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3 Ingredients of an Effective PAC Fundraising Appeal

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Summary: Raising money for your political action committee is all about the story you tell your potential donors. Don't focus on dollars. Instead, show donors what they stand to gain by supporting the cause—or what they may lose if they stay on the sidelines.

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When associations—and the experts who advise them—talk about how to enhance fundraising efforts for their political action committees, they usually stick to talking about benchmarks. And that's a mistake, says government relations consultant Amy Showalter.

Specifically, Showalter, owner of the Showalter Group, Inc., says those discussions often center on simplistic advice like "An association with a \$10 million budget should have a \$1 million PAC."

While a benchmark can be useful, "it doesn't really tell you how to get there," Showalter says. "It doesn't tell you how to be successful." The better alternative is to focus on the messages at the heart of your fundraising appeals.

The good news is that "associations are great at leveraging the external legislative context for PAC fundraising," she says. "They look at what's going on in the legislature and say, 'Hey, let's raise money based on that.'"

The bad news? Associations typically aren't disciplined about testing whether their messages will resonate with potential donors. Only 6 percent of the associations that responded to a Showalter Group survey said they spend time on message testing before they send out PAC appeals.

Messages That Move

If more associations conducted message testing, they'd likely learn that three types of PAC messages are most successful in generating PAC donations, according to Showalter.

Loss framing. This type of appeal focuses on what could be lost if people fail to contribute to your PAC. It points out the negative consequences that could arise if, say, a lawmaker who has been a longtime friend of your association or industry isn't reelected. Associations that use this messaging tactic "go to the dark side a little bit," Showalter says. "Or a lot, actually."

Why do loss-framed fundraising appeals do a better job of hitting their mark than gain-framed ones? Because "we're more averse to loss. We notice it more. It carries more emotional weight with us," Showalter says. "It's no coincidence that three of the top grassroots organizations in the country—AARP, the National Rifle Association, and the National Association of Realtors—lobby on several issues, but their primary driver is loss."

The losses these associations point to "are real. They're not making them up," Showalter notes. If the loss that will serve as your appeal's backbone "is real and authentic and truly will hurt your members, let them know about it."

What's in it for me? This appeal zeroes in on the specific ways that individuals can benefit from contributing to your association's PAC. "Many groups lead with the 'what's in it for me?' method. Why? Because they think that is what their audience wants," Showalter says. She dismisses this approach as "off base," citing research showing that these messages are less effective than those warning of potential losses.

But if there's no risk of legitimate loss, this type of message is a good alternative, Showalter says. "And many times, that is the situation: There is no risk of loss."

Unity. Unity messages make a broader appeal to potential donors' sense of community. They try to get donors to see that "we're all in this together, or we're all on the same team," Showalter says.

But there's more to unity messages than "it's us against them." For these appeals to hit their mark, she says, they need to include a profile of the opponent—usually one or more legislative nemeses—that frequently attacks your industry or your cause.

Don't Do This

Whatever you do, don't assault potential donors with appeals about the money your PAC needs to spend. Don't say, "Campaigns are expensive. That's why we need you to contribute to the ABC Association PAC."

That kind of message "has nothing to do with the contributor's situation or state of mind," Showalter says. "It's not their fault that campaigns are expensive."

Instead, tell donors how their contributions will help achieve a specific outcome. Showalter's example: "We need your PAC contribution because there are 10 members of Congress who are our issue champions. All are in close races. If they lose, we lose our voice on Capitol Hill."

Specific appeals are powerful. "Stop saying 'many legislators' or 'many decisions impact our operations,'" she says. "It's trite and vague. Specificity confers credibility."

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