

Fundraising Tips: The Role of Main Street Board Members

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By

Kathy La Plante, Senior Program Officer and Director of Coordinating Program Services, NMSCJ From Main Street Story of the Week | July 31, 2014 |



There are two myths that I find exist in some communities and that should be debunked. One, that once an executive director or program manager is hired, it is his or her job to raise all the funds for Main Street. The second myth is just the opposite - that staff isn't supposed to do any fundraising. The truth lies in the middle. The executive director has an important role in coordinating the program's fundraising plan and also playing an important role in some fundraising efforts. Ultimately though, the board of directors is fully responsible for the organization's finances. Monitoring the annual operating budget and raising the revenue necessary to keep the organization functioning are among its primary responsibilities. It is critical that board member recruitment begin with a clear job description so that board members don't find out later and then claim, they didn't know they'd have to help raise funds.

Many board members don't like fundraising, often because they assume that it entails making cold calls to businesses, begging for money from people that they do not know. While key partner/membership drives do necessitate calling on businesses, there are a number of other ways that board members can and should assist with fundraising. If every board member helped with some of the tasks listed below, fundraising for the organization should be less challenging.

- 1. Giving personally and professionally.** 100% of board members should be supporting the organization financially. It doesn't need to be a fixed amount but board members should be asked to make

a meaningful contribution. For some that might be \$25 or \$50 and for others it might be \$1,000 or more. Board members representing corporate businesses should secure a corporate contribution, and also make a personal contribution.

2. Suggest Names of Prospective Supporters and Research Businesses. Provide leads of business owners, friends and neighbors who you think would support the work of your organization or a special project, or research a company that no one on the board knows anything about. Find out what they do, what kind of charitable or sponsorship programs they have, and find out about potential contacts within the business.

3. Offer to be on a Team for Fundraising Calls. Don't like to ask for money? Pair up with a board member who does and go on a call with them. Be there for support and learn from the team member who will be making the pitch. If you suggested the contact you can provide introductions. Fundraising is easier when you're not doing it alone.

4. Nurture Current Funders. Supporters will become disinterested if the only time they hear from your organization is when you ask for money. Personally invite major/important funders to activities such as your annual meeting, if it's a community-wide, well-attended event. If there a grand opening downtown, invite the businesses whose contribution was used to offer incentive grants, or allowed staff to work closely with the business that opened. Visit downtown businesses and thank them for their support; doing this a couple times a year. You might be surprised to hear one of the complaints of downtown businesses who donate, is that they NEVER see board members come in their business. Always ask for their ideas so they feel you are working with them on making a better downtown.

5. Nurture Potential Funders. Before anyone will give to your organization, they need to know what the organizations' mission and programs are. Identify businesses and/or individuals where there are hopes of financial support and just make contact. Are you in a local service organization? Find prospects there and talk to them about your role on the downtown board explaining why you've chosen to serve on the board and about the exciting things happening downtown. Ask them what improvements they would like to see downtown. Start these conversations with people in your circle: at church, in the neighborhood, at work, etc. This a great PR tool and will help with future funding efforts.

6. Chair a Fundraising Event/Project. Special events often raise money and are handled by the Promotion Committee, but many downtown organizations hold fundraising events – with the primary purpose of raising money for the organization. Events like dinners, auctions, game shows, annual meetings have raised from \$1,000 to \$50,000+ for communities. There might also be projects like merchandise sales, brick sales, etc. that also need a board leader to chair the event to assure success. Step up to take the lead in planning a special fundraising activity.

7. Design Fundraising Materials. If you are talented in writing persuasive letters, volunteer to draft a new fundraising campaign letter. If you have marketing skills help design the fundraising brochure. If you have neither of these talents you can help by collecting successful fundraising materials from other communities or research the [National Main Street Center's Solution Center](#) for sample materials.

8. Attend a City Council Meeting. To advocate for ongoing and increased funding from the city, board members can and should attend city council meetings occasionally. Thank them for their past support and inform them of upcoming projects that will benefit the city.

Stress the importance that every board member needs to be active in fundraising. It is not solely the job of the executive director/program manager or of just one of two board members to fundraise for downtown. Many hands make light work, especially when it comes to fundraising.

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Center. Her expertise at the National Main Street Center is building organizational capacity and developing promotional programming. Her work primarily revolves around providing direction in program start-ups at the local, regional, and statewide levels. Stay tuned for more great tips from Kathy!