

Communicating With Older Citizens

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By Abny Santicola

Citizens 65 years and older do not usually respond to traditional motivational techniques due to differences in their value structure and informational processing as compared to younger people. Understanding these differences, the psychology of aging and older citizens' motivators can increase the probability of closing the gift, explained R. Jay Ribble, chief development officer at the American Red Cross, in his presentation, "Getting to Yes! A Guide to Understanding and Communicating With Our Elder Citizens" at the 2005 National Conference on Planned Giving in Kissimmee, Fla., last month.

Nonprofits looking to receive planned gifts from individuals who have accumulated wealth, phased out of their parental responsibilities and are at the end of their working careers are going to be dealing with people over the age of 60. Ribble recommends four steps to building relationships with older citizens.

1) Be trustful and trusting. This burden falls primarily on the nonprofit, Ribble says. Nonprofits must be honest, sincere, predictable, reliable, purposeful and humble. "We cannot simply use the credibility with which our position as planners endows us. Instead we, as the primary cultivators of the relationship, must perform competently, must establish a consistent and predictable set of behaviors, (and) must communicate openly, accurately (avoiding jargon whenever possible) and transparently," Ribble explained.

2) Jointly determine a common need or problem. The donor/client's perception of the need or problem to be solved should be the focus of an organization's relationship. The donor needs to identify personally and emotionally with the need; otherwise he or she is less likely to make a serious gift. The goal here, Ribble says, is to look for a match between the donor's areas of interest and the organization's need.

3) Jointly determine a real solution to the problem. If the need or problem the donor/client thinks is important matches the institutional needs of the organization, the next step is to negotiate with the donor/client to determine a solution. At this time, bringing in the CEO, president, dean, program director or other authoritative figure is important because the donor has to trust the individual who speaks for the organization.

4) Express the sense of urgency in creating a solution. Build the sense that the project or need is important. "The sense of urgency should come from their perceptions of the project's value and impact on the problem or need that they determined to be most important to them," Ribble said. The sense of urgency has to be built from within the donor/client in which they see the opportunity to give and the impact their funds will have.

Once all four steps are completed, you have a deeper relationship with the donor/client and the ask is simple, Ribble concluded.

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