Sometimes We Ask Too Early

Have you ever asked for a gift prematurely from someone? Sometimes we ask for support too early in a relationship. Now in a perfect world that would never be the case. We would cultivate the prospective donor adequately. We would involve that donor in our organization. The affinity would grow between this prospective donor and the organization we represent. The prospect would deepen their understanding of the mission and appreciation for it. Then, in the fullness of time, we would ask them for support and they would readily say, yes. And, they would give abundantly! The reality is that this is rarely the case. Oftentimes we ask for a gift prematurely.

Circumstances may require us to do so. We have a campaign. We have an urgent need to address. Such situations necessitate that we must go and ask others to help us, regardless of how developed the relationship might be. We should not be afraid of asking early Although it is not preferred, it is commonly done.

Asking prematurely isn't all bad. Asking can stimulate a relationship. If someone declines your request, you can ask why. This can help you understand the nature of the relationship. If they give, but perhaps not as much as they might have had there been more time to develop the relationship, still, they have given you something. How we treat the donor after the gift commitment is made has everything to do with what they might do next time for your organization. You gained another donor and, perhaps a major gift donor, although not at the level you had hoped. Responding with generous expressions of gratitude and continuing to engage the donor with regularity, has everything to do with developing that donor further and for the future.

When I arrived at the University of Missouri-St. Louis it was starting its fourth year of a seven year campaign. I was to take the campaign public within the year. We were engaging many alumni in major gift discussions for the first time and for most of those alumni it was the first time that they were approached for a major gift from any organization.

The university was just 45 years old at the time -- a very young institution. On one visit I went with our Chancellor and one of our Chancellor's Council members to visit a prominent graduate of the university who held the senior-most position in a significant business. When we asked for a million dollars, he said that his family could not do a million dollars, but he assured us that our request would be taken seriously. He promised to get back to us soon. We left excited and encouraged, anticipating a substantial commitment. We waited and waited for a response. He was not responding to our follow-up attempts. Then one day, across the fax machine, came a pledge for $2500 a year for 4 years – a total commitment of $10,000. We were stunned. We had such high expectations, but we had asked for the gift prematurely.

So, what did we do about it? We were grateful. We stewarded the relationship and further involved the graduate in the life of the university. Sometime later we went back to the donor and the donor committed $30,000 to endow a scholarship. Some years later he increased their gift commitment to $100,000, the entry-level of the university's major gift society. I expect that they will make additional gifts in the future. They may reach that million dollars of support one day.

Sometimes we ask prematurely. Sometimes we must because of the nature of where we are in time and because of the needs of our organizations. Let us do so courageously. Let us do so with passion and persuasion and then work with what unfolds with the donors with whom we engage.