

PREPARING FOR A CAPITAL CAMPAIGN ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



There are no shortcuts in development work and donor relations. That is especially true when it comes to capital campaigns.

The hard truth is that many capital campaigns fail. One of the most common pitfalls is not preparing adequately and doing the full due diligence on how donors will receive the proposed project.

Too many churches and organizations rush into a campaign. And it's understandable - there is a desperate need for a new space, program, staff position, a vehicle, a building. But successful campaigns are well planned, and the silent phase is critical. In this article, we'll outline the primary components of the silent phase of a campaign and how to best use this time to ensure your campaign's ultimate success.

What do we mean by a "silent phase"? This period of time is our opportunity to quietly explore the potential campaign project with our donor base. No one yet knows we're officially launching a capital campaign. No one knows what the goal might be or what the timing is. While it's not a congregational secret we're looking at a project or campaign options, this is a quiet time for us to assess our plans, the timing, our donor capacity and our overall project scope.

I see many organizations speed ahead into architectural renderings or project drawings long before they're ready to really define the project scope against their donor capacity. This is not the time to spend lots of time and money on construction estimates and blueprints.



#1

GETTING INPUT

FROM YOUR

KEY DONORS



The first step in the silent phase is to get direct feedback from your key donors. You should be at a point to be able to articulate to them the possible scope of your project and its need.

Schedule individual meetings with your best givers and discuss the project with them, honing in on what the church is trying to accomplish. Your role in these meetings is primarily one of neutral notetaker. How do they feel about the project and the need for it? How important is it? What are their thoughts about any projected timing or costs? How do they think other congregants and givers will respond?

Don't try to "sell" them on the project or correct their thinking as you gather their input. Don't be defensive. Just absorb the feedback and ask more questions. You'll use this information to shape and inform your decision-making and your case for support going forward. Simply listen and gather the input from as many of your loyal and involved givers as you can. If these involved donors have an unclear picture of the need or the project, that will help you better understand the challenges - and opportunities - ahead.

Finally, record and reflect on the feedback from these sessions with your donors in this silent phase. The information will be central to your planning going forward.

#2

DEVELOP YOUR ASK STRATEGY



Use the silent phase and your meetings with individual givers to dive deep into the strategy around your campaign project. You need to be able to clearly define the problem or issue that this campaign project is solving. And, equally importantly, you must be able to articulate what the solution is and how this project embodies that solution. Be as intentional as you can possibly be about what your church's strategy is for solving this particular issue. These steps will help you shape a compelling ask.

In my book, *What Have I Gotten Myself Into*, I share a story about a church embarking on a campaign for an additional parking lot. The attendees at the late service had no problem seeing both the issue and the solution. They'd experienced it too many times! What came as a surprise to the pastor and the church was the lack of understanding and enthusiasm among givers who attended the early service. The church hadn't done its due diligence to talk to ALL members, not just those impacted directly by the problem and the proposed fix.

Be sure to use the silent phase of your campaign to talk with a wide range of givers - those who are directly involved or impacted by the campaign project and those who are not. Those who are not directly affected may give you some of the best input to help you shape your educational strategy for the entire congregation about the project.

In the case of the church that sought to build a new parking lot, it was a matter of showcasing to the early service attendees exactly what the late service goers faced each Sunday. They had to understand the overall impact on the church even though they themselves didn't experience the frustration of no place to park on Sunday mornings.

#3

DOING YOUR RESEARCH



Take full advantage of the quiet phase of your capital campaign to gather as much research, data and input as you can before you launch publicly. This is your chance to silently compile all the information to inform and shape decisions about a campaign's scope and timing.

Churches, like most organizations, are often starting from scratch in terms of expertise on common campaign projects such as construction. Take all the time you need to fully research all of your various options on any proposed project. Visit with experts and ask for trends and data that might impact your scope, your timeline and your costs.

Take a close look at your church's donor trends and also the health of your investments and finances. What questions will your key board members or donors have about the impact of the project on your church's budget or endowment? What are the ongoing costs you might not be anticipating? What kind of community data - or even other city priorities or projects - can help inform your thinking and decisions?

I've often seen organizations and churches get to the end of a campaign and have already outgrown the new space they were adding. More recently, I've seen organizations struggle with costs and timelines due to supply issues. Be careful to plan for delays and contingencies as best you can as you research and lay out the timing and breadth of your campaign. Especially if you will be incurring debt and financing some of your costs, expect that donors will have valid questions about how those loans are structured.

In my book, *Donors Are People Too*, I spend some time outlining some of the most common questions donors have (but usually won't ask) - often, these have to do with how we steward and manage our resources. Be fully prepared not only to answer those questions, but build the answers into your campaign education materials. We should work to anticipate what donors need to know to feel confident getting on board.

#4

DON'T RUSH THE PROCESS



The artist's rendering of our new wing or addition can often feel like the most important - and exciting - part of campaign prep.

While it's tempting to quickly get into visuals and advanced planning, the truth is organizations need to spend significant time on the upfront advance work of preparing for a campaign. Most organizations rush and move far too quickly. We have a desperate need...and we are ready to ask for money to meet it! But slowing down to take our time and plan will help ensure we aren't firing before we aim.

Organizations often carve out three to six months or more for the silent phase. This is the most important advice we can provide churches looking to launch a campaign. The silent phase allows us to quietly explore the potential campaign project with our donor base and assess our plans, the timing, our donor capacity and our overall project scope. This is the time for brainstorming, creative thinking, dreaming and throwing ideas around. Even if your church has made the decision to move forward officially, don't rush it - you will not regret spending some time looking at the project from various angles and exploring all your options.

The research, the donor meetings, and the brainstorming sessions all help you to best discern the appropriateness of the project and how to frame it for your congregation. How will you market and promote the project? What kind of information, support and internal infrastructure do you need? Who all do you need to hear from? What questions do you need to answer?

Don't get paralyzed by the information and stay in the silent phase. Set a clear deadline and know that decisions need to be made by that time (go or no go!). Even a "no go" decision doesn't mean the campaign is dead - it's just an honest assessment that you have work to do before you are ready...and that honesty keeps you from a public campaign that doesn't succeed.

Your deadline should be three or six months out, typically - enough time to discern but not so much that you lose momentum. The more intentional and strategic you are in your research and planning, the more you ensure the best outcome for the church and the campaign.

Move as quickly as you can but don't rush the process - the donor input and relationship building in this phase has benefits far beyond any campaign your church will embark upon. Enjoy this protected time to dream, discuss and decide - with God's grace, guidance and blessing - what the future path looks like.

- Timothy L. Smith



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Let's Talk

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