

Volunteer Driven Fundraising: Lessons from Total Resource Campaigns

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Abstract

An increasing number of Chambers of Commerce depend on Total Resource Campaigns to increase organizational revenue. Total Resource Campaigns (TRCs) are annual volunteer-driven marketing campaigns where chambers sell memberships, marketing, sponsorships, and other services in one package during a designated fundraising period. TRCs rely heavily on personal and team-based incentives to recruit and mobilize volunteers in the fundraising effort. The success of TRCs offers lessons for successful volunteer driven fundraising that can be utilized by other not-for-profits.

Key Words:

fundraising, total resource campaign, chamber of commerce

Total Resource Campaigns (TRCs) are a new model for revenue generation in chambers of commerce. The principles of successful TRCs are generalizable to volunteer administration and fundraising in other not-for-profit organizations. Chambers of commerce are business associations voluntarily formed to represent and advocate for member interests and provide marketing and network opportunities. Chambers are generally incorporated as not-for-profit 501(c)(6) businesses and many contract with local governments or other entities to perform additional functions such as tourism or economic development.

Traditionally, chambers were funded through membership dues, which may be tiered or structured based on member

characteristics such as business sector or number of employees. The reliance on membership dues directly tied the financial health of a chamber to the strength of its membership base. Over time, chambers began to diversify the financial base by relying on non-membership dues in the forms of sponsorships and advertising. While the reliance on non-dues revenue streams improved the financial health of many chambers, it also forced chambers to engage in constant sales of not just memberships, but also sponsorships, advertising, and other related services.

To increase revenue from these sales, some larger chambers engage commissioned sales persons to sell memberships and other services. Yet, many chambers have relatively small staffs and the constant sales

mentality can detract from other duties designed to provide member benefits. Constantly “selling” leaves chambers with less time for membership services, networking, and advocacy, which are among the primary reasons many members joined a chamber. Too much focus on selling new memberships and sponsorships can lead to a revolving door of new members joining at the expense of existing members leaving because of lack of attention and service. On the other hand, focusing too much attention on existing members at the expense of generating new memberships or sponsorships can lead to stagnation and lack of financial resources. Many chambers find their organization challenged to achieve the proper balance of revenue generation and service provision.

To address this dilemma an increasing number of chambers of commerce of all sizes have turned to Total Resource Campaigns (TRCs) to generate a sustainable yearly revenue stream in a short amount of time. TRCs are annual volunteer-driven marketing campaigns where chambers sell memberships, marketing, sponsorships, and other services in one package during a designated time period (Roth, 2005). TRCs have led many chambers to record fundraising levels. The positive record of this volunteer-driven model of fundraising makes TRCs an important tool for other nonprofits to employ in meeting their fundraising needs. Fundraising and membership goals are accomplished in a much shorter timeframe, volunteers are engaged and energized, and a chamber has more time throughout the year to devote to member services. However, there are important lessons from successful TRCs that chambers or other not-for-profits should consider before engaging in a similar campaign.

The first key lesson is volunteer management. TRCs are unique in their

heavy reliance on volunteers for selling/fundraising a considerable share of the organization’s revenue. TRCs succeed or fail primarily on the basis of volunteers. Successful TRCs motivate volunteers by developing incentives for personal and team success and utilize a kick-off event, reporting parties, and victory celebration to keep volunteers informed and motivated (Roth, 2005). Volunteers self-select into teams and enjoy friendly team competition to win a group trip for the best performing team. Individual incentives in the form of random door prizes at reporting parties and monetary or other incentives for the best performing individual are also key motivators. While repeat volunteering is key to the success of an organization and a TRC, the process of engaging donors or members during the campaign can also lead to the recruitment of new volunteers.

The second key lesson is the establishment of ground rules concerning the division of prospective donors. Having multiple volunteer fundraisers solicit the same individual or organization can damage a not-for-profit’s reputation and make the campaign and the not-for-profit appear disorganized. The division of prospective donors/members should occur in a manner that maximizes the organization’s fundraising capacity and engages the most volunteers. Chambers often engage a TRC consultant for a fee to assist in establishing the initial TRC campaign ground rules and infrastructure for success. Consistency among campaigns and the retention of experienced volunteers with tacit campaign knowledge are key components to successfully repeating the TRC without consultant assistance (Roth, 2005).

A third key lesson is buy-in from organizational members, management, and board leadership. While a TRC ultimately saves member, staff, management, and board time by limiting fundraising to a

shorter period, rather than throughout the year, it does demand a considerable commitment of time and resources during the TRC period. All staff and board leadership should be involved in some capacity, even if fundraising is not their primary area of expertise or normal organizational contribution (Roth, 2005).

Chambers have successfully utilized TRCs to meet their revenue needs and increase volunteer commitment and productivity. Following the lessons of successful TRC implementation, other membership-based not-for-profits can reap the same benefits for their organization. The benefits to the organization and enjoyment

provided to volunteers, also suggests that other volunteer administrations in non-membership based organizations may similarly employ team and personal based incentives to entice volunteer participation toward particular fundraising or other goals. TRCs have a track record of success and should be considered among the revenue generating programs not-for-profits utilize.

Reference

Roth, G. (2005). Total resource campaigns: The chamber golden egg? *Chamber Executive*, 6-13.

About the Author

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