our public profile...”) Why are you asking them to give \$500? (“We want to serve more hungry families” or “We want to provide more scholarships to needy children”).

6. Make the ask. Remember to make it a question, and to ask for something concrete and specific.

So, the formula is:



That may seem like a complicated formula, but once you practice it a few times, you’ll see that is actually quite natural, and makes for a pleasant experience. Using this formula, your ask may sound like this:

*Hi Ruth, how are you? How are the kids? (Pleasantries)*

*Listen, I’ve got something important to ask you. (Make the Transition)*

*As you know, I’ve been working with the free clinic for almost a year now, and it’s something that is very near and dear to my heart. (Make the Connection)*

*Every time I visit the clinic, I see meet the nicest families, who seem just like mine, only they can’t afford even basic medical care for their children. I see kids who have to be admitted because their families couldn’t afford antibiotics for a simple infection. It’s very sad! (Make Them Cry)*

*Ruth, right now, we can only serve about 50% of the families who need our help. Our goal is to be able to serve every single family and child that needs medical care at the clinic. We need to*

*raise another \$100,000 to make that dream a reality. (Tell Them Why)*

*Would you be willing to contribute \$25,000 to help us reach that goal? (Make the Ask)*

Don't be afraid, as part of your planning process, to write out a script for yourself and practice it over and over again so you'll be ready for your ask. And remember, always profusely thank everyone who responds to your ask, and be sure to thank those who say "no" for their time and consideration.