

Kel Haney's 7 Tips for "Taking the Ick out of the Ask"

(as presented during Spektrix's Philanthropy Series 2022)

Here are seven tips you can start immediately implementing in your fundraising strategy to take the "Ick out of the Ask." These tips explore how to craft your fundraising conversations (and overall fundraising strategies) to be as successful as possible while also connecting your potential donor to your organization with an interaction that is genuine, positive, (and even enjoyable!) for both of you.

1. Focus on the "forest" instead of the "trees"

I encourage fundraisers to always focus on developing a long term relationship with your community members*, as opposed to being focused on a one-time Ask. If you develop a long-term relationship with the community member, their relationship to your organization may ebb and flow through their lifetime: for instance, a person who purchases discount tickets in their 20s and 30s could very likely become a donor in their 40s and 50s. This same person may scale back down to discount ticket buyers in retirement or, depending on their personal circumstances, they may increase their level of giving and possibly include your organization in their estate planning. The key to developing these relationships is creating touch points with your community members (and I encourage using phone conversations as part of this outreach).

**You'll notice that I refer to the individuals with whom your organization engages as 'community members'--your organization may refer to these individuals as audience members, donors, subscribers, or clients. I choose to use the phrase 'community members' because my fundraising consulting focuses on cultivating individual relationships toward a larger goal of community building. Your organization may refer to these individuals as audience members, donors, subscribers, or clients.*

2. Develop a Cadence for your Communication

I think of "touch points" with your organization's community as all forms of communication your organization shares with your community. This includes communication on the broad scale (email blasts, newsletters, social media posts, mass produced mailing campaigns...) and as well as individual, one on one outreach (personal invitations to events, in-person interactions at events, follow-up thank you notes, and individual fundraising asks in person, or on the phone or via email). I suggest you build out a timeline of when these "touch points" will occur throughout the year and how they can complement each other. For instance, during your "End of the Year" fundraiser, you could plan for a e-newsletter blast* to reach your community members near the beginning of November: that e-newsletter could include some of your organization's latest news and/or an 'offering' to your community (examples: a link to a behind the scenes video or an interview with an artist). After your email blast,

you could plan for a letter appeal to reach mailboxes the last week of November, and then you could make a personalized phone call in mid-December. That phone conversation may start something like this: “While we’ve reached out by both email and a letter in the mail, I wanted to reach out personally because we’re wrapping up our End of the Year Fundraiser and we’d love for you to be involved.”

**I suggest you always include a link to donate on any email, even if the correspondence is occurring outside of your traditional ‘fundraising season’ and/or the reason for corresponding is something other than a fundraising solicitation. You never know who in your community wants to give and when they want to donate: always give them the opportunity! Also, make sure your “donate” buttons links are easy to locate and that the system for making a donation is as simple and friction-less as possible.*

3. Curiosity is Key

One fundraising “super-power” is cultivating curiosity—and I believe we are all capable of engaging with audience members from a place of genuine curiosity. I encourage you to use active, open-ended questions to get to know your community members. Here are some examples: *What was their last experience with your organization like? Who joins them at your org’s events? How can your org better support their needs/interests? What led to them engaging with your org in the first place?* The more genuinely curious you are about the community member, the easier, quicker, and more natural the connection between you will be.

4. Keep Meticulous Notes (and make them accessible to the rest of your org!)

Through these one on one interactions, not only will you be relationship building, you’ll also learn details about your community members that you won’t learn any other way. It’s amazing how candid and open individuals can be with each other during one on one interactions! Here are some examples: you work for a theatre company and you learn that the community member is an avid theatre goer and attends shows roughly five times a week; or you work for a dance company and you learn that the community member’s grandmother was a famous dancer. These pieces of information are qualitative research and I suggest that you document these pieces of information in your CRM.

5. Craft Every Interaction into an “Event”*

It’s extremely effective (and fun!) to craft every fundraising interaction into “an event” and I encourage you to share your organization’s given circumstances with the community member. What’s happening at your organization right now that can inspire this community member to get more involved with your organization during this interaction. The obvious example is, if your organization has a virtual/in-person engagement coming up soon, definitely encourage the community member to join! Or, whether your organization is currently starting, in the middle of, or wrapping up a

fundraising campaign, it's helpful to present that moment as an exciting time for the community member to offer support. Also (and I know this may be difficult to believe...), community members love hearing about specific number: feel free to share how much money your organization is hoping to raise on this campaign, how far you are from that goal right now, what's the next milestone you're hoping to reach, etc. The more specific you can be about *why* the community member should donate *right now*, the more effective your Ask will be.

**One great tool to crafting your Ask as an event is a 'Matching' or 'Challenge' Grant. It's a superb way to connect individuals who can give at various price points: when you have a Match/Challenge, you can encourage an audience member to expand their involvement with your organization because their gift will be exponentially impactful.*

6. Determine what feel like a 'Good Stretch' for your Ask

My personal yoga practice has inspired me to encourage the fundraisers I coach to explore what feels like a "good stretch" vs. a "bad stretch." If you, as the fundraiser, feel like you are making an Ask that feels a little (but not too much!) out of the comfort zone of both you and the community member, hopefully you are both staying within the realm of a 'good stretch.' Ideally, in that sweet spot, we are challenging ourselves and our community members, but also avoiding "the ick." In order for you to determine where in the spectrum a 'good stretch' is located, I suggest you look at this community member's history of involvement with your organization and where your organization's current levels of engagement are set.

7. Include your Entire Organization in the Fundraising Conversation

I firmly believe that fundraising affects all aspects of your organization. Developing messaging for your fundraising conversations is an opportunity to look at the overall mission, purpose, messaging and branding of your organization. Fundraising conversations include not just the fundraising department of your organization, but also the marketing, customer service, audience outreach, and your departments. Through the success of our fundraising conversations, we can inspire entire organizations to become more comfortable with community-focused fundraising.

Kel Haney, Senior Consultant at [Donorly](#), is a NYC & Maine-based fundraising expert with 15 years of experience in the field, specializing in Outbound Fundraising. She's consulted with such organizations as MCC Theatre, Signature Theatre, Ensemble Studio Theatre, Manhattan Theatre Club, The O'Neill Theater Center, New York Theatre Workshop, Page 73 Productions, BroadwayUnlocked, The Glimmerglass Festival, American Composers Forum, and RIP Medical Debt. Over her fundraising career, Kel has helped non-profit organizations raise over \$10M, primarily in donations under \$2K. Kel's work boils down to "Taking the Ick out of the Ask" and shifting fundraising conversations from transactional encounters to relationship-building

opportunities. She spent twenty years as a theatre director and her fundraising methodology is based on how she led a rehearsal room: focusing on what makes each of us unique and engaging. www.kelhaney.com

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