Brakeley Briscoe
Considering Philanthropy
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The Fundraising Case Statement: Writing Your Story

by Marianne Briscoe, Ph.D., ACFRE

Ah, the case statement. Few fundraising tasks present more challenges and strike more fear into the hearts of development managers. The range of opinions about how to tell your institution's story and how to motivate people to give money is vast. Furthermore, volunteers and senior executives have an abiding belief that a printed case brochure, video or Web page is the secret to raising a really big gift.

A colleague calls the printed case statement the "make brave", meaning with this brochure in-hand, leadership is finally emboldened to go out and meet prospects. Fundraisers know that it isn't the paper or the video that lands the gift; it's the personal interaction. But if that object makes the leaders brave, how can we deny them?

The fact is that the brochure, Web page and video — substantial financial investments in themselves — are the capstone of a lot of important work that must come before.

Needs List

First, we recommend developing a clear, widely agreed understanding of what you need the money for. One sad client wanted to upgrade the heating/AC system and gave us a list of all the equipment, down to the nuts and bolts, required to do

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Counsel to the Rescue; Just Getting it Done

by Melanie Brandston

If you are reading this, chances are you are looking for a solution to the challenges that are facing all development professionals: our "job jars" are overflowing. Leadership is talking about even more work with increased focus on expanding your donor base, raising more major gifts or even undertaking a capital campaign. Meanwhile many shops have seen job freezes, furloughs or staff reductions as organizations have restructured to get through the recession's budget squeeze. More work ahead with fewer hands and a narrower staff skill base could be out there for you

Bringing in a consultant to add expertise and relieve some of the work overload can be an effective and efficient solution. Consultants do not always have to be telling you what you need to be doing; consultants are certainly skilled analysts, and developing strategies and plans (doing "studies") is an excellent way to use consultants. However, in many cases a consultant can actually do the work for you. So what can a consultant do most effectively either on- or off-site? What should not be delegated to a consultant? How can you add a consultant to your team in a smooth and effective way?

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Overseeing Specific Projects

A consultant can bring expertise, objective attention and focus to a project. Consultants like Brakeley Briscoe are equipped to create and oversee specific development projects. They can establish a major gifts department or oversee a short-term major gifts campaign for a special project. They can be responsible for identifying prospective donors and leadership volunteers within the organization's current donor base as well as "suspects" in the general philanthropy arena. They can conduct prospect research. They will develop strategies, timetables, and assignments for cultivation and solicitation of prospects. They will train solicitors (board and staff) and can participate in visits to prospective donors. They will track all activities, and perhaps most important of all, serve as taskmaster to ensure attention is given to fundraising priorities. Staff management, events, proposal writing, donor database records and stewardship responsibilities are all appropriate roles for a consultant.

A significant advantage in retaining a consulting firm is the depth of expertise behind the individual assigned to your job. Consultants are used to getting something important done, and quickly. With a firm, a top-level manager will oversee the work of the on-site consultant and assure the project is carried out on time and on scope. With a firm, your consultant can tap into a wide range of skills and expertise. If, for example, you need an expert in wealth screening services, in-depth prospect research, or planned giving regulation, a full service consulting firm has those resources even if your individual consultant isn't an expert in that arena. All this adds up to a really deep capacity to get your priority attended to.

Keys to Success

Among the most important keys to success using a consultant in a project management assignment are a clearly defined scope of work, an up-front discussion about how "success" will be defined, and clarity about who does what and by when. Usually you want a senior consultant in the firm and a senior executive in your organization to serve as the overseers of the consultant manager's work, and these two executives should check in with each other regularly.

To be most effective, consultants should not be burdened with the bureaucratic duties (perhaps that all-staff meeting or that HR-induced emergency procedures training) that you as staff probably must address. Let them focus on the contracted scope of work. They can be helpful as a sounding board on issues that may be hampering your effectiveness, but we caution against making them "one of you".

Also remember, you don't need to assign your project manager five days per week to the task; nor may it be necessary to require that the consultant do all the work on site. You can save time and money if you recognize that this manager serves you best with a laser focus on the job you need done.

About Asking

Should the work scope include actual face-to-face cultivation and solicitation? This is a tempting way to reduce work overload. But do not believe any consultant who claims that he or she will raise the money on your behalf without your hands-on participation. In many states solo asking makes people paid solicitors — and they may not even be licensed as such. Besides, your prospects want to speak to a representative of your organization, not to a consultant or "paid fundraiser" about any gift they plan to make. The consultant can prepare materials, letters, cultivation and asking strategies, and may be able to open a door or two. However, major gift investments in an organization's plans are secured when your leaders explain their vision in person to the interested audience. People want to know who will be ultimately responsible for the project's implementation and how their money will be utilized. That person is not the consultant.

Some Examples

Here are some ways consultant managers can move your work ahead. Brakeley Briscoe has provided a senior consultant to serve as associate vice president for development in a large department that went too long without a senior executive in charge. We provided a senior consultant to manage a large university annual fund during a long vacancy in the face of urgent need to get the fund up and running — including selection of the direct response consultant/vendor. A Brakeley Briscoe consultant has managed a major gifts program in the absence of a senior development executive. We have developed grant proposals when time was short. We have supported vendor selection for wealth screening and analyzed the screened information and developed an action plan. We have managed board development committees, and of course, served as resident capital campaign managers. Most of our team has actually served in these capacities before they became consultants. The combination of their analytic skills and line experience allows them to get the work going fast and right.

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the renovation. This is of course not what we mean by needs list. We mean a list of things to be accomplished (with price tags), based on your strategic plan, which is in turn clearly and explicitly aligned with your institutional mission and vision. Sometimes this needs list comes close to exceeding the gross domestic product in value and must be streamlined and prioritized — this is always a good exercise. Donors want to fund what is most urgently needed and what will create the greatest progress in fulfilling the mission.

Audience Analysis

Second, recognize that a case statement is as much about what the donors will respond to as it is about what you need money for. A heating/AC renovation, a parking lot or an invisible seismic retrofit may be your highest need, but without a really great rationale for its urgency it will be a very hard sell. Likewise, an exquisite proof of the importance of your need may also be unmoving. Donor-centered communications begin the discussion with the prospect's interests not with the institution's. This is a lot easier in a one-on-one conversation than it is in a communication that must serve many prospects and many solicitors. You need to analyze your audience; determine the major stakeholders for the success of your fundraising; and evaluate their interests, values and points of connection to your organization. Next, segment that audience, focusing, of course, on the clusters of high value prospects, and compose the arguments that will appeal to these individuals. This could mean reformatting the needs list so it is more attractive to prospects. It could also require some interviews for market testing.

Often a campaign feasibility/ planning study will market test a needs list and some "theories" about the arguments donor prospects will respond to (a preliminary case statement). But you won't always have a campaign study report in hand as you write a case — you may not even be writing a case statement for a campaign; maybe you are just working on the annual fund. Whatever the circumstances are, preparing a tight needs list and an analysis of the mindset of your prospects is critical preparation for writing the case statement.

Compiling Story Components

While you may think of the case statement as that brochure or video, it is actually first the source book for those "treatments". Before you write the case and turn it into various communications tools, you should assemble all the pieces. This can mean the history of the organization; an accounting of the leadership; a listing of the points of excellence; an assembly of "I didn't know that" items about your organization; a summary of the strategic plan; basic budget information, service area, services, and other frequently asked questions; and statistics and other points that contribute to the rationale for your excellence and the importance and urgency of meeting your needs. This is likely to be the size of a small notebook when you are done.

Writing It

Classical Roman rhetoricians (like Cicero) had it right when they divided the task of writing into three components: invention, arrangement, and elocution. And you should follow their advice in writing your case. Do not rush to the flourished elocution. You will end up in debate gridlock about phrasing before there is even agreement about what you want the case to say.

Decide what your case is about — what needs you wish to fund and why the institution needs to fund them (invention). Then decide how to set out your arguments so that they appeal to your audience (arrangement), using this analysis to expand and sharpen the notebook of story components you assembled earlier. We are at the outline or very plain-style prose stage here. When you have agreement on these parts, you are finally ready to start "elocuting", or turning your preparations into the key phrases and narrative story that will be the backbone of your various treatments — be they video, Web or print. This is never easy because you have all those leaders, each with their own conviction that they know what needs to be said. Often they are right, but often they are advising from their own mindset, which may not be that of your donor markets. (How many of them refuse to believe that direct marketing fundraising works since they won't take solicitation phone calls themselves?). Having negotiated consensus on the invention and arrangement parts of your case, you are in a better place for focusing everyone on what actual words should be in your case.

Shaping It

Here are some hints for developing a case: First remember that the document that is agreed to in this process will need to change over time. You will continue to learn what is working and what is not, and further, your prospects and their environment will continue to change. A case statement that was like "butter" in early 2008 probably needed substantial revision after the recession hit, for example. While

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LET'S MEET: CONFERENCES AND SPEECHES

April 11, 2010 - April 14, 2010

AFP 47th Annual International Conference; Baltimore, MD. Marianne Briscoe, Alden Briscoe, and Timothy P. Snyder attending. Brakeley Briscoe exhibiting at booth 644.

April 26, 2010

AHP Pacific and AHP Rockies & Southwest Joint Regional Conference; Phoenix, AZ. Stuart R. Smith attending and introducing the keynote speaker.

May 18, 2010 - May 19, 2010

Center for Nonprofit Success DC Fundraising Summit; Washington, D.C. Timothy P. Snyder giving a speech.

June 11, 2010

AFP New York Fund Raising Day in New York 2010; New York, NY. Melanie Brandston giving a speech.

June 16, 2010

AFP Golden Gate Fundraising Day 2010; San Francisco, CA. Julie Ver Steeg, Alden F. Briscoe and Marianne G. Briscoe attending. Brakeley Briscoe exhibiting.

June 16, 2010

AFP Greater Arizona Mentor Program; Phoenix, AZ. Stuart R. Smith presenting, "Capital Campaigns" with Sue Gaub, AHP chapter president.

September 28, 2010 - September 29, 2010

AEDROS (Asociación de Ejecutivos en Desarrollo de Recursos para Organizaciones Sociales), Buenos Aires, Argentina. Marianne Briscoe will present a master class on "Preparing Your University for a Campaign", and a conference session on "Raising Funds from Corporations".

October 20, 2011 - October 23, 2010

AHP 44th Annual International Conference; San Antonio, TX. Brakeley Briscoe exhibiting at booth 326. Stuart R. Smith and Timothy P. Snyder presenting on capital and endowment campaigns.

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you are not writing your case in sand, you aren't writing it in stone either.

In addition, a range of "treatments" can allow you to target your audience more finely than the full case document itself. You may want to prepare a treatment aimed at corporations or one aimed at alumni or planned gift prospects. The case and the "notebook" can have materials that support arguments for these various audiences that may not be useful in the general brochure or video or Web page. Similarly, different media can support different ways of expressing and arranging your points.

What are the most important things to say? We are all tempted to open our story like a fairy tale, "once upon a time", so we begin with our founding. Sometimes your origins are very important and should start things off, but for most this is a snoozy way to engage your audience. A wise venture capitalist once summarized what makes him invest in an enterprise (and this seems like the best possible framework for building your case statement too): State the problem, describe your solution, show me why you are the best institution and best people to implement it, and show me that it is urgent to do this.

How do you tell your story? Another wise colleague told me that "the most powerful voice in the room is the prospect's." Strive to put your prospect in the picture you present. This means that you want to do less "telling" and more "showing". Have people like the prospects make some of the most important points. Allow leadership to say why the institution needs what it needs. Have clients, graduates, and other beneficiaries talk about why you are great, effective, and important. Use quotes, portrait images, and even charts to make your points both verbally and visually. Remember, many people are more visual than verbal.

How do you feel as the author? In most cases you will find that you have been nudged or pushed in directions you didn't anticipate when you set out to write the case. Just remember no one ever won a Pulitzer for a case statement; you won't either. Put your ego away and recognize that while you may be the one with the pen (or keyboard) you are really the leader of a consensus-building process that seeks to achieve the highest, not the lowest, common denominator.