

The role fundraisers play or don't - CSI's changing arena

Non-governmental organisations are run and managed by people whose primary concern is the communities they serve. These individuals are driven by the passion to change lives and to address the socio-economic disparities that still continue to plague our society. Unfortunately, for NGOs to do this, they need funds from a variety of sources: individuals, government and donor foundations and agencies. Not so long ago, the process of acquiring funds was not as strenuous and as competitive as it is today.

Vying for a piece of the pie



Sizile Mbaso

Made worse by the current weakening economic crisis which has a correlating increase in the number of people dependent and reliant on the munificence of these NGOs, "funds are in short supply", commented Sizile Mbaso, managing director of SM Business Consultants, a professional organisation dedicated to providing strategic advice and infrastructure for the effective management of socio-economic development (SED) programmes.

"It used to be sufficient for an NGO to put together a generic proposal outlining the purpose of the organisation and plight of communities it serves," continued Mbaso, "but as the sector has matured and more strenuous requirements are put upon donors, the sector has become more competitive."

Importance of a strong case

Donors are no longer happy with the emotional plea from NGOs, but are interested in a strong business case before a grant is made - a business case that delivers to the strategic objectives of the donor. This means that more time needs to be devoted by the NGO in the fundraising process. It also requires a higher level of writing and communication skills that does not naturally reside with most NGOs, especially, those that are not so well established. Increasingly, directors of NGOs find that they spend more time trying to raise funds than on the ground implementing the organisation's activities, resulting in an overall breakdown and degeneration of the original ambit of the organisation and the incremental suffering of those who were dependent on it.

Being an independent professional

Due to financial constraints, most NGOs cannot afford to employ a full time person to perform this function and thus the use of independent fundraisers.

Ideally, a professional fundraiser comes with a huge donor base network. This immediately exposes the work of the NGO to potential funding sources. She/he is ideally experienced and is familiar with the nuances of donors and is therefore better equipped to position the work of the NGO to potential donors. This is an individual who will make it her/his business to understand the core business of the NGO, the nature of the project requiring funding and would identify potential donors whose strategic focus is aligned with the work of the NGO. She/he will make sure that at an appropriate time, during engagement with a donor, a representative of the NGO is introduced to the donor and is able to maintain and nurture the relationship with the donor.

Utilizing the services of a fundraiser thus frees the NGO management to focus more on what they do best - the implementation of projects within communities. The real value to the NGO is dependent on the calibre, level of experience, expertise and depth of

knowledge of the development sector of the fundraiser.

Sales and emotional blackmail

However, over time, we have noted that the level of professional fundraisers has deteriorated with some fundraisers acting purely as sales people. Their idea of putting together a proposal is limited to a vague sales pitch accompanied by an annual report and, mostly but not always, a huge dose of "emotional blackmail". These fundraisers rarely have an in-depth understanding of what the NGO does and how it does it. These are all questions that a matured donor would need answers to. Because they deal with so many NGOs, they are not in a position to provide detailed information on any of their clients.

Avoiding template proposals

During her time as a Fund Manager, Mabaso became so used to certain fundraisers that even if they were submitting a proposal on behalf of a new client, she would immediately, without having read the proposal, know who the fundraiser is - by the font they use.

For a CSI Manager this could be extremely frustrating, especially, since there is no shortage of organisations to support. For an NGO it could cost it the funds and the relationship it desperately needs to sustain its activities.

Finding the right fundraiser

Mabaso's advice to organisations looking to make use of fundraisers, is to first establish their credentials - "check out their references and speak to some of the organisations and donors with whom they have worked in the past."

For those considering a career in fundraising, Mabaso is equally direct "to succeed and deliver sustainable success for your client, ensure you understand the field that they work in, don't work from a template - there is nothing worse than reading the same proposal just with the beneficiary name altered; look to the long term objectives; lose the emotion and most of all be professional!"

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