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A two-word action plan: Just ask

by Tom Suddes



'Knock, and it shall be opened unto you.' With that passage from Luke's Gospel, an organization has its biblical permission. (Dreamstime)

Commentary

The Catholic church is clearly a leader in elementary and secondary education and in providing social services that impact the poor, the homeless, the hungry and more. The church's reach ranges from children to seniors and transcends religious denominations.

The current economic crisis has exacerbated all of the problems of homelessness, hunger and poverty and dramatically alters the ability of church organizations and other groups to deliver solutions.

Over the last 25 years, the Suddes Group has been engaged in helping organizations and institutions raise money to pursue their goals. In working with thousands of organizations, including Catholic elementary schools, secondary schools, colleges, parishes, dioceses and social services, we have learned three basic truths:

- Every "not-for-profit" organization needs more money.
- There are plenty of people, with money who want to help.
- The current model of connecting these donors with those in need of their largesse is broken.

What's needed is a change in the way we think, operate and fund. We need to change the game and change the rules ? in order to change the world.

Change is never easy, especially in a 2,000-year-old organization. The good news is that this change is relatively simple, and doesn't require a papal encyclical or a bishop's imprimatur. Whether you are worthy cause looking for funding or a funder looking for a worthy cause, here are three insights that can help:

First, your impact drives your income, not the other way around. After 35 years, 400 campaigns, 30,000 visits, this is our simple "St. Paul knocked off his horse" epiphany: The size and scope of your group's impact determines the size and scope of your income.

Catholic schools in urban areas are models of effectiveness. The church's work with the underserved is an irreplaceable part of the current delivery system. With all due respect and admiration, none of these organizations have incomes that matches their profound impact.

Stephen Covey says, "No money. No mission." However, the corollary is equally powerful.

"No mission. No money." The implications of this insight can bring about considerable change. If an organization is truly driven by the impact it has on others in the community, then that affects how that organization delivers its services, how it sells its vision, how it leverages its assets and much more. It also means that moving ahead is not just about fundraising, begging for money, building campaigns, or survival.

The challenge is to avoid letting income determine impact. If an organization wants to raise a lot of money, it should understand and be able to communicate its who, why, what and how. In other alliterative words, one's mission, meaning and message need to be delivered in a clear, concise, compelling and consistent fashion.

The second insight is contained in this advice: Change the way you talk, and you can change the way you act. The best place to start an immersion into this new language is to stop defining yourself as a "negative" ? as a not-for-profit. People don't give because you are a "charity," "tax-exempt," a "501(c) 3" organization. Just ask them. No board member, or even staff, wakes up in the morning and shouts: "Yeehaw! We don't get to make any money today!" Be what you are, for impact.

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This is not some kind of semantic gymnastics. This is about your attitude.

Here are additional old words replaced with new words that can help an organization change the way it thinks about itself: Charity to philanthropy; mission statement to message; survival to vision; inform to involve; competition to collaboration; donor to investor; appointments to visits; transactions to relationships; "asking for money" to "presenting an opportunity."

The third insight: Just ask. It's a two-word action plan. The power of this action statement encompasses

the entire solution to funding an organization's vision. This is one of the hardest lessons for most Catholic educators, health care leaders and social service executives. They are committed to the cause, but not trained to ask.

I tell them: "You're in sales. Get over it. You're selling your vision, your solutions, your ideas, your programs, your people and much more."

To put it more bluntly, faith, hope and charity are three great individual virtues, but faith alone will not pay operating expenses. Hope is not a strategy. And charity, as a mindset, will generate token gifts. "Ask, and it shall be given to you. Seek, and you shall find. Knock, and it shall be opened unto you." With that passage from Luke's Gospel, an organization has its biblical permission.

Use these three insights to help transform a not-for-profit organization into a for-impact one, reminding staff and volunteers of the power of this impact. Present the opportunity to potential investors who want to make a difference in the world. Go forth and just ask.

[Tom Suddes founded For Impact, a consulting firm for nonprofit fundraising, in 1983 after working in the development office at the University of Notre Dame, Ind.]

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