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Time to ask is now, fundraisers say

Julia Vail | August 13, 2008

DURHAM, N.C. -- Nonprofit fundraisers are being squeezed on both sides by the flagging economy. While donors are tightening their belts, those who benefit from the services nonprofits provide are in even greater need of assistance.

This issue received attention at the annual state conference of the Association of Fundraising Professionals.

At the conference, held Aug. 7 in Durham, leading fundraisers told 540 participants that, despite economic hardship, now is no time to be shy about asking for contributions.

In fact, it is even more vital to ask for money when the economy is weak, fundraising consultant Laura Fredricks said during her keynote address at the event, organized by the association's Triangle, Triad and Charlotte chapters.

"There are 1.4 million registered charities," she said. "If you don't ask your donors, they are going to be asked by other people."

Fundraisers who did not speak up during previous economic slumps got a shock when other organizations received bigger and better donations, said Bob Hartsook, president of fundraising consulting firm Hartsook Companies in Wichita, Kan.

When those development officers asked corporate donors why they were so generous with their gifts, the answer was simple, he said: No one else asked.

"I get very frustrated when people say, 'Everyone's tapped out,'" Hartsook said during a conference session. "The universality of that is wrong. From a macro point of view, there is money available."

The principles of fundraising remain the same, even during the economic crunch, speakers said. One of these is the need for development officers to convince prospects of the importance of the organization's mission.

"Often we talk about what we do and forget about why we do it," said Karin Cox, senior vice president of Hartsook Companies. "Take what you do on a daily basis and transfer that into how it impacts people's lives."

While it is important for fundraisers to speak up, speakers at the conference said, sometimes more can be accomplished by keeping the mouth shut and the ears open.

"I think we do way too much talking and not enough listening," Fredricks said.

Successful fundraisers must know about their prospects' businesses, families and feelings toward the fundraiser's organization, Hartsook said.

That not only helps the fundraiser develop rapport with the donor, but also allows the fundraiser to tailor the request to the donor's needs and interests.

Without exception, speakers at the conference warned fundraisers not to be discouraged by the economic slump.

Regardless of whether the numbers are up or down, donors have the innate desire to help others, Cox said.

"These are real people," she said, "who are also passionate about making a difference."

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