

# Administrative Assistant's

UPDATE



PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR CANADA'S OFFICE SUPPORT STAFF

JUNE 2005

## How to respond to assertive fundraisers

### Reader M.B. writes:

*I wonder if you could suggest an appropriate response to organizations asking for donations. In instances when the caller is very assertive and will not take "no" for an answer, I will ask them to fax or e-mail a letter to me. I prefer to respond with a firm and final response, while still showing some empathy. Any suggestions?*

### Dear M.B.,

Many years ago, I worked as a telephone operator for a university fundraising campaign. Let me tell you some secrets. The telephone script that many fundraisers use is *scientifically proven* to get results. The script is tightly worded and often does not allow the responder to say anything but "yes" for the first few minutes. By that time, you are trapped. So I can appreciate how you feel. But having been a caller, I also know how it feels to be on the other end of the line.

### It's always a balance

In this situation, the key is to try your best to balance your personal interests (to get your job done) with the company interests (to be a great company) and the caller's interests (to get something from you). The better we understand each of these interests the better we are so make sure they all get satisfied.

First of all it is important to remind you that listening to the full spiel of every fundraiser is not an option. If you listen to every sales pitch you may temporarily feel better, but you will likely not be able to do the rest of your job. More important, however, is that you are likely also wasting the caller's time. The caller, too, wants to know quickly whether you are someone who is going to give them something. It would be a waste of their time trying to convince someone who has already made up her mind (or may not have the authority) to provide funding.

### Quickly assess their need

Your aim, as with any phone call in business, is to be able to meet the caller's



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needs – and your own needs – as quickly as possible. This means shifting from them asking you questions (which often take a long time) to you asking direct, short questions.

Try this: "Pardon me for interrupting. To ensure that you are speaking to the right person I need to ask you two questions: What organization are you fundraising for? What specifically do you want?"

You need to find out whether they want a million dollars, clothing, old computers or meeting room. You may want to ask other questions such as:

- Have we supported your organization in the past?
- Is your company local, national international?
- How are you related to our company or industry?

The better you can refine these questions, the better you can quickly decide what to do.

### Build a prevention program

The best way to deal with any difficult or awkward situation is through prevention. Prevention means anticipating the event and then doing things to prevent the situation from happening. In this situation I would call this a *fundraiser caller prevention program*.

The best solution is to design, well in advance, an answer that would leave both of you feeling good. Try drafting a few responses on your own and with a colleague. Here is a sample:

"As you can imagine, each year we receive many requests for funding [pause]. So the board of directors decided to select an organization or cause that fit our particular values and direction. The board developed the following criteria for selection [fill in here]. The organization we selected this year is [fill in here]. We do keep a file of possible sponsorship opportunities so feel free to send a one-page description describing how you meet the criteria and I will look at them in [month] next year. Best of luck... it sounds like a great cause."

### When prevention does not work

As a last resort, you may wish to resort to screening your calls. This can mean simply not returning voice messages or having a receptionist stop all calls before they reach you. I do not like this option at all and I say, *use it at your peril*.

Many companies and many individuals do this every day. However, there are serious consequences. You might be successful at keeping one caller away but eventually people will stop calling and start talking to others about you.

Great companies would never consider this as an option since they usually think of every caller as a potential customer or, at least, a person who might say something nice about their dealings with that company.

Always keep in mind when dealing with fundraisers, or any callers for that matter, that they are human, but also keep in mind that they, like you, have a job to do. If you help them do their job, everyone wins. **AAU**

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