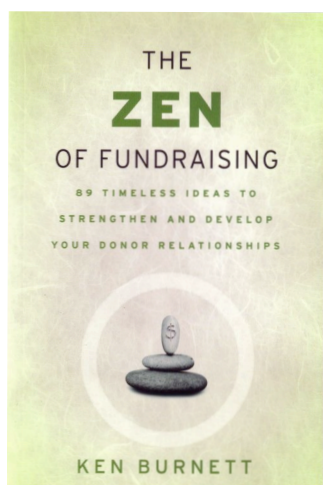


SOFII Top Tips



The following eight strategies are extracts from *The Zen of Fundraising* by Ken Burnett, published by Jossey-Bass Inc, San Francisco, 2006.



15 things
I would do if
I were the new
head of donor
development
Part 1: the first eight.

This list came about when a US journal for fundraisers asked me to imagine I'd just started in a new job, with a clean slate and sufficient resources to set about transforming the donor development function. It's included here to help anyone in an even vaguely similar situation. And to help me set out my philosophy of donor development.

These 15 strategies aren't the only things I'd do. They may not even be the most urgent things I'd do, or even the most important, but they are the things I'd do that I think would have the most lasting impact. They would make the most difference to converting my imaginary donor development department from the under-funded, misunderstood appendage to the fundraising function that I found on joining the organization, into the finely honed, high-earning core activity that I'd like to leave behind me when, in the fullness of time, I move on to pastures new (you have to indulge me a little here, in this fantasy).



Anyway, here are the first eight.

1. I'd aspire to be the most learned fundraiser of my generation

Apart from studying the lessons of history and going to the best seminars and workshops, for the fundraising resource center that I'd set about creating I'll (at the very least) get hold of the 10 best books on fundraising (see elsewhere on SOFII). And I'll make sure they don't gather dust on the resource center's shelves, but are really used. Plus I'd subscribe to the best trade magazines and journals around. And I'd encourage each of my colleagues to set aside half an hour each day for 'essential fundraising reading' (in their own time, preferably). I'd challenge them each to try to get at least one new idea from

this, every day, that will help keep us just a bit ahead of everyone else who's clamouring for our donors' funds. And once each month at least, I'd encourage them to visit a fundraising organization with which they've had no prior contact whatsoever. Or to call a fundraiser for advice, someone they've never spoken to before.

I could also suggest, each day, that they wave at someone they don't know. But that may be going too far.

2. I'd teach all my fundraising colleagues to make the 90-degree shift and to aspire to be 15 minutes ahead

These two fundamental attitudes underpin the best approach to donor development. The first, making the 90-degree shift, will involve putting myself firmly but clearly in the donor's shoes, seeing everything our organization does through our donors' eyes. It sounds uncomfortable and it's not easy, but nothing else will come close in helping us build mutually beneficial relationships with our donors. Imagine – instead of giving donors what we want them to have, when we make the 90-degree shift we can be sure to offer them only what they want to receive.

The second, aspiring to be 15 minutes ahead, means I would concentrate not on finding those rare, elusive big breakthrough ideas to advance our fundraising, instead I'd focus on implementing the myriad small but cumulatively significant little ideas that are all around fundraisers today, almost waiting to be picked up. There are hundreds such ideas to be found on SOFII, if not more.

For I know that's how our fundraising is most likely to move fastest, not in a few risky giant steps but in lots of sensible even obvious but demonstrably sound little ones.

Before focusing in any detail on the techniques and skills that fundraisers need, I'd make sure my own thinking was right and I'd encourage my colleagues to get their thinking right too. Before I'd unleash any of my well-meaning fundraising colleagues on our poor, unsuspecting donors who deserve so much better than they usually get, I'd ensure they start off with all the good habits fundraisers need to acquire. So I'd rigorously remind all my colleagues of the basic foundations of our profession, the essential values and approaches that underpin good fundraising. I wouldn't let them even talk to a donor until they'd passed muster on the basics.



3. I'd develop a culture of appropriate but high quality donor service in our organization, top to bottom

I'd make sure we are always a pleasure to do business with.

Tragically, nonprofits are not very good at customer service and that is an understatement. We should perhaps reflect that customer service is like personal hygiene – without it, your relationships won't even get started.

Not a savoury thought, I'm sure you'll agree. Yet experience tells me good, appropriate customer service is missing in most of my competitors (so providing it is just one more way we'll be 15 minutes ahead). As almost every 'mystery shopping' test confirms, fundraisers are almost invariably rotten at

customer service. In the past, most donors haven't expected anything better, but as customer expectations rise generally, that will change for nonprofits, for sure. To enhance the experience of being a donor to our nonprofit, our department will offer the most appropriate, most friendly, most efficient and most effective customer service to be found anywhere. All at a time that suits our donors rather than suits us. So our donors will like doing business with us. And they'll tell their friends.

I'd get all of our fundraisers used to saying thank you and welcome promptly and properly. Ours would be a nice place to be and to be in contact with.

4. I'd be very choosy



Fundraisers almost never have unlimited resources, so of necessity we have to be choosy. Nowadays, we need to be very selective in where we focus our attentions. So I'd concentrate our resources very finely. We can't build relationships with everyone, so we'd focus our energies and resources on those who really count. Remember real donors are rare creatures. A real donor is someone who has shown a propensity to support your cause over time. People who have given just once, in my definition, are responders, not yet donors.

We'd aspire to ask fewer people for more money for better reasons. We'd set out to find the real donors, because we know real profit comes from real relationships with real donors.

5. I'd cut out all short-term thinking, including all hard-sell activities

Instead, we'll lay solid foundations for a secure and lasting future that's not driven by short-term targets or objectives. I'd start by searching out opportunities for mutual benefit. I'd lay down strategies to develop committed giving and bequest income. I'd banish all high pressure activities, and make sure that we don't sell to our donors, instead we work with them and for them, as respected counsellors and friends.

Fundraisers should put an end to the hard sell, lay foundations for the future and invest in and plan for the long term. The long-term nature of most fundraising should be made clear to all fundraisers when they join.

6. I'd switch our organization's contact paradigm from 'marketing' to 'communication'

Donors don't like to be sold to. They never did. Effective communications, we are reliably informed by research, build trust and confidence amongst our donors. And trust and confidence are the foundations of good relationship development. I'd make communication with our donors a dialog, not a monologue. I'd recruit to our team genuine expertise and track record in effective communication. Our story would get told. And how!

I'd foster the lost art of story telling and practise 'experience' fundraising. See Richard Turner's tip on this theme, on SOFII.

Fundraising isn't about asking for money. It's about inspiring people to believe that they can make a difference. Then helping them to make it. So fundraising is the inspiration business and however much we may try to elevate and complicate it, at its heart it is little more than telling stories. I'd encourage all my fellow fundraisers to become master storytellers. Most of the time donors can't be where our work is, to see for themselves the good work our organizations do. So we fundraisers need to be able to take them there in words and pictures, to paint images of our work so successfully in their minds that it will be like the donor is almost there in person, experiencing it for himself, or herself.

7. I'd make sure we only send effective, imaginative communications



The problem with most nonprofit communications is that they are dull. Given the abundance of colorful, dramatic, human interest material with which nonprofits are blessed, this is a shocking admission. Yet sadly it's true. Fundraisers are prolific producers of printed and electronic communications, but the bulk of it is either tedious, vacuous, fit only for the rubbish bin, or all three. Common weaknesses include too many words, limited skills in designing for readability and over emphasis on what the organization wants to say, rather than on what the reader wants to read. If you think this a little harsh, send off for the newsletters or annual reports of, say, 20 other prominent nonprofits and see if I'm wrong.

You can't write effectively without also seeing the reader, in your mind's eye at least. Communications is a bit like kissing. It takes two to do it properly.

You should only send communications that will help ensure your supporters

- are entirely comfortable;
- will grow in their trust and confidence in you and your organization;
- actually look forward to hearing from you;
- only hear about issues and subjects that truly interest them;
- give when you ask;
- feel they are benefiting from the relationship too.

It's important that fundraisers become more self-critical of what they produce so they only send creative and effective communications, that they save the money currently being wasted on inappropriate and poorly constructed publications by not sending them, thus avoiding inflicting unhelpful, unwelcome materials on our dear donors.

- Constantly measure donors' interest in and reactions to what they receive from you. Learn from this. Ask yourself whether or not your donors actually read what you send them.
- Never be dull, bland or unmoving. Communicate with passion. We have the best stories in the world to tell, and the best reasons for telling them.
- Invest in good pictures and in people who can write compellingly, with power and passion.
- Design for readability.
- Send less, but better. Make sure what goes to donors is only good.

8. I'd make ours a listening and a hearing organization



In addition to training myself and my fundraising colleagues in how to provide appropriate yet highly professional levels of service and donor care, I'd make sure we know what our donors want and that we implement what they want us to do. I'd meet and talk to donors at every opportunity. I'd offer our donors a say in formulating our strategies, I'd encourage feedback, comments, questions and complaints, I'd regularly research our donors' views (and those of lapsed donors too) and I'd survey and measure their satisfaction. For records I'd keep simple indices of these, which in time will become key performance indicators (KPIs or even KDI's, key donor indicators), the regular data I'll use to monitor and report on fundraising performance. I know I'll be ahead in this, because most fundraisers only measure their performance in terms of money received now.

In all their communications fundraisers need to switch from monologue to dialog. In addition to investing effort and resources into knowing and understanding their donors, they should make sure donors don't adopt a passive role but instead can readily become active participants who will get as involved as possible (within their own levels of comfort). This can be achieved by offering donors genuinely interesting and worthwhile involvement opportunities, inviting donors to visit and see your work for themselves, so they really can get under your organisation's skin and become not just participants but co-owners of your cause. To achieve this, you have to become a listening and hearing organisation.

There are six keys to being a listening organisation

- Train frontline personnel.
- Involve donors strategically.
- Encourage feedback, comments, questions, even complaints.
- Undertake regular research. Listen particularly to donors and to former supporters.
- Regularly survey donor satisfaction. Monitor and report on key indices.
- Don't just listen – really hear what your donors will tell you, and act upon what you learn.

Watch out for the final seven strategies in this list. They'll be appearing on SOFII in the next few weeks.

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This 'top tips' list is an extract from *The Zen of Fundraising* by Ken Burnett, published by Jossey-Bass Inc, San Francisco, 2006.
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