

Introduction

Put the Fun Back in School FUNdraising

I love to write books, but I'll let you in on a secret: Radio remains my favorite medium. It possesses an enchanting ability to spark the imagination instantly—but only in close collaboration with the listener, who must provide the mental pictures to go with the words and music.

Here's all it takes to make great radio: open minds reaching out to each other across the ether. One of my broadcast heroes, Ken Nordine, opened his long-running public radio show, *Word Jazz*, with a phrase that sums up that interactive entertainment experience wonderfully well: "Stare with your ears."

There's a lot of mindless junk on the air these days, of course, but radio's possibilities remain nearly endless. Array a few creative people around a microphone, and they can conjure entire worlds that captivate thousands of listeners with little or no budget for special effects. Remember, Orson Welles's radio production of *War of the Worlds* created far more of a cultural stir than the blockbuster film version starring Tom Cruise.

A TALE OF TWO PLEDGE DRIVES

How does this tie into school fundraising? Well, most of my broadcast experience lies in public radio. As a result, I've volunteered for plenty of pledge drives over the years. And the two stations with which I'm most familiar couldn't be more different in their approaches to the task. The contrast provides a great lesson for school leaders setting out to raise money for their educational endeavors.

One station assumes that listeners hate pledge drives and operates accordingly. Officials promise to reduce the number of fundraising days if early membership renewals hit a certain level. Many of the prerecorded promotions are humorous and inventive—and the on-air folks make the case for contributing in a professional manner. But the pledge drives always have about them the air of dreary obligation. Announcers regularly apologize for soliciting donations and frame pledge drives as a necessary evil.

The other station takes the opposite approach. Staffers view pledge week as a fun way to connect with listeners and celebrate their connection to the community. Special guests regularly drop in for a chat—in fact, I once scored a pledge-drive interview with public radio’s Dr. Science (he told listeners he would have beaten the late Mr. Wizard in a wrestling match). And the estimated 300 volunteers who take the phone pledges every year get in on the act with an array of silly-sounding noisemakers.

Instead of just offering tried-and-true (and tired) pledge premiums such as mugs and T-shirts, this station asks loyal supporters to donate oddball prizes, including live goats, handmade toys, residential moving services, and “anti-road-rage” lavender sachets. In addition to the 2,000 premiums it averages every year, the station caps off pledge week with Pet Wars, during which listeners call in with donations in honor of their dogs, cats, ferrets—you name it (Szpaller, 2005).

The latter station broadcasts from a smaller city than the former one. But in one week, it raises more money than the other station does in two. It isn’t that one community is naturally inclined to support public radio less than the other, nor are the broadcasters at the pledge-happy station more passionate about their jobs.

It’s just that the more financially successful station sees pledge week as an opportunity—to have fun, to connect, to take a break from the same old, same old—instead of as a chore. The amazing result: listeners in that community actually look forward to the event.

The lesson is simple: if you treat school fundraising as drudgery, the community will agree with you. But if you get excited about FUNdraising and maximize each event’s potential for education, outreach, and plain old good times, the buzz likely will prove infectious—while participation levels and receipts soar to new heights.

We've seen a backlash in recent years against the old-fashioned product sales that force parents to twist arms at the office until colleagues buy items they don't want or need in hopes that others will return the favor when their children's fundraisers roll around. Of course, some school sales drives remain welcome traditions in their communities—and more power to those exceptional exceptions, I say.

But where that backlash exists, it isn't against schools or even fundraisers. Some communities, shell-shocked by a never-ending stream of sales, have adopted an annual cash-contribution model instead. This shows that participating school families are still willing to support education; they just don't want to be harassed in the process.

Wouldn't it be better, though, if schools entertained and delighted those communities with their fundraisers instead of trading annoying sales for obligatory pledges?

There's a lot of goodwill out there for schools, and they still have an important cultural-enrichment role to play in their communities. Please keep those heartening facts in mind as you peruse the following pages for fundraising ideas everyone can get excited about.

A FUNDRAISING MANIFESTO

Your event just might be a FUNdraiser if it does one or more of the following:

- ⑤ Offers an experience so compelling people would show up even if it wasn't in support of a good cause.
- ⑤ Enhances the cultural life of the overall community.
- ⑤ Provides a service that's both needed and desired.
- ⑤ Improves the school experience of student participants.
- ⑤ Leaves attendees with a smile and a good memory.
- ⑤ Puts a creative twist on a classic fundraising idea.
- ⑤ Showcases the school community's distinctive talents.
- ⑤ Clearly explains to donors where their money will go.
- ⑤ Generates enthusiastic local media coverage.
- ⑤ Becomes a popular (and lucrative) annual happening.

- ⑤ Helps school families spend more enjoyable time together instead of burdening them with dreaded sales chores.
- ⑤ Raises the school's positive profile among people not directly tied to the institution, thus expanding its base of support.
- ⑤ Taps into the increasing number of Web funding sources for pain-free program support.