



Successfully appointing a
Professional Fundraising Consultant

Volunteers have the Power

Successful fundraising is most effectively conducted when a healthy partnership is struck between the Volunteer and the Professional. Ultimately, it is the Volunteer who has the fundraising *power* – the personal contacts and credibility to open doors. In this partnership, the team in the Development Office have a critical role in marshalling these volunteer resources and ensuring they are judiciously applied.

So, when the time comes to consider appointing a Professional Fundraising Consultant to add to this team, it is important to approach the process in such a way that your organisation not only gains the expertise it needs, but it also strengthens the invaluable relationship it has with its volunteers.

Time spent in properly engaging your Consultant is a critical factor in determining the ultimate success of any subsequent fundraising programme that your organisation may decide to undertake.

Do your homework first ...

To begin, consider formulating the answers to questions in three key areas:

1. *Priorities*

- Has your organisation defined its fundraising goals and objectives?
- Are you able to prepare a concise statement that articulates exactly why further funding is needed?
- Have you secured the necessary approval for the project from your organisation's governing body?

2. *Commitment*

- Do your key decision makers support the idea of fundraising?
- Is your organisation prepared to commit significant time and resources to undertake a fundraising programme?

- Is your organisation ready to engage professional counsel to help plan and implement a fundraising programme?

3. *Resources*

- What are the strengths and weaknesses of your fundraising operation?
- What investment is available to mount a fundraising programme?
- How will your own staff and volunteers work with the consultant team?

In taking the time to first consider these and other key questions, you will be best able to determine exactly what services you require a Professional Fundraising Consultant to deliver.

Understanding what you are buying ...

A firm of Professional Fundraising Consultants can deliver considerable benefits to an organisation that is seeking to significantly improve the amount of money it is raising, including:

1. *Expertise*

Fundraising Consultants offer a range of specialised services such as development office audits, resources studies, management of capital campaigns and annual appeals, prospect research, proposal writing, IT services, presentation of communications materials, direct mail and dial programmes, as well as planned or deferred giving programmes.

All of these elements of fundraising are becoming increasingly sophisticated and, in today's competitive philanthropic environment, they require specialist expertise to ensure success.

2. *Objectivity*

The best consultants will provide an objective, candid analysis of your development operation and your fundraising potential. They will then

prescribe creative and workable solutions based on their extensive practical experience.

Volunteers and institutional leaders sometimes accept advice from experienced, 'arm's length' consultants which they will not necessarily accept from in-house management or development staff.

3. Momentum

An experienced, focused consultant will keep your fundraising effort on the 'front burner'. Although your staff and volunteers are undoubtedly faced with many competing demands, the consultant will ensure that your fundraising programme receives priority attention and moves ahead in accordance with a carefully predetermined timetable.

The consultant will help solve day-to-day strategic and tactical problems as well as inspire your staff and volunteers to keep the effort on track.

Setting the 'right' expectations ...

The role of your Professional Fundraising Consultant will need to be properly understood by your organisation's volunteers and staff, in order for the partnership to be effective.

For example, a consultant *cannot* meaningfully address any one of the following key areas that will be essential for the success of your fundraising programme:

1. Institutional Planning

Although consultants can facilitate the 'brokering' process, they cannot make final decisions regarding your institutional priorities and the projects to be included in your fundraising campaign. Similarly, although consultants can help 'package' your needs as attractively as possible, they cannot produce a strong case for support if none exists.

2. *Volunteer Commitment*

Although consultants will help you identify, cultivate, and perhaps enlist senior volunteers, they cannot substitute for a lack of internal or external leadership. A consultant cannot 'manufacture' the total commitment of the institutional leaders and high level volunteers, which is crucial to the success of any fundraising initiative.

3. *Asking for gifts*

Consultants will provide you with a strategic plan, prospect research, public relations materials, volunteer training, and a myriad of other services crucial to the success of any fundraising initiative. However, they will not directly raise funds for your organisation and they cannot substitute for the well-armed, influential volunteers who must personally ask your most important prospects. Similarly, they cannot 'produce' givers or financial support for a cause, which a community is not prepared to endorse.

Search

Now that you are clear about what you are seeking from a Professional Fundraising Consultant and the right expectations have been set within your organisation, the time has come to see which firm will best meet your needs.

Research

Undertake some preliminary research to identify the consulting firms your organisation may wish to consider. A good place to start is by consulting your own network, then seek the assistance of professional bodies such as the Association of Fundraising Consultants (AFC) and the Institute of Fundraising. Shorten your list to four or five firms, which have a positive reputation in the professional community and appear to fit the requirements of your organization.

Proposals

Next, send to each consulting firm on your short-list a detailed letter setting out:

- The background of your organisation
- It's fundraising and development history
- The nature of the project for which you are considering engaging counsel

It is often useful to attach supplementary material to your letter, such as your most recent annual report and relevant public relations materials.

Your letter should clearly indicate what you require in the proposals you are soliciting from the consultants. These requirements may include:

- Brief history of the consulting firm
- Description of its services & experience of its principal Directors
- Client list and referees
- Detailed description of how the firm proposes to serve your organisation
- Qualifications of staff to be assigned to your project
- Timetable for the assignment
- Proposed professional fees and any other disbursements

You may also require each firm to respond to specific questions such as "What resources and involvement will you require from us?"

Finally, you should clearly indicate a deadline for the receipt of proposals and a timetable for follow-up.

Some firms may wish to meet with you personally in order to obtain a better understanding of your situation before submitting a written proposal. This is generally a useful exercise for both your organisation and the consultant.

Selection

Once your nominated response date has passed, evaluate each firm's proposal on the merits of the:

- Response given to the questions posed in your letter
- Level of professionalism, creativity, and suitability to your own unique circumstances

On the basis of the written proposals and your preliminary enquiries about each firm, you should attempt to reduce the list to two or three candidates who will be invited to meet with your selection committee.

Committee

Carefully choose the members of the committee charged with the responsibility of selecting your consultant.

While the number of committee members should not ordinarily exceed seven people, it is important to include all of the key persons who will work with the consultant and share responsibility for the success of the programme. Optimally, these individuals should include your Chief Executive, Chairman of the Board of Governors, Chairmen of the Foundation Board, Director of Development and a few key external volunteers who are familiar with your situation and may be called upon to play an important role in the proposed fundraising programme.

Interview

Try to interview all candidates on the same day or on consecutive days. Set a friendly but firm environment for the interview - do not allow the consultant to control the process.

Establish a predetermined time for each part of the interview, such as:

- Your own introduction to highlight the brief (say five minutes)

- The consultant's presentation (say 15 minutes)
- Questions and answers (say 15 minutes)
- Summation (say five minutes).

If you set aside at least an hour for each interview, you will also allow time for your committee to interact, share immediate impressions, complete their "rating scale" for the previous candidate, and prepare for the next interview.

Criteria

Depending on your own needs and preferences your organisation should develop a weighted checklist of selection criteria (a "rating scale") to help you assess the candidates. Carefully structure the interview to cover the most important selection criteria with each consultant. Your weighted list of criteria might include:

- Integrity / general reputation of the consultant
- Quality of the written proposal
- Quality and professionalism of oral presentation
- Level and breadth of the consultant's expertise
- Depth and capability of specialist services
- Track record / related experience
- Level of interest / eagerness
- Level of innovation (versus "boiler plate")
- Compatibility with your unique needs
- Accountability mechanisms
- Qualifications and experience of principal Directors of the firm

- Qualifications and experience of the staff that will work on your project (you should insist on meeting personally with these individuals)
- Listening ability
- Level of support and supervision of the field staff
- Costs (consider professional fees and disbursements as well as the cost of resources required from your organisation for the project)
- Level of professional indemnity insurance, public liability cover etc
- Style of the consultant and *chemistry* with your staff and volunteers
- Likelihood of the consultant transferring skills and experience to your staff and volunteers to ensure longer-term benefits.

It is often helpful to carefully prepare, ahead of the interview, questions that address these criteria which can then be put to each of the consultants interviewed. If the answers are unclear, equivocal or lack credibility, follow-up questions should be posed. Do not allow a consultant to respond with lengthy generalities, which are not responsive to your concerns.

Also consider preparing a few questions, which are specific to the particular consultant (“What would be your firm’s response if we were dissatisfied with the performance of the consultant working on our campaign?” or “What quality assurance systems does your firm have in place to ensure the fundraising programme is being properly managed?”).

Similarly, prepare a few challenging questions which are somewhat out of the ordinary (“Tell us about one of your assignments which you consider a failure”). Listen carefully to the response to each question and take note of voice inflection, body language, eye contact, and other nuances that may indicate the sincerity, and comfort level of the consultant.

The interview should pursue similar (comparable) areas of inquiry with each candidate and your committee should carefully note the style and tone as well

as the substance of each response. In the end, the process is intended to produce a fair comparison of each candidate and enable you to weigh both the subjective and objective factors, which will determine your final choice.

Each member of your committee should independently complete the “rating scale” for each consultant before proceeding to the next interview. At the end of the process the entire committee should share these ratings and discuss each candidate separately and comparatively. A final ranking of the candidates should be developed by consensus rather than result from a committee vote or a purely arithmetical computation of the ratings.

References

In order to validate your final selection, your organisation should conduct careful reference checks. Talk to a reasonable cross section of the consultant’s clients, particularly those in your own professional sector and geographical area. Although you may wish to contact the references supplied by the consultant, it is important that you talk to a selection of other clients whom the consultant has served. Use your own contacts as well as the reference list provided. Most importantly, check the general references for the consulting firm and the personal references for the individuals in the firm with whom you will be working most closely.

If you identify any “red flags” from the interview, your reference checks, or the general reputation of the firm, be sure to pursue these diplomatically but earnestly. As a final check, you should consider visiting the consultant’s offices to obtain a firsthand impression of the organisation and the support team behind the scenes.

Beginning work ...

Once you have completed final reference checks and validated the committee’s selection, contact the consultant you have chosen and ensure that they are prepared to accept the assignment on your terms.

Then contact the other candidates and thank them for their participation in the process. Do not allow yourself to be drawn into discussions regarding the specific reasons for your selection. Although it is both polite and professional to give unsuccessful consultants some general feedback in this regard, detailed discussions are unnecessary and may directly or indirectly breach the confidentiality of your committee deliberations.

Then, prepare a written contract setting out the terms on which the consultant is to be engaged, including the nature of the services to be provided, the assignment of personnel, timetable, costs, resources, contingencies, and other fundamentals. Many consulting firms are also ready to prepare the first draft of such a contract, which reduces legal fees and expedites matters. Most importantly, ensure that the contract contains a specific provision for termination of the appointment in event that the services being delivered by the consultant are no longer required.

Now with a new and experienced consulting partner on the team, your organisation is ready to begin the real work of “making challenging dreams a reality”!

Have fun ...