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# RURAL FUNDRAISING:

## *Looking Beyond the Locals*

BY ANDY ROBINSON

Fundraisers in rural communities working on local causes face a number of unique challenges, including fewer services, higher costs, and less advanced technology (for example, limited high-speed Internet access). In many rural areas, jobs are few and wages are low. For fundraisers, however, the biggest problem is the most obvious: fewer people to ask for contributions.

If you live and work in a rural area, your fundraising probably begins and ends with the locals, with good reason: These folks are most affected by the problem you're trying to solve. They're the ones most likely to use your services. In many cases, you've got the strongest relationships with your neighbors. (Of course, this is one of the *advantages* of raising money in rural areas — people tend to know their neighbors.) Savvy organizations solicit local residents for contributions, ask often, and do everything they can to involve them in the work.

Rural activists sometimes raise concerns about this approach. They say, "We've already approached our neighbors a dozen times," and, "Everybody around here already gives to everything," and, "We've tapped each other dry." While it's wise to take these complaints with a pound of salt — after all, how often do we get to see our neighbors' financial information? — the problem of "not enough neighbors to ask" is a genuine barrier.

By necessity, fundraisers based in out-of-the-way communities must reach out to a wider audience. Here are seven other places to look for donors and for help raising money.

**Former locals.** About twenty percent of Americans move each year, but many retain ties to their former homes. Children grow up and move away, but still feel

connected to the places they were raised. Even if they see no direct benefit from your work, these people appreciate what you do from a distance.

Sometimes nostalgia is the motivator; in other cases, the desire is to give something back to a place where they learned a new skill, fell in love, felt connected, participated in important work, were touched by the landscape, or built lasting friendships. For all of these reasons, I continue to support several nonprofits based thousands of miles from where I currently live. Millions of other donors behave the same way. E-mail makes it fairly easy to keep track of those.

**Friends and family elsewhere.** Since all fundraising is based on relationships — the most powerful motivator is one friend asking another for help — bring the work of your group to the attention of family and friends who live somewhere else. They might surprise you.

Some years ago, I was helping a group in rural California with their fundraising plan. When pressed on this point — "Who do you know *out of town* who might be supportive?"

— the executive director said, "I grew up with this fellow who now lives in Virginia. His family has a foundation. I never thought to apply, since they're clear across the country, but now that you mention it..." He sent a letter to his friend, outlining the work of his group and why he cared so much about their mission, and received a \$15,000 grant.

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This protest by members of Kentuckians For The Commonwealth (KFTC) is aimed at the coal industry practice of lopping off the top of a mountain to remove the coal inside — a violation of the Clean Water Act because it leads to the burial of hundreds of miles of streams. KFTC raises money from a broad base of donors (individual and foundation) from both in and outside of Kentucky to support their work.

**Part-time locals.** Many rural areas include owners of second homes. Some of these folks spend long periods in their second home: Florida all winter, Maine all summer, and so on. Others visit their vacation home nearly every weekend and holiday. Many second-home owners intend to move or retire there and identify strongly with the landscape, people, and values of their adopted community. Given their financial circumstances — it's not cheap maintaining two residences — these people are also candidates for major gifts.

As always, involvement is the key. To draw these folks in, schedule events, house parties, and facility tours during the appropriate season. If fitting, ask them to join your leadership. They can fill an important role by bringing an outside perspective to your work.

For example, a grassroots group in Vermont recently recruited two part-time residents for their board. Both new board members have extensive governance and fundraising experience, including service on the boards of large, national groups. When they're in-state, they participate in person; when out-of-state, they participate through conference calls. Since so much of the board business is managed via e-mail, it often doesn't matter where the board members are at any given moment.

**Future locals.** With so many people moving each year, some are bound to land in your community. New arrivals want to be connected with a new peer group, and one of the best ways is through volunteering and donating to local nonprofits. Well-organized groups keep track of new arrivals in a number of ways:

- Making friends with local realtors and mortgage lenders
- Talking with clergy; people of faith tend to “shop around” for a congregation before they move
- In places where it still operates, participating in Welcome Wagon programs.

Imagine that you're about to relocate to a new community. A month or so before you move — or a few weeks after your arrival — you receive a warm, personal welcome letter from a local organization. Then you get a phone call inviting you to be involved. Which group is likely to be first in line for your money and your time?

**College students.** Many small towns are enriched by the presence of colleges and universities. Students tend to be transient and don't have a lot of disposable income, but one thing they have is time. (I know, they're supposed to be studying, but...) Furthermore, they're already organized into service clubs, fraternities, and sororities that seek community projects.

Try to identify a campus club that will adopt your group and help raise money for it. Invite them to assist with your fundraising events or, even better, organize their own. Campus events tend to be the “tried and true” — car wash, yard sale, fundraising meal, etc. — and they reach a completely different audience. If student volunteers do most of the work, so much the better.

**Tourists.** If your area gets a lot of vacationers and visitors, think creatively about how to appeal to their tastes and their wallets. Many rural arts organizations depend on tourist support and schedule their seasons to coincide with the visitors. Other nonprofits organize community



Pictures like this one can make your issues come alive and inspire people to give to your organization — even if they live far from your community. This photo of a nuclear facility that is leaching radioactive waste into Idaho's key source of drinking water is part of a PowerPoint presentation produced by the Snake River Alliance. They use the presentation in speaking engagements throughout Idaho to raise money for their work.

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festivals and events to capture the tourist dollar. Many environmental groups have created eco-tourism programs to educate travelers about the wildlife, while earning money for their conservation work.

Can you reach tourists through the businesses that serve them? The Alaska Wilderness Recreation and Tourism Association ([www.awrta.org](http://www.awrta.org)) provides an interesting example. Thirty-five outfitters and wilderness guiding companies participate in their “Dollar a Day for Conservation” program. Customers pay an extra dollar for each day of their trip; the money is then aggregated and granted to environmental groups working to protect Alaska. Last year, this program generated more than \$25,000 in grants while providing a marketing tool for participating outfitters. “It’s not only been good for raising funds,” says Kirk Hoessle of Alaska Wildlands Adventures, quoted on the AWRTA Web site. “It’s been good for business, too. People like the opportunity to get involved.”

**Wannabe locals.** It’s a sad fact that many people are dissatisfied with the town they live in. It’s also sad but true that, due to family commitments, financial limitations, legal restrictions, or sheer inertia, many will never leave. These folks often have fantasy relationships with other countries, states, communities, or landscapes. Perhaps they visited once and fell in love with the place. Perhaps a friend moved there and raves about it. If your locale is the object of their affection, these people can be loyal and generous donors.

Alaska provides another fine example. The overwhelming majority of Alaskan conservation funding is raised outside of the state. Many of these donors have never been there, but — thanks to the magic of television, radio, video, the Internet, and the astonishment of their friends just returned from vacation — they feel a strong connection. Many will never get there, but they understand — in a deep, personal way — that Alaska’s biodiversity and wildness should be preserved.

How do you reach the wannabes? Some are disguised as tourists, so you connect with them through tourist events and the businesses that serve them. Others can be found reading publications such as *Arizona Highways* and *Vermont Life*. You might identify these people on the donor lists of other organizations whose mission and geography overlap yours.

All fundraising is based on good planning, diligence, and fearlessness. To be successful, rural fundraisers need a few additional attributes: the willingness to look beyond the obvious prospects, and the creativity to reach out to everyone else. Use the ideas in this article to expand your prospect list — then get out there and ask! **GFJ**

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ANDY ROBINSON IS THE AUTHOR OF *GRASSROOTS GRANTS AND SELLING SOCIAL CHANGE (WITHOUT SELLING OUT)*, PART OF THE CHARDON PRESS SERIES PUBLISHED BY JOSSEY-BASS. ANDY IS OUTREACH AND TRAINING DIRECTOR FOR THE NEW ENGLAND GRASSROOTS ENVIRONMENT FUND IN MONTPELIER, VERMONT.