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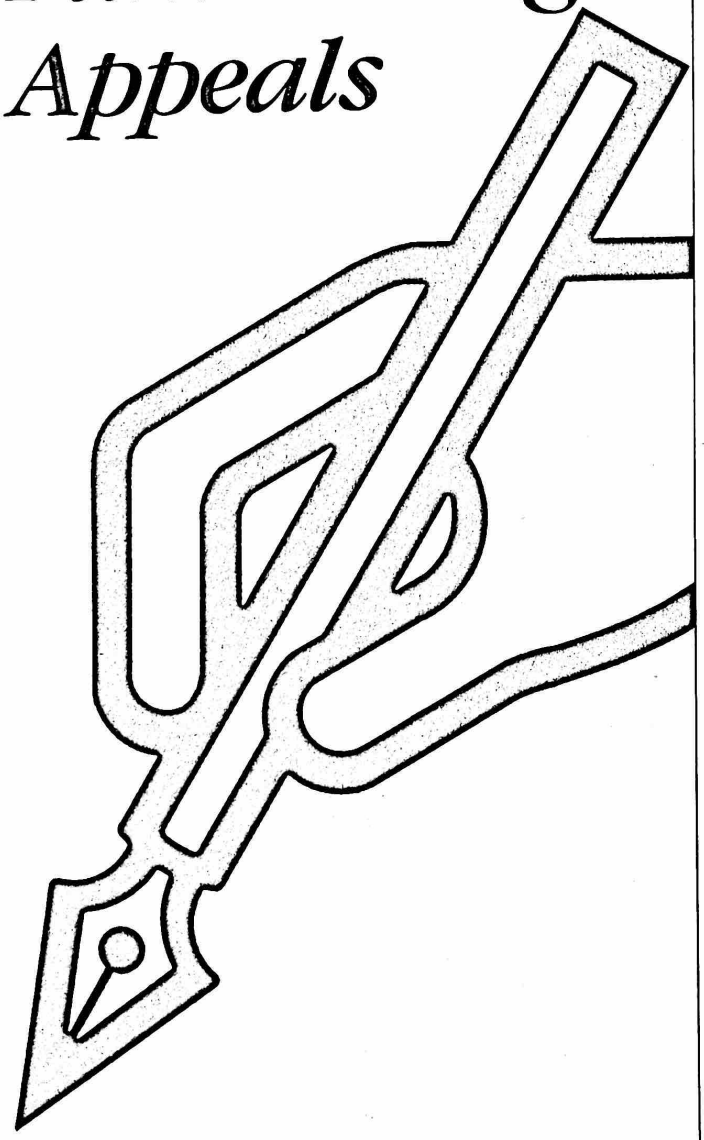
Personalizing Fundraising Appeals



The pile of wadded pieces of scratch paper is now about one foot deep in my wastebasket. I slowly wander down the hall, scrutinizing posters that never previously interested me. My pencils are in hand, and I am on my way to sharpen them for the third time today. I wonder, why did my high school writing teachers not include a section on how to write fundraising letters? Everyone I know is engaged in this particular form of writing, and we are all struggling. It occurs to me that it is time to write a letter to my local school board suggesting a change in the curriculum. I will do anything at this point to avoid another attempt at formulating a satisfactory funding appeal.

Fundraising letters are a Development Director's lifeline. Year in and year out, we must find new, creative ways to describe our programs. We must intrigue new donors but not bore previous ones. We must express our organization's needs in our own words, the words of the Executive Director, the Chair of the Board and any other volunteer who has agreed to sign an appeal. We must be informative but brief; direct but not rude; needy but not desperate. It is a specialized technique.

As the art of writing a fundraising appeal has developed, a few formats have emerged. In analyzing these formats, one can identify some common features. These are the subject of this article.

Personalizing Your Fundraising Letters

In an age when the average citizen's mailbox contains several fundraising appeals each day, one of the most difficult jobs of a fundraiser is to create a letter that attracts the attention of the potential donor. Fundraisers attempt to do this in many ways: printing the letter on colored paper; using an unusual size of envelope; hand addressing the envelope so that it looks like personal mail; printing URGENT on the envelope.

One of the most effective ways to make your letter stand out is to make it personal. By personalizing your appeal, you will make the individual feel that he/she is receiving some special attention. This will give the (accurate) impression that each individual's donation is significant and important to your organization. All tests have led to the same result—the more personal the appeal, the more likely it is to generate a positive response.

The degree of personalization you can and should try to achieve depends on the size of the mailing you are preparing and the size of the contributions you seek. A form letter might be fine for reaching large groups of people with similar interests to ask for small donations, but it will rarely convince a donor to make a major contribution.

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If you are writing to more than 100 individuals to ask for

contributions of less than $100, it is not worth your time to write a personal letter to each person. However, it is worth taking a moment to consider what, if anything, people within this group have in common. Are they all members of your organization from whom you are seeking additional contributions? Did they all attend an event that your organization sponsored? Are their names from a mailing list of a particular organization or combined mailing lists of several similar organizations? If there is something that is common to everyone on the list, mention that in your letter. For example, most fundraisers who produce events send appeals several months after each event to all those who attended. This letter includes a reference to the event:

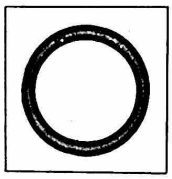
Dear _____

Six months ago you learned about Social Change, Inc. at a screening of the film "The Grass is Always Greener." This film made clear the important role that workplace organizing plays in creating safer and healthier work environments. I write at this time to ask you to support the efforts that Social Change, Inc. is making in our own community to organize workers.

Or, if writing to previous donors, a mention of their past support should not be forgotten:

Dear _____

I write on behalf of People for Peace to ask you to consider making a $50 contribution in support of our work for disarmament. Your past support has been very important to our ongoing efforts to stop the deployment of U.S. missiles in Europe. It is for this reason that I write to you now, in hopes that you will renew your support.



ne of the most effective ways to make your letter stand out is to make it personal.

The larger the contribution you are seeking, the more personal your letter should be. To personalize your appeals to major donors, you will probably need to do some research about each individual. Does the person know your organization? Has she/he been actively involved in it? What is the average size contribution the individual makes? What other organizations/causes does this person support?

The point of gathering all of this information is not to write to the donor to tell him/her all you know. This information should help you create one or two sentences that speak to that particular individual. The sentence can be as simple as: "Your $1,000 contribution last year helped us continue our efforts on behalf of elephants' rights." or "I know you are well aware of the activities in which our organization has been involved over the past year."

The results of your research will also be useful in developing the tone of the letter. An individual's contribution can be easily lost by sending him/her a letter that is either too formal or too informal. If you, or the letter-signer knows the person to whom you are writing, be familiar. If you have never met the person, be formal in your approach. If the person is active in the issues you are addressing, don't go overboard in explaining why the work is so important. However, if the person has never been involved in related issues, provide a thorough and convincing background.

The tone of a fundraising appeal is initially set by the salutation. For this reason, it is worth taking some time to establish an appropriate salutation for every funding appeal. Even if you are mailing 100 identical letters, a personalized salutation will indicate to each recipient that your organization cares about his/her support in particular.

If you individualize salutations, it is necessary to identify who should be addressed by first name and who should be addressed by Mr. or Ms. Lastname. It takes very little time to have the signer of your appeal review the list of recipients to indicate who should be addressed by first name, and it is always worth the effort.

An additional way to make your letter seem more personal is to select someone to sign the letter whose name will be recognized by the recipient. This technique is useful in mailings of any size. A mailing to 5,000 subscribers to a progressive magazine could be signed by a frequent contributing writer to the magazine. A letter to the attendees of a conference could be signed by the keynote speaker or by one of the main conference organizers.

The signer of mailings to major contributors should be signed by a peer of the contributor. If a letter is being sent to all of the Chief Executive Officers of the corporations in your city, it should be signed by a Chief Executive Officer or someone placed in a comparably high position in the business community. If your organization has no connections in the business community, then the signer should be a person of comparable rank in your corporation, i.e. the Chair of your Board of Directors.

Fundraising letters are a development director's lifeline.

Be Brief

When you first sit down to write your letter, keep in mind that the attention span of most readers is very short. In most cases fundraising letters should be no longer than two pages. (An exception to this rule is made for direct mail appeals, which many experts believe are most effective at four or five pages.)

The body of your letter should consist of short paragraphs. Never count on the reader to read the letter thoroughly. If there is a particular piece of information that you want to be sure is read, use a visual technique such as color highlighting or bulleting to bring it to the reader's attention.

Use Enclosures

Support materials (documents enclosed with the letter) are in many ways as important as the letter itself. Without making your total package intimidatingly large, include newspaper clippings, recent newsletters, your brochure or annual report, and even a budget if you are asking for money for a specific project. Support materials can be useful in keeping the length of the letter to two pages. For example, you do not need to name the members of your Board of Directors in the letter–enclose a list of them and their affiliations. This is important information to include, but is much easier to read in list form than in the body of the letter.

If you can afford it, also include a printed self-addressed return envelope. This makes it easier for your donor to respond. Some organizations stamp the envelope, while others feel that this wastes money when you do not actually know if the envelope will be returned. Many organizations design a pledge card which has proven to be useful.

The Contents

The following is a suggested outline for the contents of a fundraising appeal. Keep in mind that this outline is intended to provide guidance, not rules. Be creative in your letters. Try out new and experimental formats. Fundraising is a gamble, and if you find a winning technique, you will be ahead of the game.

1. Opening

The opening paragraph of the letter is the most important in that *it is frequently the only one read.* It must introduce who you are and why you are writing. It is important that you make it very clear that you are asking for money. It is often helpful to name a specific amount right away. If the reader is not familiar with the organization, your first paragraph should include a *brief description* (no more than a sentence) of your organization's purpose. (*See examples 1 and 2*)

Example 1: Opening
(Women's Health Care Coalition)*

Dear Ms. Jones,

Janet Smith has given me your name because she knows you are concerned about the quality of health care available to women. Through your work, you may have heard of the Women's Health Care Coalition, an organization devoted to improving the quality of health care available to women. I am writing to ask you to consider making a contribution of $1,000 to support the work of the Coalition.

Example 2: Opening
(Women's Health Care Coalition)

Dear Ms. Jones,

I write on behalf of the Board of Directors and staff of the Women's Health Care Coalition to ask you to consider making a contribution of $1,000 in support of our efforts to improve the quality of health care available to women.

2. Need

This paragraph should familiarize the potential donor with the need for your organization and the issues it is addressing. Use statistics sparingly, but use them. (*See example 3*)

Example 3: Need
(Coalition to Stop Uranium Mining)

As you know, when the nuclear industry began mining uranium, few people were aware of the hazards of exposure to radioactive materials. Over the years, it has become increasingly apparent that the medical hazards greatly outweigh the benefits. The level of radioactivity inside a uranium mine is 100 times that which is determined by experts to be safe. ***80-90% of those working in the mines can expect to die of cancer.*** *Anyone living near the mines is breathing and drinking radioactivity through the air*

**This organization and all of the organizations used in the examples are ficticious.*

and water. The Coalition to Stop Uranium Mining is the only organization in the Western United States currently working to educate the public about these issues.

3. History

It is important to provide some sense of the history of your organization, if only in one sentence. This information lets the reader know how long you have existed, lending credibility to your organization. (*See examples 4 and 5*)

Example 4: History
(Lawyers for Human Rights)

Lawyers for Human Rights was formed 5 years ago in response to a growing need for experts in the legal arena to provide free legal assistance to Bay Area residents who could not afford to hire an attorney.

Example 5: History
(Lawyers for Human Rights)

When the Legal Services Corporation of San Francisco folded in 1973, Lawyers for Human Rights became the only organization providing free legal assistance to low income residents of the Bay Area.

4. Program Description

In a funding appeal, you must be very specific about what your organization is doing. Describe the various services you provide or kinds of work you do, who benefits from your work or services, and how many benefit. Be sure to specify the geographic area within which you work and whether you are working to achieve national or local impact. (*See example 6*)

Example 6: Program Description
(Women's Health Care Coalition)

The Women's Health Care Coalition continues to be a respected voice for women health care consumers. We are currently working to educate health care workers, to create networks for support and strategizing among women's health centers and clinics in California, and to focus media attention on the hazards of several standard forms of medication for women. A more complete description of our work is enclosed.

5. How the Contribution Will Be Used

This section should specify how a contribution of the size you are seeking will be used. State whether you are seeking support for a special project within the organization or for general operations. In the case of a special project, describe the project. In either case, make the donor feel that the size of the contribution he or she might make would be significant to your operations. (*See example 7*)

Example 7: How the Contribution Will Be Used
(Community Services, Inc.)

The requests for assistance from local agencies have been overwhelming. We are currently turning away organizations who are anxious to participate in our seminars, simply because of lack of resources. A contribution of $1,000 would enable us to provide a second seminar each month, therefore serving twice as many organizations.

6. Closing

In a closing paragraph, tell the reader how you will follow-up this request. If possible, state that you will call the donor within a specific amount of time to answer any questions he/she might have and to discuss the request. You might also suggest getting together for a meeting. In either case, you should take the responsibility for following up the letter. This is also the place to mention any support materials that you are enclosing. (*See example 8*)

Example 8: Closing
(Community Services, Inc.)

I have enclosed our brochure which describes our entire program, as well as a promotional piece describing the Media Access Project. Also enclosed is a list of our current Board of Directors. I will call you next week to discuss this request and to answer any questions you might have. –LH

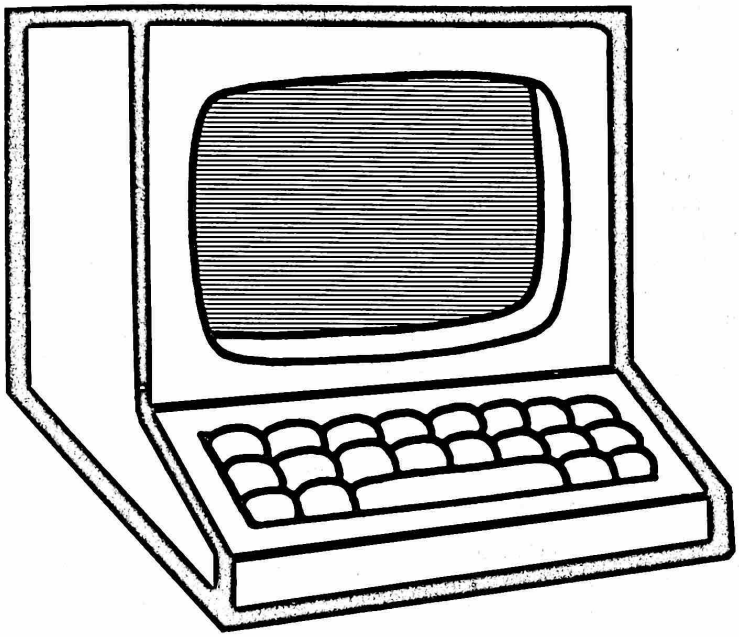
DOs and DON'Ts Of Fundraising Appeals

DO let your reader know immediately that you are writing to ask for money.
DO use phrases that involve the reader such as: "You will remember", "As you probably know", or "Knowing that you are concerned..."
DO write the letter on your organization's letterhead.
DO proofread the letter carefully. It is best to have it proofread by someone other than the author(s).
DO enclose support materials such as brochures, newspaper clippings, budgets, list of Board members, return envelopes.
DO follow-up the letter with a phone call within the period you promised in the letter.

DON'T use a form letter and handwrite in salutations.
DON'T ask for an amount of money larger than the person can give—be conservative when you don't know.
DON'T tell donors what they should think or should do. Inform, don't lecture.
DON'T address the donor by his/her first name unless you actually know him/her personally.
DON'T spend too long on the letter. No one will read it as critically as you.

Computers for Non-Profits?

Part One



IS THERE STILL ANY QUESTION

One of the big questions being faced by many social change organizations this year is whether or not to enter the computer age. For many, the answer to this question does not solely depend on having the financial resources available to purchase this new age equipment.

Computerization is a controversial subject. Some social change organizations are concerned that computers eliminate jobs, making their use "politically incorrect." Nevertheless, when presented with the range of functions that computers can provide to increase an organization's efficiency, it is difficult to be completely closed to the idea of computerization.

Even those who are open to incorporating computers into their office, and have the finances to do so, are faced with many difficult questions. Which brand of computer should be bought? How does one know if the equipment one selects today will soon be made obsolete by the constantly developing technology? How much research is required before making a purchase? The questions are endless.

In coming months, we hope to publish a series of articles which will begin to address some of the difficult issues related to the use of computers by social change organizations. In these articles, a variety of views will be expressed by individuals who are using or thinking of using computers.

The following article is written by Elizabeth Whitney. Ms. Whitney is a freelance writer, publisher and editor living in Inverness, California. Among the ways she makes a living is offering access to her Eagle II computer and NEC Spinwriter printer. In the next issue of the Journal, an article will address specific applications and uses of computers by different non-profit organizations.

The Publishers

To computerize or not to computerize, that is the question. Well, actually, that is not the question. There is no longer any question that the computer is a tool whose time has come, especially in professions in which mailings, budget analyses, and public relations are critical to the nature of the work done.

The real question is not "computer–yes or no?" but "computer–how?" How do you afford a computer? How do you know which one to get? How do you convert your systems? How do you choose software? How do you know when it is cost effective? etc. The answer to all of the above is: one step at a time, by trial and error, and with a little help from your friends.

Can your organization afford a computer? The answer will vary based on the organization's resources, but don't forget to look for resources among your own circle of supporters who may have personal contacts or inside information on computers. The field is changing so fast and the so-called "state of the art" is updated so frequently that there may well be a market of used computers which is worth exploring.

There will always be a fad element to new products like computers. Already several articles in leading computer magazines note that 25% of all personal computers purchased are stashed in a closet somewhere. Those people found that learning to run programs that were supposed to balance budgets, write form letters or do cost analyses was more trouble than it was worth. A first approach to getting your hands on a computer might be to canvas your organization's friends for one of these surplus computers.

It really doesn't matter what computer you get. This is an important sales resistance attitude. It matters more that you simply get one, however the organization can afford it. After you enter the wonderful world of computers you will begin learning about refinements and special features. At some later point, when the money resources are there, you can acquire a specific computer customized to your unique needs.

Buying your first computer is like buying your first car. Your first car is the one you can afford or the one your parents give you. After you've been driving and living for a few years you know better how to choose a car to fit your lifestyle–a lifestyle that having a car has already transformed.

When you know what you want, you can be a tough, pragmatic shopper and make sure you don't get seduced into paying for features which you will never use.

The analogy to cars is very apt; when in doubt, think about cars. Remember when you first learned to drive and how it felt—how *you* felt? How it seemed as if you could never get the clutch and stick shift coordinated, how it was scary to be out on the road alone? And now, it's all second nature, right? Well, learning how to run programs will feel like that in the beginning. It is important to build into your planning process a certain amount of time for you and all the people who will have access to the computer to simply learn to use it.

long it takes to drive there.

The computer is having a similar impact on modern culture. Soon, the measure of time it will take to do certain kinds of work will be based on the presumption of having a computer's assistance. That is one of the main reasons why the decision to join the computer world means more than just adding a new convenience item to your cupboard; it means joining the fast lane. The exciting thing about having a computer is discovering what new enterprises are within your reach. The irony is that the computer really doesn't save time—it *changes* what you do with the same amount of time. In other words, the best thing to do with a computer is use it as much as you possibly can. It's a power tool and should be put to work, full tilt.

The more you understand about computers, the less likely you are to be a victim of the computerized society.

One of the problems of computers and small business people or non-profit people like yourselves is that you usually don't have a lot of loose time to devote to learning how to use this new tool. In the short run this time seems unproductive, since you will still be using your old tools to perform the services you want the computer to do. This is a stage that simply must be endured. It takes time to learn to use computers. That's why a lot of folks give up. It is hardly like bringing home a new kitchen appliance and plugging it in and making toast.

Like cars, computers begin to create their own realities. When people first got cars, they probably could only think in terms of replacing what they did on foot or by horsedrawn vehicle with this newfangled machine. Then, as they began getting used to having a car, they realized that they could do new things with their cars that they never did on foot or by carriage. Like driving out to see Grandma for an afternoon, making a one day round-trip into the city for supplies, or taking a family vacation half-way across the country. In short order the measure of distance became—and has remained ever since—how

Let's assume that by hook or by crook you've got yourselves a computer and printer. The two basic categories of software you'll need are word processing software and accounting software. The economy plan for software is simple: find people who have compatible computers who support your organization. Hopefully, these folks will also be willing to spend some time teaching you the ins and outs of the programs, since users are the best teachers. Also, you will need to have a supportive person to call when you have questions and problems.

If you have to go shopping for software, try to enlist some veteran computer users (veterans have usually had a computer for, maybe a year) to help you resist the sales pressure. Again, the people who understand software are the people who have stayed up until 2 a.m. a few nights here and there trying to figure out how to do things, or tracking down the reason that things that are supposed to work don't. You begin to get intuitive about a program after you've spent a few nights in intimate relationship with it; you begin to guess what's troubling it even if it refuses to tell you, and you discover its "personality." There's a human intelligence there—or rather, several human intelligences—and you will begin to relate to that intelligence as you get to know it.

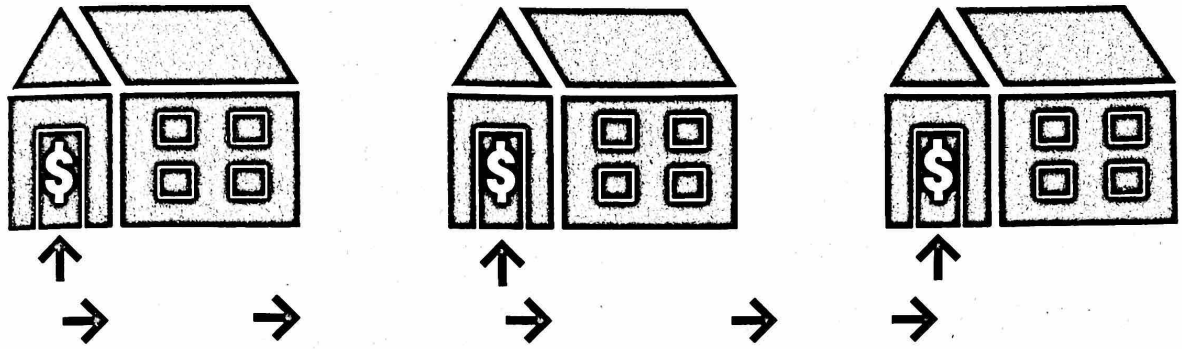
Contrary to what detractors may say, there is nothing impersonal about a computer and computer programs. They are remarkable human achievements. Read the Pulitzer prize winning non-fiction book, *The Soul of a Machine,* by Tracy Kidder (Atlantic-Little, Brown & Co. 1981) if you still have doubts. It's an adventure story about building a computer that is as exciting as an account of an assault on Mount Everest. The resistance to a computer from techno-phobes (this, by the way, is a legitimate stance to take—temporarily—considering a world which is changing as fast as ours is) lasts about 15 minutes. If you have volunteers in your organization who "don't want to have anything to do with computers," gentle them into it. I have yet to find anyone who is serious about the work he or she is doing who didn't acknowledge in one instruction session how wonderful a tool the computer is.

What is the work the computer should be doing for a non-profit organization? First of all, anything that was done on a typewriter. You are not going to type anymore, you are going to word process. Once you learn the word processing technique—that is, you learn how to translate your intentions into a series of commands the computer can execute—you will readily see how much faster and more efficient and flexible the computer is for all kinds of writing.

At the heart of an organization which interacts with its "clientele" by mail are its mailing lists. If used well, these resources are as valuable as money in the bank. Here a computer can earn its weight in gold. Once you have entered your mailing list into the computer and saved it on a disk, you can use it again and again in a variety of specific and creative ways. You can create a code for each name which will allow you to sort selected names quickly for specific purposes; you can print out labels in a few minutes so that the cost of mailings includes no human time for addressing envelopes; you can merge names with a body letter for a personalized mailing that can save time and trouble and need not appear impersonal or the least bit insulting. It is your function to create the warm, informative letter; it's the com-

Continued on page 15

Part One



SETTING UP A CANVASS

by Beverly Cherner & Dan Alspaugh

Introduction

Many organizations which have experienced a sudden decrease of government or foundation funding find themselves considering a door-to-door fundraising canvass. But most organizations fail to ask themselves the right question about whether or not to raise funds in this way. The question is not whether canvassing is going to solve your organization's fundraising problems, but whether your organization is ready to commit to changing into the kind of organization that can successfully operate a door-to-door canvass.

Before answering that question, let's look at what canvassing actually is and what it can and cannot do for your organization.

Briefly, canvassing is going door-to-door in residential neighborhoods talking about your organization's work and asking for donations to support it. Generally, canvassers work between the hours of 2 and 10 p.m. Organizations that canvass year-round use paid employees rather than volunteers.

What a Canvass is Good For

Fundraising: Many organizations establish a canvass mainly for the substantial amount of money it can bring in. The amount varies widely from one group to another, mostly depending on the number of canvassers on staff. In some local organizations, the canvass staff consists of two or three people in one location; statewide groups may employ over 100 canvassers in several geographic areas.

The money raised by canvassing typically comes from many small donations. People may give anything from the loose change in their pockets to a check for several hundred dollars. Most donations range between $5 and $25.

A canvass is a good way to increase your number of contributors. Many people who donate to a canvasser would never contribute to your organization through the mail. Some reasons people donate through a canvasser are: they never heard of your organization before; they appreciate the personal contact; their neighbors responded.

While the gross income from a canvass may be high, so are the expenses of raising the money. In addition to each canvasser's salary there are overhead costs. Canvassers need transportation to and from the area where they are working, a publication and other materials to show people at the door, and office space. Classified advertising to recruit canvassers is a major expense. Employee benefits such as Social Security, worker's compensation, unemployment insurance, holidays, vacations, etc. are costly. As a result, your net canvass income may be at most only half the gross.

You may be thinking that you can reduce your overhead with volunteer canvassers. While this may be successful for a one-time or short-term canvass, you will be hard pressed to find anyone willing to spend several hours a day several days a week knocking on doors for no pay.

Public Education: Maintaining a canvass requires a commitment to public outreach and involvement. You may be bringing important information to community residents that they are unable to obtain elsewhere, particularly if the local media is not giving your organization much coverage. For example, you can tell residents about the medical clinic or crisis center that your organization operates and why it is needed.

A unique aspect of a canvass is that it allows a dialogue between your organization's constituency and its staff. This allows direct feedback on what issues people in your community are interested in, and helps you make sure you are meeting their needs. Complaints received by Citizens for a Better Environment's (CBE) canvassers about a local industrial polluter, for example, led CBE to challenge the company's pollution permit which resulted in an eventual reduction in air pollution.

Canvassing usually results in a higher percentage of re-

Adding a canvass operation requires changes in the structure of your organization.

sponse than mail or telephone campaigns. Whether for signatures on petitions, raising donations, turning out people at demonstrations or hearings, or writing letters, personal contact works the best.

Recruiting volunteers and generating letters: A number of organizations have been successful in canvasses to write letters and recruit volunteers. The California League of Conservation Voters, for example, is campaigning heavily for strong federal legislation to protect California wilderness. The League's canvassers discuss the wilderness bill at the door and ask people to write a letter to a key senator. They then continue on to other houses, returning later in the evening to pick up the completed letters and mail them. During the period from July through September 1983, the League collected and mailed more than 2,000 such letters.

League canvassers regularly ask people if they would be willing to volunteer. During election campaigns, the League calls those people who said they would volunteer and puts them to work to get out the vote through phone banking or precinct walking. They also are able to get these people to turn out at public hearings and press conferences.

Recruiting future staff: Staff canvassers may be qualified for other positions that open up in your organization. These people come to their new roles with a working knowledge of your group that a new employee doesn't have. Canvassers at CBE have moved into positions as researchers, office manager, bookkeeper, newsletter editor, development director and, of course, canvass director.

Will a canvass work for your organization?

You need to have a local issue to discuss: People are most interested in what they perceive as affecting them directly. You will usually get a greater response if you're canvassing on a local issue rather than on a state or national one. It's easier for all people in a community, regardless of political and social attitudes, to see the personal impact of a local issue. For example, CBE's work against toxic chemical leaks is discussed by canvassers in cities where drinking water contamination has occurred. Highlighting this issue in neighborhoods 50 miles away with other sources of drinking water elicits little response. People not only are reluctant to contribute money to the issue, they may not even want to hear about it. These same people, however, are likely to contribute generously when canvassers discuss CBE's program against pesticide misuse in their community.

While state and national issues are not usually as interesting to many people, they will not necessarily meet indifference at the door. The National Organization for Women began its canvass in the San Francisco Bay Area to raise money for last-ditch lobbying during the final months of voting on the Equal Rights Amendment. Their canvass continues today to emphasize primarily national issues. Whether or not your national work will appeal to people at the door depends largely on the political character of the community you're canvassing in. People in San Francisco may contribute to a canvass raising money for medical aid to El Salvador, while residents in Omaha may not.

People must feel that even a small donation makes a difference: People need to feel that their money will get results. Since some canvass income is from donations of one or two dollars, people will have to see that your work is effective and your goals realistic in order to feel that their single dollar will make a difference. Canvassers for the Livermore Action Group have successfully appealed to the public to contribute to studies of converting the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory in northern California to non-weapons research. Consider the response their canvassers might receive if they said, "I'm here to raise money for world peace."

You must be able to demonstrate success: Consider what a canvasser would say in a year to people who donate to your group today. Could they say that the money went to the program work it was meant to support? Could you show that you made progress on the issue? Be sure you feel you could demonstrate your work product next year.

You must distinguish your organization from others in the area working on the same issues (particularly another canvass): Before you decide to set up a canvass, study other organizations in your area working on similar issues, and others who canvass (regardless of their issues). You will need to convey an identity that is different from theirs. When CBE began canvassing in California in 1978, we suffered for being in the stronghold of the 100-year-old Sierra Club and the popular Friends of the Earth. People tend to lump all environmental groups together in their minds even though our work rarely overlaps with that of other groups.

If the other organization already has a canvass, this becomes an even greater problem. There are four canvasses in the San Francisco area, for example, working on issues that affect women. One funds a local women's center, one funds a medical clinic, one works on reforming rape laws, and the fourth works on national economic issues. Nonetheless, a canvasser from any of these groups is likely to hear at the door: "I already gave to a women's group that came by a while back."

This situation is less difficult for an organization that has

been established for a few years before its canvass begins. It will have more name recognition, and be able to point to previous accomplishments. If your organization is new, you need to be able to convey what makes your work unique.

Is Your Organization Compatible With a Canvass?

Start-up costs: Beginning a canvass requires an initial start-up investment. It may take several weeks, several months, or even several years of subsidizing the canvass before you recoup any money. Although start-up costs vary from one group to another, expect to spend money on the following:

☐Knowledgeable consultant and/or experienced canvass director, if you have no experience yourself with canvassing. This assistance is critical. A number of individuals and firms throughout the country specialize in setting up new canvass operations.

☐Office space and related overhead expenses (telephones, furniture, office supplies). You will need a room exclusively for use by the canvass staff and a private office for interviewing prospective canvassers. If your office is already too full, you'll need to rent another space. Rather than assume the canvass can work out of a different location, you should consider moving your whole office to a space that can accommodate both the canvassers and office staff. Canvassers working at a different place will have difficulty feeling committed to your organization's work. They must see the staff and the results that the contributions they raise support. Canvass/office relations are hard enough because of the different hours and workplaces (canvassers work in the field), without the addition of geographical distance from the main office.

☐Classified ads: these are your best bet for recruiting canvassers. They can also be expensive.

☐A receptionist to answer the phones and greet interviewees, if you don't already have someone in your office to do this.

☐Canvasser materials. These include clipboards, signature sheets, ID cards, brochures, publications and copies of anything else you think canvassers should present at the door.

☐A car or van for transportation. The options are to pay an employee for use of her or his vehicle, or to rent, lease or purchase a vehicle. The first is usually the most economical for the organization. Insurance under your organization's name for an organization-owned vehicle is a major expense.

Can Your Metropolitan Area Support a Canvass?

To support a year-round canvass, your metropolitan area should have a population of at least 1 million people. You need to have both enough houses to visit and a big enough labor pool from which to recruit canvassers. If you want to operate a canvass during only part of the year, population size is less important. A summer canvass can operate with a handful of people in a smaller community.

Unfortunately, just because a city has many square miles of residential neighborhoods doesn't mean your canvass will succeed. Every metropolitan area has districts that are unsuitable for canvassers for one reason or another, sometimes because the residents are very poor or the terrain can't be covered on foot very easily.

Your success in recruiting canvassers is linked not only to the number of people in your metropolitan area, but also to the character of the population and the cost of living. While there are never as many people willing to work as activists for low wages as you want to hire, some regions will attract more such people than others.

Although there are always exceptions, canvassers tend to be between 18 and 30 years old. Besides their interest in your group's work, they usually like canvassing for one or more of the following reasons: they like to work outdoors, they don't want to work a 9 to 5 job, they enjoy working semi-autonomously, they see canvassing as the first step in creating a future position for themselves, or they enjoy talking with people.

Organizational Changes Required

Adding a canvass operation requires changes in the structure and character of your organization. It requires a commitment to the canvass not just from the new staff person you hire to supervise it, but from your other staff members as well.

For your canvass to be successful, members of your program staff must be willing to keep canvassers up to date on program activities through regular briefings. Your staff has to be open to hearing suggestions brought by canvassers from people they talk with.

Most importantly, your staff has to be willing to help maintain good morale among the canvassers. The staff needs to remember that canvassers open themselves up for rejection at every house, and that facing that night after

Maintaining a canvass requires a commitment to public outreach and involvement.

night can be very discouraging. It is difficult, emotionally draining work for low pay, with an understandably high turnover.

Failure to recognize that canvassers are as much a part of your organization as anyone else on staff has undermined many a canvass. Canvassers will quit if they are not consulted when decisions are made and if they feel their work is unappreciated. Other paid staff must be appreciative of the work involved in a a door to door canvass, and even be willing to canvass themselves from time to time.

Just because a city has many square miles of residential neighborhoods doesn't mean your canvass will succeed.

If you understand that canvassers are an essential part of your organization and give them the encouragement they deserve, you can maintain a committed canvas staff that not only brings in income, but furthers your organization's goals in the community.

Conclusion

Beginning a canvass is not a guarantee of easy money. If your organization is not ready to go through a fundamental change, adding a canvass operation will probably spell disaster. There's no doubt that if you begin a canvass, you are creating a new administrative headache, with a complicated payroll and a staff that changes constantly. However, if your organization has a public outreach orientation and can incorporate the needed changes, beginning a door to door canvass could be worth all the effort. ■

The authors are staff members for Citizens for a Better Environment (CBE). Beverly Cherner is Canvass Director of the CBE office in San Francisco and oversees two other canvasses in northern California. Dan Alspaugh is a Board member of CBE, and Director of Development. Under their leadership, CBE's annual income from its canvass in California has grown from $112,000 in 1978 to $380,000 in 1983. (In our next issue, an article on the mechanics of setting up a canvass, hiring a canvass director, laws in your community, and other logistical concerns.)

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Book Review

534 Ways to Raise Money
by J. Thomas Hay
Simon and Schuster, New York, 1983.
192 pp. $6.95

534 Ways to Raise Money is a new kind of fundraising book. Organized like an encyclopedia, it provides, in alphabetical order, an introduction to fundraising schemes being used by non-profit organizations around the country. It is for the fundraiser who is seeking inspiration and looking for new ideas.

The introduction about the author that appears on the cover of the book will be enough to get most fundraisers to nod knowingly and pick up this book. "J. Thomas Hay is a free-lance writer and fund-raising specialist. Following a particularly dull string of 'rubber chicken' fund-raising luncheons, he concluded that there must be a better way to raise a buck. The result: a four-year study of money-raising activities in 50 states and his selection of the very best, now shared for the first time in *534 Ways to Raise Money.*"

If, indeed, each idea in this book has actually been tried by some organization, then the book nicely proves the point that some fundraising schemes will be appropriate for one organization but not another. There are some ideas that some organizations will reject simply based on their name, such as "slave auctions" which Mr. Hay describes as "traditional at schools and colleges" at which "the donor gives one day of his or her time to the high bidder for such chores as car washing, gardening, or doing the laundry." Other ideas would also be rejected for political reasons, such as wet t-shirt contests. There are numerous ideas that require access to celebrities, something that the great majority of organizations do not have. However, the determination of what is right for your group is left up to you.

This is an idea guide, and as such, it is relatively extensive. Mr. Hay not only has listed general fundraising schemes in *534 Ways,* like auctions, awards and ceremonies, dances, parties, sales, raffles, etc., but has also provided variations on some of these themes. In some cases the number of variations provided is astounding. A striking case in point is auctions. Mr. Hay writes, "To help you bid on the right auction for your group, here are some of the more popular auction categories," and includes in his sampling antique or art auctions, celebrity auctions, commission auctions, food auctions, open auctions, radio-telephone auctions, scrip auctions, and slave auctions.

The book is not all inclusive, nor is it intended to be. It is a sample of ideas that the author came across in his study. Events receive by far the most coverage. This may reflect a reality that events are the form of fundraising that provide the greatest outlet for creative thinking. Or, it may be because events are easy to describe briefly and in amusing terms. Whatever the reason, Mr. Hay has listed, in addition to 14 kinds of auctions, 18 kinds of parties, 36 kinds of sales, and 20 ways to use sports to raise money. Some of these lists seem like filler, such as the section on sales that has a paragraph on how each of 18 holidays, including Lincoln's and Washington's birthdays, Memorial day and Independence day, can be used to sell items to raise money. By way of contrast, endowments are covered by one paragraph, and a section on donations devotes only one paragraph each to face-to-face donations, donations by telephone, donations through a third party, and donations by mail.

Perhaps the most problematic form of inconsistency in *534 Ways* is how the author refers to what an organization actually made from a particular fundraising idea–that is, the net income. In some descriptions Mr. Hay writes that a group "earned", "raised" or "brought in" a particular amount; in others he states specifically that they netted or brought in a particular amount "after expenses." The inconsistency leaves the reader sometimes wondering if the figures provided are net or gross.

The alphabetical format of *534 Ways* is not necessarily helpful. Those fundraisers seeking information on a particular kind of event may find that the title under which they might list that event is not the same as this author chose. However, Mr. Hay has provided an index for those who get lost.

534 Ways is not a "how to" publication. It is intended to inspire you or your organization by the ideas presented. To find out how to implement those ideas, you must look elsewhere.

The strength of *534 Ways* is that it lists fundraising techniques that organizations around the country are *actually* trying. While the ideas are not rated according to their level of success, how much money they can generate or how much effort is required for their implementation, most readers will come away with some new thoughts for their next fundraising brainstorming meeting.

The book is a first-of-its-kind. It is written in an amusing and often quite entertaining fashion. If you are a fundraiser who is tired of 'rubber chicken' fundraising luncheons, this might be the book for you.

–LH

Back Issues

Many readers have inquired about getting back issues of ***Grassroots Fundraising Journal***. Limited quantities of six of the Journals are available. Volume Two are $2.50 each and Volume Three are $3.50 each. Order from the Grassroots Fundraising Journal, P.O. Box 14754, San Francisco, CA 94114. The articles in each issue are as follows:

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4/84

Dear Joan...

Dear Joan,

How can we get someone off our Board who never does anything?

Resentful in Reno

Dear Resentful,

Very Carefully.

Before you do anything, make sure that you have made every effort to find the right job for the problem Board person. What does this person do best? How can she use those skills to help your group? If she can't or won't raise money, can she keep the books or sit with the kids while other board members ask for money. Never reject a board member unless you have given him or her at least three different jobs to try.

Are you sure the board member has a clear understanding of the organization and her responsibilities? Can you assign a veteran board leader to work with the problem person for a few months?

Is there any conflict in her life right now? If she is having problems at work or at home she may not be able to give you time right now, but will be active next year. Then it is worth your while to keep her on the board until her other problems are solved.

Dear Joan,

I am part of a group trying to start a repertory theatre in a small town. Unfortunately, this seems like a bad time to try to start a theatre. We are having a hard time raising money because everyone says, "I can't give to arts organizations as long as there are so many people lacking basic services." I don't want to put down any other organizations, but I think art is essential. What shall we do to get over this hurdle?

Frustrated Founder

Dear Frustrated,

Use the courage of your convictions and press on. You are absolutely right. Art is essential. As it says on the back of the Nelson Gallery of Art in Kansas City, "The soul has greater need for the ideal than the real. It is by the real that we exist. It is by the ideal that we live."

On the other hand, as Lily Tomlin said, "They don't call it show art. They call it show business." The Illinois Arts Council calculates that every dollar spent on the visual or performing arts has a "multiplier effect" of producing another 2.7 dollars for other businesses such as restaurants, cabs, hotels, and retail stores. Other studies in New England have put the multiplier effect over three dollars. Call your state arts council and ask for the figure they use. Then show your prospects how a donation to your theatre will not only enrich their spirit, but also enrich the economy of your town.

Joan Flanagan is the author of the new *Grass Roots Fundraising Book* (1982) and *The Successful Volunteer Organization* (1981), both from Contemporary Books and available through your bookstore.

Questions for the column should be sent to the ***Grassroots Fundraising Journal*** marked "Attention: Joan Flanagan." Ms. Flanagan regrets that she cannot answer each question individually.

The views expressed in this column are not necessarily the views of the publishers or other contributors to the ***Grassroots Fundraising Journal***.

Computers

continued from page 8

puter's function to allow you to produce it quickly and professionally. All correspondence can be letter perfect, and whole paragraphs can be saved (descriptions of the work you do, for example) to be used over and over again with the touch of one or two keys.

You can also do accounting with a computer. There are spread sheet programs which will allow you to analyze expenses and income. They set up formulas which give instant calculations on the percentages of overhead or income each item on your ledger represents. You can invoice and bill with forms into which you merge names.

The critical function of a computer is its ability to let you save written or numerical material on a disk, easily recovered for reuse, and essentially freeing you from repetitive tasks. What you can do with this freedom is use your imagination to dream up new projects and new promotions. The era we are entering with the computer is bally-hooed as "the Age of Information," with the promise that information will be the capital of this new era. This is a concept to be taken seriously, for, if true, it means that having information in the data bank is comparable to having money in the savings bank. Your organization could be richer than you think.

As you think about computing, consider the idea of sharing access to a computer system with other like-minded groups. There is no reason why everybody should own everything; why not share what you own and all own different things? This might be one way to solve the problem of getting the money to get the computer to begin with. See if there is the potential to offer other person(s) or organizations(s) access to your system for a fee or if it is feasible to own a system cooperatively.

There's a good old saying, "if you don't have money, you'd better have friends," which implies that if you can invest some energy into relationships you will find that you can get what you need by sharing what you have. Non-profit groups tend to be rich in relationships and poor in money; there is no reason not to look at those relationships as a potential group of computer users. Furthermore, ideas will spring up around the computer; it's an environment in which sharing of resources is a natural tendency. People love to tell other people what tricks they got the computer to perform.

Finally, one further observation from this computer veteran (2½ years of computer ownership): The more you understand about computers, the less likely you are to be a victim of the computerized society. Here we are in 1984 wondering if Big Brother is really happening or not. One of the best ways to resist the centralizing power of the giant Government Data Bank is to know your way around the information maze and learn how to use it to protect you rather than worry whether you are its prey. If computer printouts look menacing to you, perhaps it's time to learn how to tame this beast for your own protection. Step one is understanding how the system works. Step two is making it work for you. The computer revolution is already a power-to-the-people movement that can't be stopped. If you want to get involved, get aboard. ■

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