

Fundraising in Rural and Suburban Communities

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There is an assumption in the nonprofit sector that fundraising in urban areas and big cities is easier than fundraising in rural and suburban areas. There is some truth to this. A higher percentage of corporate and foundation support flows to urban centers than rural/suburban, and urban communities tend to have higher concentrations of wealthy individuals. Residents of major cities are more likely to have had experience with large-scale fundraising and capital campaigns, as well as personal experience with making a significant stretch gift or pledge.

No matter where you live or where your organization is based, one tenet holds true: it's all about relationships and values. People give to people they know and to organizations that address the values and issues they care about. The key to increased fundraising is to activate social networks, highlight the good work your organization is doing, and get to know what is important to your prospects.

The Collins Group works in communities large and small across five states and one question we frequently hear is “How do we secure support in our rural or suburban/non-urban setting?”

What follows are our thoughts on key issues facing fundraising for these particular communities—those suburbs and medium-size cities removed from urban centers—as well as top strategies for maximizing support.

Community Characteristics

Rural communities

- Social networks are highly interwoven and overlapping. Generations have lived here and people share multiple points of connection and spheres of influence.
- Social knowledge is extensive. There is deep understanding about personal history, capacity, and willingness to give.
- News travels fast, even across wide geographic regions.
- Residents are expected to support every nonprofit or cause.
- Rural residents place a high premium on both loyalty and privacy and are reluctant to publicly share information about others.

At the same time, rural areas face two unique situations:

- 1) Many lose population and support as younger generations relocate to seek education, jobs, and opportunities in urban areas. As individuals move permanently away, the transfer of wealth from one generation to the next can jeopardize future support for the community.
- 2) Some rural communities attract sizeable populations of part-time residents drawn by seasonal activities or lifestyle factors. These part-time residents have few of the natural social, business, or family connections to the community that stimulate philanthropic giving, although many bring considerable capacity to give.

Suburban/non-urban communities

- Attract individuals and families who are seeking ready access to the outdoors, affordable housing, better schools, etc., while offering proximity to specific industries or jobs.
- Often have high numbers of people who have moved to the community, rather than having grown up in it.
- Are home to individuals who work elsewhere and whose volunteer time and focus may necessarily be directed to those communities
- Social networks are focused primarily on children's, church, and ethnic activities; residents have limited business or kinship connections.
- With fewer multi-generational and social ties, residents of these communities have less knowledge of one another and fewer natural points of connection and interaction.

Non-urban communities in the west are also increasingly magnets for two important populations:

- 1) **Wealthy individuals.** Non-urban communities offer the wealthy anonymity and a way to opt out of the philanthropic activity, social activity, and visibility of large urban centers. Like part-time residents in rural areas, these individuals tend to have few social or family connections to the area, and participate less in the social life of the community.
- 2) **Immigrants.** Ready access to affordable housing for extended families, public transportation, and an established base of other immigrants attract those newly arrived from outside the United States to non-urban areas. These populations bring with them their own cultural and social expectations about philanthropy that often prioritize giving to support the needs of the immigrant community.

Strategies

Because the goal is to understand prospects' values and utilize the connections between people, fundraising strategies that focus on and activate these become very powerful tools. Keep the following tips in mind.

Rural Communities

- **Honor and respect the need for privacy** while capitalizing on the depth of knowledge and interconnectedness of rural life. Rather than holding group meetings to discuss and qualify prospects, meet one-on-one with knowledgeable individuals who are willing to provide confidential feedback and perspective.
- **Understand the need for longer timelines** and plan your fundraising deadlines accordingly. People may be busy or unavailable seasonally, spread out over hundreds of miles, or unable to travel easily at certain times of the year. Expect to have multiple meetings with each prospect. Use initial meetings simply to seek advice, guidance, and feedback.
- **Recognize that part-time residents have fewer connections** to the social life of your community and thus fewer reasons to support your nonprofit. Organizations that directly

benefit part-timers—hospitals, museums, and land conservation organizations—are more likely to attract them as board members and donors.

- **Educate the community about the importance of providing for future needs** in the face of shrinking populations. For those elderly residents whose children have left the area, position your organization as an additional “child” whose interests should be considered in estate planning.

Non-urban Communities

- **Host house parties to entice wealthy and part-time residents.** The draw is typically the opportunity to see someone’s home and/or socialize with the hosts. House parties can be effective if structured carefully—not as fundraisers but as friendraisers. They allow your closest supporters to activate their networks in a low-risk and fun way.
- **Focus on young families and existing networks** based on connections formed through school, church, and kids’ activities. Find ways to involve parents and even the whole family in time-limited fashion. The goal is to spark and keep their interest so as income and means grow and more time is available, these families will think of you.
- **Build community pride.** Find those unique facts about your organization and use them in your key communications. Are you the only hospital with a heart cath lab or emergency room within 100 miles? Is your food bank the only one serving four counties? Is anyone else making sure that the kids in your community have access to free after-school programs? What awards have you won for the work you do? Give non-urban residents something to brag about at their next cocktail party.

Strategies for Rural and Non-urban Communities

- **Personalize direct mail.** No one likes to receive “Dear Friend” letters and with mail merge programs, there is no reason to send them. The more you personalize an appeal, the better the response. Always address letters with a personal salutation (Dear Mr. and Mrs. Smith). Segment your list, pull out letters to those who are or could be major donors, and have a board member or someone at your organization who knows them write a personal note on the letter: “It was great to see you at the golf course last week and to hear how Josh is doing at college. I want you to know I’ve been involved with this organization for years, and I hope you will join me in making a gift so we can continue to make sure no one goes hungry in our community this year.”
- **Provide multiple social opportunities**—with no fundraising involved—to engage people with your mission. Give people an excuse to meet and mingle, to gather in town at your organization or at the home of a prominent citizen. Low risk and fun ready-made social activities introduce people to your organization and give you the opportunity to interact with them in a social setting.

- **Identify a diversity of supporters** and focus on those with a natural affinity for and connection to your mission. Nonprofits tend to look primarily to business support, despite the fact that corporate giving represents only just over four percent of the dollars given annually in this country. Instead, list all the key groups in your community that you wish to connect with, and then develop strategies and activities designed specifically to bring them closer.

Offer an event that gives grandparents something to do with visiting grandchildren. If working parents are a key constituency, schedule events for the latter part of the workday to give them a legitimate excuse to leave the office early and socialize without children in tow. Trying to attract new and younger leadership? Look for time-limited volunteer opportunities for them—one-time initiatives or event staffing are often more in line with their lives and schedules.

- **Capitalize on seasonal opportunities.** Part-time rural and non-urban residents arrive just in time for summer or winter activities. Suburban residents with children are typically busiest at the beginning and end of the school years and in August. Make sure your strategies and offerings coincide with local seasonal rhythms.
- **Partner with others to increase exposure and support.** Could the library offer a free pass to your museum that could be checked out just like a book? Can you send a nurse with the book mobile to offer well-child visits or convey health information in remote locations? Would having a student from the local two- or four-year college on your board bring greater interest from other students—and possibly a gift from the associated student body group?
- **Form advisory councils or cabinets** to attract wealthy full-time and part-time residents with significant business and philanthropic experience. Make membership in this group both prestigious, exclusive, and time limited to appeal to those who have valuable experience, but little desire to participate fully in community life. Meet only quarterly and use this group's time to help you solve problems or provide input on specific issues. If you structure these meetings as agency presentations, attendance will dwindle rapidly.

In the best of worlds, nonprofits in every community would be fully supported and the need to raise funds would be obsolete. Until that day arrives, stay focused on your donors and prospects. If you connect with them, understand their values, and show how your organization naturally intersects with them, you will gain support for years to come no matter where you are located.