

“Ten Top Reasons Why Campaigns Fail (and how to avoid them!)”

by Tom Conway

Thousands of capital/endowment campaigns are started each year. Many of them fail to reach the published financial goal or are abruptly halted after a few months, leaving volunteers, donors, and staff asking “what went wrong?” Here are ten common mistakes made by non-profit organizations and recommendations to avoid these errors. Feel free to add others or comment by clicking [here](#).

1. An unclear mission, organizational goals and campaign objectives.

Ideally, a capital campaign is begun to implement all or part of the organization’s strategic plan. Revising or significantly altering a non-profit’s vision may result in new programs, collaborations and opportunities. When organizing a major campaign, Board and staff should be in agreement about goals and vision rather than emphasizing “needs” or “wants.” See attachment, *From Strategic Planning to Case for Support – A Conceptual Model*.

2. Not conducting a planning (feasibility) study or rejecting the consultant’s advice.

Some non-profits are so excited about the possibility of a new building, renovations or increasing the endowment, they just plunge into a campaign and begin soliciting gifts. Wrong! It is prudent to engage fund-raising counsel to evaluate the strength of the case for support, determine an attainable financial goal, uncover new or additional prospects and confirm the availability of campaign leadership, by way of a planning study, before announcing a multi-million dollar effort. Sometimes non-profits ignore the consultant’s advice and proceed with a campaign. Unless you can document a poorly conducted planning study (too few interviews, sloppy analysis, and inaccurate data) or have new information, e.g. a newly uncovered two million dollar gift (!) it makes sense to carefully reflect upon the recommendations and proceed accordingly.

3. Insufficient number of prospects to fulfill Top Ten Gifts.

Most capital campaigns are won or lost based on a handful (10-15) of gifts, sometimes referred to as “Advance” or “Leadership” gifts. If these prospects are not identified during the planning study serious consideration should be given to reducing the goal or changing strategies. Very few campaigns are successful without obtaining a majority of Top Ten Gifts.



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4. Enlisting less than influential and affluent people to serve as campaign leaders.

You probably know or know of the “A Team” volunteers in your community. How can they be attracted to your cause? Do they serve on the Board? Do they (or their spouse/partner) have passion for the mission? Who can ask them? Were they interviewed as part of the planning study? Recruiting the top team can be frustrating, but compromising and accepting a lesser group will prove troublesome. Once recruited campaign leadership should expect to hold other volunteers, staff and consultants responsible for the timely completion of all assignments.

5. Not obtaining early, substantial pledges from Board and/or volunteer leadership.

Those closest to the non-profit should expect to be solicited first (Board, Board members emeriti, campaign leaders). Their gifts should demonstrate real commitment to the cause. Others in the community will look to these early gifts for guidance. A lack of significant giving from those most able to contribute will cascade downward causing a negative reaction from individual, business and foundation prospects.

6. Premature or poorly planned solicitations of top prospects.

Each solicitation of a top prospect must be carefully strategized and properly conducted. I like to say that “Donors give on their calendars and not ours” which means that a premature ask can result in an outright refusal or a very modest gift. Knowing when the prospect is cultivated and having the correct solicitor(s) can make all the difference in the world!

7. Inability to ask for the correct amount during a face-to-face visit.

Asking for the correct amount should result from accurate prospect research, confirmed by a prospect review exercise and clearly communicated by a peer during a relaxed yet focused personal conversation. Avoid solicitors who say “We’ll talk about the campaign when I run into her at the club” or “I don’t have to see him, he’ll take my (phone) call.” Your campaign is important enough to warrant a personal visit and solicitors should be prepared to invest the required time and energy to convey the proper message.

8. Having an unrealistic timeline to conduct the campaign; ignoring deadlines and permitting momentum to be diminished.

The consulting team should prepare a timetable with milestones to denote important tasks. The Board and campaign leadership should sign off and agree with the timeline. While all campaigns encounter “peaks & valleys” a best effort by all is needed to respect deadlines and keep moving forward. A loss of urgency and momentum will be quickly noted by solicitors and the wider community.

9. Insufficient volunteers and staff to make the calls and to keep the campaign running smoothly.

A multi-million dollar campaign can easily use forty to fifty volunteers, including the organization's Board and staff. It is necessary to attract a substantial pool of volunteers to replenish those lost through various factors. The more trained solicitors recruited the more face-to-face calls can be completed. Dedicated, experienced development office staff can complement both volunteers and consultants; if necessary add staff for the duration of the campaign. Lastly, note the impact on the Executive Director/President's time. He/She will be asked to make many calls, attend numerous campaign events and be otherwise occupied. The Board should make provisions to either delegate some of the President's duties or defer some programs during active campaigning.

10. Inadequate budget to do the proper job.

It takes money to raise money. As a very general rule a non-profit should expect to spend 4-6% of the total goal for campaigns of \$5 million or below. The percentage is reduced for larger campaigns. Typical expense items include brochure(s), stationery, video, telephone, travel, printing, postage, staffing, donor recognition and fund-raising counsel. A budget should be assembled, approved and funding available before kicking off a campaign.

A capital campaign should be an exciting, transformative enterprise for a non-profit organization. By careful planning, staying focused on the mission and vision, recruiting the best volunteer leaders and soliciting prospects at the right time, your campaign will likely be a success. While it's a lot of hard work nothing beats the joy expressed at a victory celebration. Best wishes for your next campaign!

Tom Conway is President of Conway Company, LLC, Fund-Raising Counsel with offices in Cincinnati, Cleveland and Wilmington, NC. He may be contacted at 877.526.3430 or on the web: <http://www.conwaycompany.com/>



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