

Appendix 1-B

Myth of “More Visibility” and “Greater Community Awareness”¹

Many a board member, nervously ranging forth a first time to fundraise, soon returns with this lament: “I told my friend about our organization, and he said he’d never heard of us. If only we had more visibility in the community, it would be so much easier to raise money!”

And now this false notion is on the table: that “increased community awareness” (the other name for a visibility boost) will raise more money. Send out press releases. Get some stories written about our work. We could produce public service announcements for radio and TV, too. Maybe even put some posters up on buses. Then everyone will know who we are. Even better, to know us is to love us, and love us generously. Gifts will spontaneously erupt! That’s what the “visibility” gambit implies. The subtext is this: We deserve support, and once people know we exist, that support will flow.

It makes perfect sense ... to novices.

But it’s about as likely as expecting a magic fish to grant your wishes.

People pay attention to what interests them, and little else. Just take a look at Simone’s two sports stories.² It’s the truth: If sports don’t matter to you, the NCAA “March Madness” basketball playoffs or World Cup football, among the world’s most heavily publicized events, simply disappear.

If the test is: “I can call anyone in town, and that person will recognize our organization’s name and what we do,” your organization will simply never pass. It’s an unrealistic goal.

¹Appendix 1-B modified with permission from Tom Ahern, *Keep Your Donors: The Guide to Better Communications and Stronger Relationships* (John Wiley & Sons, 2008), www.aherncomm.com.

²See Exhibit 1.2, “Simone, Sports, and the Myth of Visibility,” in the third edition of *Strategic Fund Development*. See the same stories in *Keep Your Donors*.

The only organizations known to almost everyone in a community are those that touch every life in an important way, such as a volunteer fire department in a rural town, or familiar brand names like the United Way, Boys & Girls Clubs, the Red Cross, the YMCA.

But if you're an agency that helps, say, deeply troubled teens, you'll *never* be sharply visible to more than a relative handful of people: the school guidance counselor, a minister or rabbi, the families you help, probably the police. In most households, your agency will never be personally relevant. A newspaper article that lasts for a day, has no particular call to action, and is not required reading will not change that.

Burn this into your brain: People give because they are asked to give (and that goes for bequests, too, not just annual gifts). When there is no "ask," nothing much happens. The fantasy that someone out there will read about your organization and spontaneously write you a large check is just that, a fantasy ... at least, statistically speaking. Miracles happen, of course. But well-managed fundraising programs don't count on them.

The good news is that a lack of visibility will *not* hurt your chances for donor support. Invisible organizations, ones that neither you nor your friends have ever heard of, attract outstanding, passionate philanthropic support. While ones that have been around forever in a community, with an instantly familiar brand name, struggle to find a next generation of donors. Ask any Boys & Girls Club director, for instance, if bearing a familiar name guarantees gifts. The answer will be a flat no.

Increased community awareness, so-called, will not reduce the real labors of fund development: developing a case for support, identifying the predisposed and qualifying them as prospects (or not), marketing your organization, training your solicitors, making the ask, cultivating donors through donor-centered relationship building.

When you consider the vast outpouring of charitable support that follows natural disasters like the South Asian tsunami and the Haiti earthquake, you might reasonably conclude that increased media attention is the secret to fund development.

But those were major news events: The earth moved, literally and emotionally. The media attention never quit. The Internet, with vast promotion through servers, made giving easy and quick with secure online sites. Social media from Facebook to Twitter and text messaging with cell phones generated enormous response. Many of those gifts were, in effect, impulse purchases, spur of the moment decisions—and experience shows that relatively few impulse givers ever make a second gift. Bloggers and journalists talked about gift receiving rather than fund development—and only fund development produces donor loyalty. Worse yet, research shows that manmade disasters—like genocide—don't produce as many gifts or donors as natural disasters.

There are no shortcuts to fund development success. Visibility and community awareness of your organization aren't the answer. Fund development is a process that depends upon a body of knowledge, learns from research, and requires skills. No shortcuts. No silver bullet. No quick fix.