

Two Ears, One Mouth:

The Power of Listening

By Andy Robinson

Major gifts fundraising is more about listening than talking. Solicitors who talk too much tend to fail.

Novices are the worst offenders. They're filled with nervous energy. They're uncomfortable with silence and work doubly hard to carry the conversation. They mistakenly believe that, once armed with the perfect "case," they can talk somebody into giving - so they obsess about getting the language right. They assume that the donor's decision is based on the pitch.

You cannot talk someone into giving you money. In fact, you can talk them out of giving by talking too much.

On the other hand, you can *listen someone into giving* by asking good questions, being fully present in the conversation, and listening carefully to what he or she has to say. Fundraising guru Jerry Panas calls this "listening the gift," and it's the most important skill in face to face fundraising.

As you probably know, fundraising isn't about money - it's about relationships. Think about your own relationships. How do you feel when friends or family members talk too much and monopolize the conversation? Or when they get excited about their interests and passions and problems, but never ask about yours? Would you rather listen to a monologue or join a dialogue?

Thanks to millions of years of evolution and the grace of God, you've been given two ears and one mouth. That's no accident. When you're meeting with donors or prospects, try to listen twice as much as you talk.

Engage the person by preparing questions in advance and bringing them to the meeting.

- Why are you interested in our work?
- What is your experience with our issue? Has someone you know been affected?
- (For current donors) Last year, you gave \$____. Why? What is it about our work that moves you?
- What are your favorite organizations? Why?
- When you make a donation, how do you like to be acknowledged?

I'm not suggesting you conduct an interrogation, so don't come on too strong. Your job is to stimulate a dialogue, and the best way to do that is to ask questions.

It won't surprise you to know that people like to talk about themselves, so make it easy. *The more they talk, the better your chance of getting the gift* - not because you manipulate them, but because you're genuinely interested in their point of view. If you know what motivates them, you'll be a more responsive partner.

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