Fundraising Metrics are the Worst!
(And How to Fix Them)

Professor Russell James III, JD, Ph.D., CFP®

Fightin' words

Want to start a fight in a fundraising comment section? That's easy. Start talking metrics. Opinions are often passionate. And they often conflict. One explains why 26 metrics are "essential."[1] Another writes,

> "Fundraisers need to focus MORE on creating memories and moments with their donors … and LESS about hitting those wacky metrics or year-end goals."[2]

Another questions,

> "If philanthropy is all about relationships, then why do metrics only measure money?"[3]

So, what's the answer? Is it "all about the Benjamins?" Or is it "all about the love?"

Can't we all just get along?

Consider for a moment another alternative. What if both sides were correct? They disagree. Strongly. But maybe the problem is this: Maybe they're talking about *different* things.

Yes, they're all talking about fundraising. But fundraising isn't one thing. It's different things. It's different things with different – sometimes opposite – rules.

A business explanation

Fundraising is like a business that sells toothpicks AND aircraft carriers – *at the same time.* Would you like to buy a new wing for your local hospital? How about a mosquito net? Maybe a chicken or a heifer? Or a perhaps name a world-class engineering school? It's all fundraising.

Here's the problem. Even in the business world, small sales and large sales aren't the same. Small sales are about quick, superficial transactions. Large sales require longer, deeper, more consultative relationships.[4] The field of large sales is called Key or Strategic Account Management. These big-ticket processes are different than traditional small-ticket sales.

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[1] DonorSearch. (2015, October 13). *Nonprofit fundraising metrics: 26 essential KPIs to track.* [Website]. DonorSearch https://www.donorsearch.net/nonprofit-fundraising-metrics/

[2] Provenzano, S. (2021, February). [LinkedIn post]. https://www.linkedin.com/posts/samprovenzano_fundraising-repost-philanthropy-activity-6767134914912538624-zLy1

[3] Hodge, J. (2012). *If philanthropy is all about relationships, then why do metrics only measure money?* [Paper presentation]. https://scholarworks.iupui.edu/handle/1805/6058

[4] *See* Rackham, N. (1988). *SPIN selling.* McGraw-Hill. *See also,* Lacoste, S. (2018). From selling to managing strategic customers – a competency analysis. *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management, 38*(1), 92-122. ("… consultative-selling skills ('offering their advice to help customers solve their problems,' according to Agnihotri, Rapp and Trainor (2009, 474)) should be considered a prerequisite for creativity and intrapreneurial abilities, defined as "involving the sales professional as a valued

One researcher states bluntly,

> "The objectives of salespeople are the opposite of the objectives of Strategic Account Managers."[5]

In fact, moving between these two jobs can be difficult. He explains,

> "Salespeople who remain strictly focused on sales instead of customers (i.e., seeking to close short-term deals or working only to reach their monthly targets or their quota) might show a propensity to fail as future Strategic Account Managers …. If they have a short-term selling approach, then they most likely should not attempt to transition to Strategic Account Management."[6]

This isn't just an individual conflict. It can be an organizational conflict. Not all sales organizations can succeed in the world of *big-ticket* sales. One study looked at why.[7] Failure in big-ticket Strategic Account Management often came from the following:

- "Failure to differentiate between, 'The opposing philosophies of traditional sales and account management.'
- Focusing on short-term financial numbers rather than customer need and value creation.
- Senior management resists giving influence or control to customers."

Now, replace the word "customer" with the word "donor." Voila! We've got the fundraiser metrics fight.[8] Traditional sales isn't wrong. Strategic Account Management isn't either. They're just designed to succeed at two *opposite* ends of the market.

A storytelling explanation

The "one big thing" in fundraising is always the same: Advance the donor's hero story. So, let's talk storytelling. Suppose instead of managing fundraisers, we were managing writers.

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advisor and viewing him as an industry expert" by Liu and Leach (2001, 147) … Thus, salespeople with advanced consultative selling skills might consider moving to a Strategic Account Management position.")

[5] Lacoste, S. (2018). From selling to managing strategic customers-a competency analysis. *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management, 38*(1), 92-122.

[6] *Id.*

[7] Wilson, K., & Woodburn, D. (2014). The impact of organisational context on the failure of key and strategic account management programmes. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing, 29*(5), 353-363.

[8] The parallels go further. Much of what works in major donor fundraising is replicated in best practices in Key/Strategic Account Management. For example, one study defined successful Strategic Account Management programs using the following scale. (Replace "strategic accounts" with "major donors" and these are also ideal practices for major gifts fundraising success.)

> "1. We always review the results of our solution with strategic accounts.
> 2. When we lose a strategic account, we always know the reasons why.
> 3. We jointly set long-term objectives with our strategic accounts.
> 4. We have relationships and dialog at the highest executive levels with all our strategic accounts.
> 5. We regularly engage our strategic accounts in our product/service planning process.
> 6. Our salespeople are definitely effective at producing year-over-year revenue growth from existing customers.
> 7. Specific criteria have been established to define a strategic account in our company."

Sullivan, U. Y., Peterson, R. M., & Krishnan, V. (2012). Value creation and firm sales performance: The mediating roles of strategic account management and relationship perception. *Industrial Marketing Management, 41*(1), 166-173. p. 172.

First, suppose we're managing a group of novel writers. Does it make sense to manage their daily work based upon their daily sales? What about weekly? Quarterly? Of course not. That would be silly.

Writing a novel takes a long time. The money comes in much, much later. Yes, we'll eventually see who sells and who doesn't. Sales are still important. But they aren't helpful as a short-term metric to guide behavior.

Now, suppose we're managing a group of social media "influencers." They write Twitter posts. Does it make sense to manage their daily work based upon their daily views? Weekly? Quarterly? Yes, that makes perfect sense. We can quickly compare posts that work with those that don't. We can coach, track, celebrate success, and identify failure.

But here's the problem. The social media manager then shares the best metrics for managing "writers" and their "output." He puts out rules for managing with daily, weekly, and quarterly data. He describes the most effective "writing." It's about making extreme, provocative, crisis statements. And he's right.

The manager of novel writers reads this. He responds, "This is nonsense. That's not what works in writing! You can't manage writers that way." And he's right, too.

Each manager holds opposite views on how to manage writers. And they're both correct. How? Because "writing" isn't just one thing. Like "fundraising," one word describes different things. They're both right because they're talking about *different* things.

Basic realities for metrics

I've argued for peace and understanding. Now, let me join the fight. In fundraising, the *important* issue is managing for *large* gifts. Why?

First, this is true because small gift metrics are easy. Results are quick. If you constantly A-B test, you'll eventually get there. You probably don't even need academic theory (or a professor like me). Darwin will figure it out for you.

Second, this is true because small gifts don't matter that much. Fundraising doesn't live in an 80/20 world. It's more like an 80/3 world. An analysis of 3,576 charities found, "76% of gifts come from 3% of donors."[9] Less than one fourth of the money comes from donations under $5,000.[10] For legacy gifts, it's even more extreme. Most charitable dollars come from 0.1% of decedents.[11]

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[9] Levis, Bill (February 5, 2015). *The 80/20 Rule is alive and well in fundraising.* Association of Fundraising Professionals. http://afpfep.org/blog/8020-rule-alive-well-fundraising/

[10] Amperage Fundraising. (n.d.). *The new 80/20 rule for fundraising.* (referencing Fundraising Effectiveness Project Data). https://www.amperagefundraising.com/new-80-20-rule-fundraising/

[11] "in 2017, when only 2,902 estates with charitable transfers filed estate tax returns, these estates still produced the majority (59%) of all bequest dollars transferred to charity in the country." James III, R. N. (2020). American charitable bequest transfers across the centuries: Empirical findings and implications for policy and practice. *Estate Planning & Community Property Law Journal, 12*, 235-285. p. 250. *Also see,* a total of 2,813,503 decedents in 2017 at https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/databriefs/db328-h.pdf

So, I'm not going to disagree with small-gift metrics. I'm going to disagree with applying them to large-gift fundraising. I'm not trying to start a fight. I'm just trying answer a different question.

So, what's the answer? To get there, it's important to start with two facts:

1. Metrics can hurt.
2. Metrics can help, but only a little.

Metrics can hurt fundraising

I'm a data guy. I love numbers. In analysis, more data is better. But in managing people, the opposite can be true. So, the first goal of fundraising metrics isn't,

"Measure everything!"

It's not even,

"Measure all the important things!"

Instead, it's,

"First, do no harm."

Analytic types – like me – can sometimes miss this danger. How serious is it? Consider this. One study found,

> "over 42% of fundraisers view their metrics as detrimental at worst or ineffective at best in reflecting important behaviors."[12]

Retaining good fundraisers is a challenge. Bad metrics can make it harder. Fundraisers dissatisfied with their jobs often cite unrealistic expectations.[13] This is a problem for the bottom line. Fundraisers are expensive to replace. And they usually don't become highly productive until about their fourth year at a charity.[14]

Using lots of metrics isn't leadership. It isn't management. And it can be harmful. One study looked at 24 fundraising/marketing metrics at 210 large charities.[15] Which charities used the most metrics? Those with the greatest "top management demands for accountability" of fundraising. They were also the *poorest* financial performers.

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[12] Megli, C. D., Barber, A. P. & Hunte, J. L. (2014, December). *Optimizing fundraiser performance.* Bentz, Whaley, Flessner. http://www.bwf.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/December2014.pdf

[13] *Id.*

[14] "Fundraisers who jump around hurt their careers and limit their potential to raise money (production jumps at 3.4 to 4 years of tenure, according to BWF data)." Megli, C. D. (2016, January 1). *Outlook: Producing high performers.* CASE. https://www.case.org/resources/outlook-producing-high-performers

[15] Bennett, R. (2007). The use of marketing metrics by British fundraising charities: A survey of current practice. *Journal of Marketing Management, 23*(9-10), 959-989.

When metrics reflect a top-down distrust of fundraisers, they don't help.[16] Even in good organizations, less can be more. One study found,

> "gift officers that were more focused on fewer metrics … outperformed those professionals with equally weighted or mixed measurement models. In short, focusing on fewer but essential metrics results in increased productivity across a wide range of activities."[17]

Short-term metrics can hurt in business

Large sales result from long-term processes. Short-term financial metrics can undercut these. One study examined failed Key Account Management programs. Reasons for failure included the following:

- "If the end of quarter results are the main objective, Key Account Management never works
- Focus on numbers rather than customer need
- Short-termism: 'Reconciling 36-month Key Account Management objectives with 12-month compensation plans usually frustrates most organizations'
- Focus on [immediate] sales and revenue makes the program focus short-term and leads to failure"[18]

Another study explained simply, "because of the relational nature of their jobs, Strategic Account Managers are not measured using short-term indicators."[19]

The relationships are not about short-term transactions. They're about creating long-term value. Other business researchers explain,

> "This investment in relationships with the company's most strategic customers will only pay off if … the Key Account manager works with a mindset that allows value creation for both his own employer and the Key Account."[20]

Short-term metrics can hurt in fundraising

What about fundraising? One study examined the practices of the highest-growth fundraising organizations. The findings were similar to those from Key Account Management research in business. These high-growth metrics focused on the long term. They encouraged *behaviors* that created long-term *value* for the donor. The researchers explained,

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[16] Which charities in the study were most likely to have sound financial performance? Those that had actually invested the most in fundraising/marketing. *See, Id.*

[17] Grabau, T. W. (2010, July). *Major gift metrics that matter.* https://www.bwf.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/00090978.pdf

[18] Wilson, K., & Woodburn, D. (2014). The impact of organisational context on the failure of key and strategic account management programmes. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing, 29*(5), 353-363.

[19] Lacoste, S. (2018). From selling to managing strategic customers – a competency analysis. *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management, 38*(1), 92-122.

[20] Peters, L., Ivens, B. S., & Pardo, C. (2020). Identification as a challenge in key account management: Conceptual foundations and a qualitative study. *Industrial Marketing Management, 90*, 300-313.

> "our outstanding leaders aligned their organizational metrics with the longer-term drivers of donor value. There was less concern with metrics such as response rates and immediate return on investment. They focused instead on the standards and behaviors they knew would add value for supporters and thus build donor lifetime value. Their appraisal and reward systems were similarly aligned, to focus team-member ambitions on the things that mattered most to longer-term growth."[21]

A short-term, transactional focus hurts large-ticket sales in business. But it may be even more harmful in fundraising. In anthropology, giving is not based upon the transactional "exchange" economy. Instead, it originates from the relationship-based "gift" economy.[22]

This social/sharing world has different rules. Focusing on short-term or immediate payback violates those rules. Whenever a relationship becomes "strictly contingent" or transactional, giving stops. This is true across human cultures. One anthropologist writes,

> "Ethnographers studying people as diverse as foragers (Mauss, [1923]) and Irish smallholders (Arensberg, 1959) have long noted that attempts to [strictly] balance exchanges are tantamount to ending … relationships."[23]

Short-term, transactional behavior signals the absence of a sharing or helping relationship. This kills generosity. Sadly, in many charities this "signal" is accurate. One study examined charity leadership views of seven fundraising metrics.[24] The *least* useful for justifying a budget increase from leadership was this:

> "Predicted improvements in donors' feelings of satisfaction with or commitment to the organization."

Most fundraising managers felt this wasn't even "slightly important" to leadership. The problem wasn't just *failing* to add value for donors. The problem was not even *trying* to do so. This goal wasn't even there to start with. The charities' leadership simply didn't care.[25]

Good metrics start with good goals

Not caring about the donor's experience isn't a numbers problem. It's not a problem of what we're measuring. It's a problem of who we're being. It's a story-character problem.

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[21] Sargeant, A., & Shang, J. (2016). Outstanding fundraising practice: How do nonprofits substantively increase their income? *International Journal of Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Marketing, 21*(1), 43-56.

[22] For the original formulation of this idea, *see* Mauss, M. (1923). Essai sur le don forme et raison de l'échange dans les sociétés archaïques. *L'Année Sociologique*, 30-186. (A recent English translation is Mauss, M. (2002). *The gift: The form and reason for exchange in archaic societies.* Routledge.)

[23] Hames, R. (2017). Reciprocal altruism in Yanomamö food exchange. In L. Cronk, N. Chagnon, & W. Irons (Eds.), *Adaptation and human behavior: An anthropological perspective* (pp. 397-416). Routledge. p. 411.
Citing to Arensberg, C. M. (1959). *The Irish countryman: An anthropological study*. P. Smith; Mauss, M. (1967). Essai sure le don. *The gift: Forms and functions of exchange in archaic societies*. Norton. (A translation of the 1923 essay).

[24] Bennett, R. (2007). The use of marketing metrics by British fundraising charities: a survey of current practice. *Journal of Marketing Management, 23*(9-10), 959-989.

[25] It appears that charities care less about donors than businesses care about customers. This study noted, "A conspicuous difference between the findings of the present study and those of at least one investigation completed in the business sector … is that metrics concerning market share and (donor) loyalty, retention and satisfaction were rarely presented to top management [at charities]." Bennett, R. (2007). The use of marketing metrics by British fundraising charities: a survey of current practice. *Journal of Marketing Management, 23*(9-10), 959-989. p. 980.

Metrics that lead in the wrong direction don't help. What's the right direction? In business, it's about creating value for the high-capacity customer. In fundraising, it's about creating value for the high-capacity donor.

Effective fundraising can deliver real value to donors. It can deliver an enhanced identity. This can be private meaning, public reputation, or both. How? It starts with story. The universal hero story is an identity-enhancement journey.[26] Advancing the donor's hero story can deliver big value. How can the fundraiser do this? By playing an archetypal role: the hero's "guiding sage." The guiding-sage fundraiser advances the donor's hero story.

If you don't buy all that story mumbo-jumbo, let me translate. In "business" words, the goal is this:

1. Create and promote personally meaningful philanthropic investments *(i.e., advance the donor's hero story)*
2. by building consultative relationships with donors of capacity *(i.e., by being the donor hero's guiding sage).*

If we've got the wrong goal, metrics won't help. They'll just get us to the wrong place even faster. But with the right goal, metrics can sometimes help.

Good metrics gone bad: Money raised

There are all types of fundraising metrics. But every charity uses this one: Money raised. It's an important metric. It can be helpful. But it's often used wrong. And then, it becomes destructive. This good metric can go bad.

In driving a car, fuel efficiency (miles per gallon [MPG]) is a good metric. If it drops unexpectedly, something is wrong. It might be your spark plugs, motor oil, fuel, fuel injector, air filter, or tire pressure. It might be the way you're driving.

Suppose your job is driving a car. In the back seat is your manager. The car displays instantaneous MPG. You go up a hill. MPG drops. The manager complains. You go down a hill. The manager is elated. You accelerate for an on ramp. The manager screams, "Look at these numbers! This is awful!" You hit snow or rugged terrain. The manager threatens your job.

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[26] This universal story, called the monomyth, includes specific steps. At the end, the main character returns as an honored and victorious hero bringing a boon to the original world. In the story, the hero,

1. Begins in the ordinary world
2. Is faced with a challenge (the call to adventure)
3. Rejects then accepts the call and enters the new world
4. Undergoes ordeals and overcomes an enemy
5. Gains a reward or transformation
6. Returns to the place of beginning with a gift to improve that world

This hero story progresses through
Original Identity [1] → Challenge [2, 3, 4] → Victory [4, 5] → Enhanced Identity [5, 6]

How soon would this get frustrating? Yes, a driver can influence this metric, but only a little. Mostly it's controlled by the environment. Managing people based on metrics they can't control is a recipe for frustration.

The problem isn't the metric. The problem is the way it's being used. Tracking money raised is similar. It's good as a long-term diagnostic. It can act as a "warning" light. But it's bad as a short-term "dashboard" metric to drive with.

Any new driver can show good short-term results in MPG. Just coast. Until the car stops, MPG will be great! But that's not good – or sustainable – driving behavior.

Any new fundraiser can show good short-term results in money raised. Ask early! Ask often! Don't ask too big! Just get to the "Yes," right now! This quarter will look good. But this "coasts" on previous relationship building. It's not good – or sustainable – fundraising behavior.

Fixing bad money metrics

So, what are the alternatives? First, focus on the long-term. If you want to focus on money, fine. But focus on *lifetime* donor value, not just next quarter.

I once received a call from a newly hired legacy giving manager at a major health-related charity. He was trying to figure out why their estate gift income had been dropping for nearly a decade. It had fallen consistently, losing tens of millions of dollars year-over-year.

He thought maybe it was demographics. No, I assured him, that wasn't the problem. Then he thought perhaps it was competition. No, I argued, most people have never heard of your competition.

Finally, he recalled another change. About eight years before, a new development director had arrived. The immediate return-on-investment (ROI) analytics showed mailing to older donors wasn't paying off. So, they quit mailing. The next quarter probably looked good. But the short-term metrics crushed their long-term results. Using *lifetime* donor value could have prevented this disaster.

Second, consider an alternate approach. Focus on fundraiser *actions*. The fundraiser can better control these. One study examined 270 university fundraisers. It found that,

> "Major Gift Officers with solicitation goals, rather than dollar goals, have better activity with prospects and hit dollar goals anyway."[27]

Metrics can help. They can encourage doing the *hard* stuff. In any job, some tasks are easy or urgent, but not that important. Others are important, but they're hard and not urgent. Metrics, when focused on the hard stuff, can help. They can nudge behavior in the right direction.

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[27] Birkholz, J. & Hunte, J. (2014, October 30). *The secrets of high-performing, long-tenured gift officers.* [PowerPoint slides]. Bentz Whaley Flessner https://store.case.org/PersonifyEbusiness/Store/Product-Details/productId/165848717

Using metrics in the right way

What works in managing business sales? One study took an in-depth look. The answer with this:

> "When asked to describe specific sales leader behaviors that best enable salesperson performance, sales professionals – both sales leaders and salespeople – overwhelmingly referenced coaching …"[28]

My daughters ran cross-country in high school. Once, the coach brought his four-year old son to practice. Wanting to help, the boy yelled, "Run faster!" It was cute. But it wasn't coaching. Yelling, "Sell more!" or "Raise more dollars!" is just as unhelpful.

In coaching, metrics can be a useful tool. They can help the coach diagnose areas for investigation. This can lead to improvements. These come from training, shadowing, guiding, and practice.

The highest growth fundraising organizations did use metrics. They measured outcomes. But they used these metrics in a special way. A bad number wasn't a tragedy. It was an opportunity for *learning*. The researchers found,

> "Failure was redefined as the failure to learn from experience if something did not work out as anticipated, rather than the failure of a particular strategy or individual per se … The achievement of this organizational learning culture seemed to us to be absolutely critical in delivering outstanding fundraising."

Metrics don't have to be a top-down tool for punishment. They can even be a bottom-up tool for learning. The most powerful metrics can be those the fundraisers themselves choose, revise, and recommend to leadership.[29] Metrics can be part of an empowered, participatory, learning culture.

Metrics aren't perfect

Can metrics help? Yes. A little. Metrics can encourage the right behavior. They can serve as a "check-engine" light. But every metric can be gamed. Every one. Pick your favorite.

Do you like "money raised?" Gifts are lumpy. Getting a big one means you should stop asking until the next reporting period. A great year means you should change jobs. Who wants to compete against that baseline? The real secret to success? It's "owning" the right donors. Get assigned to the right list and get territorial! Hard selling donors is bad long-term. But it sure makes the numbers look good right now!

Maybe you prefer "number of asks?" Just asking a lot is quick. Doing it well requires a longer process.

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[28] Peesker, K. M., Ryals, L. J., Rich, G. A., & Boehnke, S. E. (2019). A qualitative study of leader behaviors perceived to enable salesperson performance. *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management, 39*(4), 319-333.

[29] EAB. (n.d.). *What are the right metrics to measure major gift officer performance?* [Website]. https://eab.com/insights/expert-insight/advancement/what-are-the-right-metrics-to-measure-mgo-performance/

What about "number (or share) of gifts closed?" Make sure to ask small! Easy asks hit those number best.

What about "number of donor visits?" Just go see the old favorites every month. And make it short! Five minutes or a full afternoon counts the same.

What about "significant contacts?" Just focus on whatever is quickest. A letter? E-mail? Phone call? Just do lots of the easiest thing. Skip the hard parts.

Metrics aren't people

The point of all this isn't that metrics are bad. They can help. We'll look at some great ones next. But metrics help only a little.

If we've got the wrong people, metrics won't fix it. One study of salespeople found this:

> "only 6% of salespeople without the personality traits fitting that trade will perform above average by working hard to compensate for their lack of personality "fit." Emotional intelligence and interrelated features (e.g., competitive intelligence and empathic listening) represent the first pillar of those natural abilities, and the higher the level of emotional intelligence (EI), the better the salesperson will perform … salespeople who do not score highly on EI have little chance of becoming successful Strategic Account Managers."

The same is true in fundraising. Dr. Beth Breeze studied key personal skills in fundraising.[30] The most important included the following:

- High emotional intelligence
- An ability to read people, and
- A great memory for faces, names, and personal details.

Getting the right people "on the bus" matters. The highest-growth fundraising charities showed a common pattern: High fundraiser turnover at the beginning. Low fundraiser turnover later. The researchers described high initial turnover. They explained,

> "In most of our cases, the teams were substantively overhauled. Our interviewees reflected that the people who left or were asked to leave were usually either not up to the task or, critically, did not demonstrate the level of passion and commitment necessary for the new fundraising approach."[31]

But keeping the right people was just as important. They explained,

[30] Pudelek, J. (2014, July 10). *Eleven characteristics of successful fundraisers revealed at IoF National Convention*. Civil Society. https://www.civilsociety.co.uk/news/eleven-characteristics-of-successful-fundraisers-revealed-at-iof-national-convention.html
[31] Sargeant, A., & Shang, J. (2016). Outstanding fundraising practice: How do nonprofits substantively increase their income? *International Journal of Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Marketing, 21*(1), 43-56.

> "None of the organizations we interviewed, after the right team had been built, suffered from the high turnover rates that otherwise pervade the fundraising sector."[32]

The "secret" to success isn't just about metrics. Metrics might get a fundraiser her next job. But they won't keep her in this one. Metrics aren't purpose, cause, or inspiration. They're not coaching, identity, autonomy, or personal growth. Metrics can help. But only a little.

The right metrics

Fundraising metrics can't do everything. But they can answer four key questions:[33]

1. Do we have the right prospects?
2. Do we have plans for each?
3. Are we seeing them?
4. Are we asking them?

These are important questions. Answering "yes" doesn't guarantee success. But, answering "no" usually guarantees failure. This is also a common feature of metrics in storytelling.

Suppose we were managing novel writers. One metric might be hours per day spent writing. Another might be words per day. Hitting these metrics won't guarantee a successful novel. But their absence does guarantee failure.

I don't manage novelists. But I do manage Ph.D. students as their dissertation advisor. Completing a dissertation requires many things. Students will read research, run experiments, analyze data, fill out paperwork, think, talk, and write. I've had many succeed and others fail. Over the years, I've learned to predict this outcome with just one number. That number is hours per day spent writing.

Students who write consistently will finish.[34] Otherwise, they often won't. Here's why. Students fail, but not because they don't do the fun stuff. They fail because they don't do the hard stuff. Writing is the hard part. All of the parts are necessary. But the only metric that matters is the *hard* part.[35] The best metrics encourage doing the hard stuff. This applies in managing dissertations. And it applies in managing fundraising.

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[32] *Id.*

[33] See examples of similar ideas in Wilson, K. L. (2015). *Determining the critical elements of evaluation for university advancement staff: Quantifiable and nonquantifiable variables associated with fundraising success*. [Dissertation]. East Tennessee State University. ("a) do you have enough prospects, b) are you seeing them, c) are you asking them." p. 57; "number of personal visits made with rated, assigned prospects as reported in contact reports, and the number of proposals submitted with proposal date, content and asks amount." p. 58).

[34] Bolker, J. (1998). *Writing your dissertation in fifteen minutes a day: A guide to starting, revising, and finishing your doctoral thesis.* Holt Paperbacks.

[35] The same phenomenon can be seen in sports. One study looked at which activities separated local-level and national-level under-18 soccer players. The national-level players had accumulated more hours in focused practice. They actually accumulated fewer hours in "playful activities" in soccer. It wasn't just about putting in the hours. It was about putting in the hours doing the hard stuff. Ward, P., Hodges, N. J., Starkes, J. L., & Williams, M. A. (2007). The road to excellence: Deliberate practice and the development of expertise. *High Ability Studies, 18*(2), 119-153.

1. Do we have the right prospects?

Fundraising math

So, let's start with the hard stuff. There's a difference between what's fun and what's important. Consider some simple math.

> Scenario 1. You spend the next two years working with 100 donors. Each has capacity to make a $10,000 gift. Interest in giving is high. Each has a 75% chance of making that gift.
>
> Scenario 2. You spend the next two years working with 100 donors. Each has capacity to make a $1 million gift. Interest in giving is low. Each has a 3% chance of making that gift.

Mathematically, the answer is easy. Scenario 2 raises four times as much money. The charity receives $3,000,000 instead of $750,000.

Emotionally, the answer is hard. Suppose you make one gift proposal per week. That's 100 over the course of two years. In Scenario 1 you constantly win. Three out of four weeks, you bring back a big gift.

In Scenario 2, you constantly lose. On average you'll lose *33 times* for every victory. You'll have all of your proposals rejected for over 8 months. And you'll raise four times as much money.[36] What *feels like* losing actually wins. Emotionally, a series of small wins feels more attractive. But that's not how the numbers work.

Sports math

The same result happens in modern sports. As analytics begin to take control, games change. Low risk, low reward tactics fall out of favor. In basketball, the three-point shot takes over. This shot also has the greatest chance of missing. Baseball moves to home runs or bust. This also increases strike outs. In football, throwing increases over running. This also has a higher risk of a turnover or no gain.

Before analytics, coaches and players do what "feels" successful. They avoid the negative emotions of a temporary negative outcome. After analytics, games change. In each case, analytics corrects the emotions of "loss aversion." It moves towards higher risk, higher reward tactics.

Major donor math

Ideally, we want donors with high interest and high capacity. But capacity and interest are *not* equally important. That's not how the math works. That's also not how people work.

[36] In reality, this difference becomes even larger. In the following year, you would have only 3 long-term relationships to manage instead of 75. And the high-capacity donor is more likely to refer to other high-capacity donors, leading to even greater growth differences.

We can influence a donor's interest. Creating donor experiences helps. Building relationships with the charity employees, beneficiaries, or other donors helps. Making connections with the donor's values, people, and life story helps. Any of these can change interest. And what can we do to change a donor's capacity? Nothing.

The right behavior requires spending time with high-capacity prospects. But the *right* behavior isn't the *easy* behavior. As James Daniel writes,

> "Many would gladly trade cold million-dollar prospects for warm ten-thousand-dollar prospects. Unfortunately, many do make this swap – a recipe for failure."[37]

In business, large accounts aren't managed by traditional sales metrics. This math problem explains why. Short-term sales metrics only work for small, quick wins. They don't work with long-term, high-capacity clients.

The prospect prescription

The right metrics should nudge the right behavior. The right behavior requires spending time with high-capacity prospects. There are, of course, many ways to measure this. We might have capacity minimums for major gift officer portfolios. We might multiply activity metrics by capacity rating. (Getting a visit with a high-capacity prospect is a bigger deal.) We can be more flexible with high-capacity success rates and timetables.

But what if we don't have enough high-capacity prospects? What if we don't have any? Systematic, planned efforts to contact new prospects can help.[38] John Greenhoe relates,

> "the most successful development officers I have worked with developed a regimented procedure for connecting with new prospects."

Referrals can work, too. We can always ask,

> "Who do you know that may be interested in our work?"[39]

But what works better is to start with what we can give, not what we want to get. This starts with a simple question:

> "How can we *provide value* to high-capacity prospects?"

Maybe we're offering attractive experiences. Maybe we're giving recognition or prestige. Maybe we're sharing expertise. Maybe it's access to a valuable social network. Our efforts are more likely to pay off when we lead with value.

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[37] Daniel, J. P. (2009, January 26). *Cold calls, the first hurdle.* [Website]. BWF. https://www.bwf.com/published-by-bwf/cold-calls-the-first-hurdle/

[38] "Fundraisers who are disciplined about calling new prospective donors typically fare well. Those who aren't usually don't last long in this field." Greenhoe, John. (2013). *Opening the door to major gifts: Mastering the discovery call.* CharityChannel Press. p. 27.

[39] Pittman-Schulz, K. (2012, October). *In the door and then what?* [Paper presentation]. National Conference on Philanthropic Planning, New Orleans, LA. p. 14. ("Who do you know that may be interested in our work? Would you send a note to introduce me, or arrange for us to do lunch? You like to entertain—how about a dinner party or reception?"); *See also* Baker, B., Bullock, K., Gifford, G. L., Grow, P., Jacobwith, L. L., Pitman, M. A., Truhlar, S., & Rees, S. (2013). *The essential fundraising handbook for small nonprofits.* The Nonprofit Academy. p. 154. ("Do you know other people that may be interested in learning about what we're doing?").

The outreach story

Leading with value works. But it takes time. Maintaining internal support can sometimes be challenging. (In some managers' views, donors are only supposed to provide value to the charity – never the other way around.)

It may help to reframe the internal story about prospect outreach. For example, many charities focus on advocacy. But what is advocacy? It's promoting the cause to those with the power to make a difference.

Getting a 30-minute meeting with a senator is reason for celebration. Why? Because that person has capacity to make an impact for the cause. What about getting a meeting with a high-capacity donor? This should also be a cause for celebration. Why? Same reason.

Advocacy is celebrated. It's part of the core mission. Expanding the advocacy story to include major donor discovery can change perspectives. It can increase internal support for these long-term processes.

Do we have the right legacy prospects?

With legacy giving, the hard stuff gets even harder. Wealth is important in giving. It's even more important in legacy giving. In annual giving, a low-wealth donor can make substantial contributions. In legacy gifts, he cannot. In annual giving, the value of small gifts can accumulate over many years. In legacy giving, there is only one gift. Also, wealthy people make a larger *share* of their donations as legacy gifts.[40] Most charitable money comes from the top 1 out of 1,000 wealthiest decedents.[41]

And it gets harder. Old-age and end-of-life decisions dominate. Nearly 80% of charitable estate dollars are transferred by documents signed by donors in their 80s, 90s, or older.[42] Most charitable decedents switched from non-charitable estate plans in the final 5 years of life.[43]

Charities also get dropped from plans. Among older adults, the ten-year retention rate for a charitable estate component is only 55%.[44] Only 65% of legacy society members actually generate estate gifts.[45] Part of the reason is this: About 1 in 4 legacy society members received

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[40] Steuerle, C. E., Bourne, J., Ovalle, J., Raub, B., Newcomb, J., & Steele, E. (2018). *Patterns of giving by the wealthy.* Urban Institute. Table 4. https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/99018/patterns_of_giving_by_the_wealthy_2.pdf

[41] "in 2017, when only 2,902 estates with charitable transfers filed estate tax returns, these estates still produced the majority (59%) of all bequest dollars transferred to charity in the country." James III, R. N. (2020). American charitable bequest transfers across the centuries: Empirical findings and implications for policy and practice. *Estate Planning & Community Property Law Journal, 12*, 235-285. p. 250. *Also see* a total of 2,813,503 decedents in 2017 at https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/databriefs/db328-h.pdf

[42] James III, R. N., & Baker, C. (2015). The timing of final charitable bequest decisions. *International Journal of Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Marketing, 20*(3), 277-283.

[43] *Id.*

[44] *Id.*

[45] Wishart, R., & James III, R. N. (2021). The final outcome of charitable bequest gift intentions: Findings and implications for legacy fundraising. *International Journal of Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Marketing*, e1703.

no communications from the charity in their last two years of life.[46] Why? Often, it's because charities communicate based only on recency of donations. Charitable decedents normally stop donating during the last few years of life.[47]

Who are the right legacy prospects? The oldest, wealthiest, childless friends of the charity.[48] The money will come from just a few, extreme donors. In financial terms, typical donors don't matter. For example, most estate donors leave less than 10% of their estate to charity. Taken together, these typical donors transfer only 3.8% of total charitable bequest dollars.[49] Most money comes from the tiny fraction of donors that give 90% or more of their estate to charity.[50]

Given all this, common legacy metrics are simply wrong. This is a world dominated by statistical extremes. Only the outliers matter. Yet, charities typically count every donor as "one." A ten-million-dollar planned estate gift from a childless, 95-year-old, lifetime supporter? That's one. That's one legacy society member. A 25-year-old adding the charity as death beneficiary for his first IRA account? That's one. One legacy society member.

And it gets worse. Getting a new legacy society member only *starts* a process that might eventually lead to money. These are, after all, highly fluid decisions, especially towards the end of life.[51] But fundraisers are rewarded only for *starting* the process. They get no reward for *continuing* the process.

And it gets even worse. Working with a donor through identification, cultivation, and solicitation counts as one. Getting a donor to reveal a pre-existing charitable plan in a mass survey – also one. Guess which is easier to do?

The legacy prospect prescription

Legacy metrics could be different. They could differentiate behavior that discovers a gift and behavior that asks for a new one.

They could also value gifts differently. Valuing an *irrevocable* estate gift is easy.[52] For example, an *irrevocable* estate gift from a 55-year-old donor counts at 33% of face value.[53] Multiplying by this percentage again accounts for the risk of revocation. The revocable gift counts at 33% of 33%, or 11%. This values the initial commitment correctly. It can also reward

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[46] Wishart, R., & James III, R. N. (2021). The final outcome of charitable bequest gift intentions: Findings and implications for legacy fundraising. *International Journal of Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Marketing*, e1703.
[47] James, R. N. III. (2020). The emerging potential of longitudinal empirical research in estate planning: Examples from charitable bequests. *UC Davis Law Review, 53*, 2397-2431
[48] James, R. N. III. (2009). Health, wealth, and charitable estate planning: A longitudinal examination of testamentary charitable giving plans. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly, 38*(6), 1026-1043.
[49] James, R. N. III. (2020). American charitable bequest transfers across the centuries: Empirical findings and implications for policy and practice. *Estate Planning & Community Property Law Journal, 12*, 235-285.
[50] *Id.*
[51] James, R. N. III. (2020). The emerging potential of longitudinal empirical research in estate planning: Examples from charitable bequests. *UC Davis Law Review, 53*, 2397-2431
[52] Valuation Table S for single life and R for joint lives are at https://www.irs.gov/retirement-plans/actuarial-tables
Simply scroll down to your preferred interest rate and use the "Remainder" percentage next to the age of the donor(s).
[53] Using a 5% interest rate, Table S reports a Remainder value of 0.33032 at https://www.irs.gov/retirement-plans/actuarial-tables

maintaining the relationship. Reconfirming at age 65 counts an additional 10%. Reconfirming again at 72 does the same. So does reconfirming again at 77, 82, 87, and 92.[54]

Of course, counting every revocable commitment as "one and done" makes life more fun. Fundraisers can just spend time with donors their own age. The don't have to deal with "old people" attitudes, frailties, and family. They don't have to worry about wealth or complex gifts. A token gift "counts" just the same as a transformational one.

Are the right metrics the answer in legacy giving? They can help a little. But other factors are also important. The charity's cause or culture can help. Some causes win because they're naturally in front of people in their 80s and 90s. Pets, cancer, healthcare, and hospice are natural winners.

Others succeed by a culture of staying connected with their older friends. Some charities naturally value visiting the elderly – especially those who have no children visiting them. Universities never lose contact with their alumni – regardless of current donations. This helps, too. Others include legacy giving as part of their regular messaging. This works as well.

These charities may not "measure" any better, or at all. But doing the right things still works, even without the metrics. Metrics can help. But culture beats metrics. The right fundraiser identity – who are we trying to be – matters more. Story beats statistics.

2. Do we have plans for each prospect?

Back to business

The business world doesn't have "major donors" or "principal gifts." Instead, it has "Key Accounts." What works in the world of Key Account Management? One study looked at 20 practices across 209 businesses. It then statistically tested to see which predicted success. The answer? Only one practice simultaneously predicted

- Increased share of customer spend
- Revenues
- Customer satisfaction
- Relationship improvement, and
- Improved retention.[55]

What was it? Individual key account plans. In other words,

"Each account should be planned separately to ensure appropriate service."

[54] Of course, this counting is only for internal administrative purposes. It should never be shared with donors. Instead, donors should always receive recognition for 100% of the face amount of any planned gifts.
[55] Davies, I. A., & Ryals, L. J. (2014). The effectiveness of key account management practices. *Industrial Marketing Management, 43*(7), 1182-1194. Table 8A and 8B. (This was the only factor significantly and positively related to every one of these outcomes.)

This finding was powerful. But it wasn't new. A lot of Key Account Management research had found similar results.[56] Individual plans are key for Key Account Management.

Fundraising parallels

This also works in fundraising. A nationwide study of the most effective major gifts fundraising metrics found this:

> "Written strategies for each gift officer's top 25 to 50 prospects with specific initiatives, specific persons to be involved in each task including internal partners and external volunteers, and specific target dates for each purposeful action should be required and documented ..."[57]

Why are individual plans so powerful? First, consider a "business" answer. Establishing a "consultative relationship" requires individual plans. Just "selling" doesn't. Traditional sales just pushes product. The customer's path is always the same: buy! Then buy more! In one approach, individual plans are critical. In the other, they aren't. Thus, this one factor divides traditional sales from Key Account Management.

Next, consider the fundraising "story" answer. The "one big thing" in fundraising is always the same: Advance the donor's hero story. Will that story be the same for every donor? Of course not. If it is, then it's not *the donor's* story. An individual story requires an individual plan.

Of course, meeting this metric won't guarantee success. But not having it probably shows that something is missing. If individual plans feel unnecessary, beware!

- You might just be "pushing product" rather than being the donor-hero's "guiding sage."
- You might not yet have prospects with capacity to warrant individual plans.
- You might be too comfortable just talking, without progressing step-by-step towards an ask.

Not every meeting will include an ask for a gift. But every meeting should include an ask. It should include an ask for the next event in the donor's plan. The ask might be to take a tour, meet again, or listen to a proposal. This helps turn just "seeing them" into advancing the donor's journey.

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[56] McDonald, M., Rogers, B., & Woodburn, D. (2000). *Key customers: How to manage them profitably.* Butterworth-Heinemann; Ojasalo, J. (2002). Key Account Management in information-intensive services. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services, 9*(5), 269-276; Ryals, L. J., & Rogers, B. (2007). Key account planning: Benefits, barriers and best practice. *Journal of Strategic Marketing, 15*(2&3), 209-222; Storbacka, K. (2012). Strategic account management programs: Alignment of design elements and management practices. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing, 27*(4), 259-274.

[57] Grabau, T. W. (2010, July). *Major gift metrics that matter.* https://www.bwf.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/00090978.pdf

3. Are we seeing them?

An important start

It's hard to raise major gifts sitting in the office. "Go see people," helps. Seeing the right people helps more. Seeing the right people as part of a personal customized plan helps even more. These don't guarantee success, but not doing them probably does guarantee failure. It's like managing novel writing by counting words per day. Hitting 2,000 words per day doesn't guarantee success. But hitting 0 does guarantee failure.

How do we answer, "Are we seeing them?" First, "them" means the high-capacity prospects from step 1. Second, "seeing them" is not just about number of visits. It's about the share of the portfolio visited.[58] You might have 1,000 personal visits. But for a prospect you didn't visit, the answer to this question is still "No."

This highlights another problem. Why do we have so many people in the portfolio? The answer is often bad metrics. As one author explains,

> "if the primary goal is total funds raised … it is in an officer's best interest to have a very large portfolio of already proven donors."[59]

As a result,

> "Portfolios tend to grow into unwieldy hordes of neglected names or become stagnant like ponds disconnected from moving water."[60]

Having too many people in the portfolio can be a problem. It's a problem when it changes the answer to the question, "Are we seeing them?"

What do we do when the answer to this question is "No?" How can we fix it? There are two answers:

1. Reduce (or divide) the portfolio.
2. See more people.

Let's look at each option.

The "seeing them" prescription: Part 1

Major gift officers often have 125-150 donors in their portfolio. This is at or beyond the extreme maximum for maintaining human relations.[61] Managing that many relationships can lead to minimal contacts with each person.

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[58] Megli, C. D., Barber, A. P. & Hunte, J. L. (2014, December). *Optimizing fundraiser performance.* Bentz, Whaley, Flessner. http://www.bwf.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/December2014.pdf

[59] BWF Research. (2016, June 23). *How to survive drowning in an unwieldy portfolio hoard*. [Website]. BWF. https://www.bwf.com/data-science/survive-drowning-unwieldy-portfolio-hoard/

[60] *Id.*

[61] See an evolutionary argument for a maximum of 150 people in Dunbar, R. I. (2018). The anatomy of friendship. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences, 22*(1), 32-51. Note that this maximum would NOT suggest a portfolio of this size unless the fundraiser had no other social connections in her life. Another view holds that the number may be about double this for online relationships.

Often, focusing more time on the best prospects works better. One way to do this is to make the portfolio smaller. Don't be afraid. This isn't the end of the world! One firm reports,

> "Institutions that have reduced Major Gift Officer portfolio size have actually seen increases in the number of asks, number of gifts, and overall dollars raised."[62]

An analysis of hundreds of campaigns found,

> "In the vast majority of cases, portfolio optimization provides the biggest delta in rapid production increases…. It is a simple question of, "Are we seeing the best prospects?" So much energy goes into the "seeing," but the "best prospects" portion of the question continues to be our main missed opportunity pain point."[63]

If a smaller portfolio isn't acceptable, another approach can work. Separate the portfolio into active and passive relationships. In active relationships, the donor is in cultivation for a gift. The individual plan is moving toward a time-targeted ask. The fundraiser must be visiting, or at least regularly seeking visits, with all active group participants.

In contrast, the passive portfolio gets special attention only if the donor initiates contact. The fundraiser is available when needed, but with fewer – or no – visit expectations. Responding to donor requests is still important. Taking advantage of chance encounters is great. Receiving unexpected gifts is wonderful. But these aren't the same as planned activities. And they shouldn't be counted the same.

Actively dividing a portfolio is different than passively ignoring part of it. Dividing is planned. It's based on interest, capacity, and the individual donor journey. Ignoring is reactive. It encourages the easy meetings, not the important ones.

The "seeing them" prescription: Part 2

The question is, "Are we seeing them?" We want to answer, "Yes." One approach is to reduce the number of people who count as "them." The "them" is limited to key high-capacity donors.

The other approach is to see more people. This might be helped by more effective strategies for setting appointments. It might be helped by nudging fundraiser behavior towards visits. But in most cases, this metric is best used to manage the manager.

What prevents fundraisers from hitting these goals? A study of 660 frontline fundraisers found the answer.[64] Managers started with high goals. They wanted fundraisers to spend most

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See Zhao, J., Wu, J., Liu, G., Tao, D., Xu, K., & Liu, C. (2014). Being rational or aggressive? A revisit to Dunbar's number in online social networks. *Neurocomputing, 142*, 343-353.

[62] EAB. (n.d.). *What are the right metrics to measure major gift officer performance?* [Website]. https://eab.com/insights/expert-insight/advancement/what-are-the-right-metrics-to-measure-mgo-performance/

[63] BWF Research. (2016, June 23). *How to survive drowning in an unwieldy portfolio hoard*. [Website]. BWF. https://www.bwf.com/data-science/survive-drowning-unwieldy-portfolio-hoard/

[64] Megli, C. D., Barber, A. P. & Hunte, J. L. (2014, December). *Optimizing fundraiser performance.* Bentz, Whaley, Flessner. http://www.bwf.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/December2014.pdf

of their time on major gifts fundraising. But few met these expectations. Why not? The fundraisers identified the barriers:

70% referenced other administrative work.

52% referenced team and program management.

46% referenced events.

43% referenced support to deans/units/programs.

Another study found a similar result. One manager of a high-growth-fundraising charity explained it this way,

> "You would think I maintained tight oversight of my team, but in reality, I spend most of my time managing the organization so that my team can maximize their impact."[65]

With competent and willing fundraisers, the biggest change will come from *the manager's* behavior. The manager's task is to protect the fundraiser from the endless array of low-value, internal, "urgent" tasks.[66] The manager frees the fundraiser to "Go see them."

4. Are we asking them?

Asking doesn't guarantee success. But not asking probably does guarantee failure. Asking is an essential part of the story. Every hero story has a "call to adventure." Asking metrics are also important because asking is hard. Metrics can help by focusing actions on these hard parts.

Asking is important. Making the *right* ask is even more important. The *right* ask will advance the donor's hero story. It will include

Original Identity → Challenge → Victory → Enhanced Identity

This rarely happens with a generic, shotgun-style approach to asking. It requires a planned, personal ask.

Advancing a hero story requires a heroic "call to adventure." A small, comfortable ask cannot fill this role. The heroic ask is "big." It can be big relative to past giving. It can be big relative to other capacity measurements.

One study analyzed nearly 1,000 gift officers. The top 20% highest-producing fundraisers raised about 75% of the dollars. What was different about these special fundraisers? Two of the factors related to asking. The study found,

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[65] Sargeant, A., & Shang, J. (2016). Outstanding fundraising practice: How do nonprofits substantively increase their income? *International Journal of Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Marketing, 21*(1), 43-56.

[66] "What could be easier than focusing on the few who can make major gifts and seeing them? Yet, not seeing donors is the most significant and common barrier to success. What's going on? Most major gift fundraisers have other duties—special events, reports, meetings—that appear more "urgent" than making visits. Visits are urgent only when scheduled; until then, they are movable. Fundraisers fall victim to the tyranny of the urgent and lose focus." Daniel, J. P. (2009, January 26). *Cold calls, the first hurdle.* BWF. https://www.bwf.com/published-by-bwf/cold-calls-the-first-hurdle/

> "The top 20 percent of officers tended to solicit gifts at the research capacity ratings ... The bottom 80 percent tended to ask for about 40 percent of the capacity ratings … Top performers have a consistent timeframe for managing the cultivation process, and the average was about 11 months. Lower performers either asked too soon for lesser levels, or dragged out the process. It is best to have a consistent action path that leads toward solicitation."[67]

Other research finds,

> "Stronger fundraisers go on more calls, yes, but they also ask earlier and make more ambitious solicitations."[68]

The "asking" prescription

The right behavior is to make planned, personal, "stretch" asks. Doing this works. But it's also hard. Asking for the small, comfortable gift is easier. Asking blindly without cultivation is also easier. Putting off the ask, or avoiding it altogether, is even easier.

Metrics can help. Too much time in cultivation can be a warning light. It can alert that the donor's story isn't advancing.[69] Measuring asks relative to a capacity indicator can help. It can show if the ask is truly a heroic "call to adventure."

Asking for assets sets the story in the land of wealth sharing, not disposable income. This changes reference points. It encourages deeper, consultative relationships that lead to wealth conversations. Special recognition for asset asks encourages better stories.

Tracking gifts closed is fine. But beware! Asking to capacity won't have the same close rate as asking small. A heroic "call to adventure" is often met with an initial "no." But a "no," handled well, can still advance the story. It can show what is, and what isn't, important to the donor. It can lead to the next challenge.

Conclusion

So, what's the magical metric system that guarantees success? Sorry. Metrics probably aren't "the" answer. In fact, they're just as likely to be the problem. Metrics aren't people. They aren't skills, or story, or leadership.

Over the long-term, a fundraising money problem is often a fundraising story problem.

- Maybe fundraisers are telling the wrong story. (The *administrator-hero story* works only for small gifts. The *donor-hero story* works for large gifts.)

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[67] Birkholz, J. M. (2018, January). Planned giving fundraiser metrics. *Planned Giving Today,* p. 6-8. p. 7

[68] BWF. (2014, July 25). *Client advisory – 5 tips for effective, meaningful performance reviews.* [Website]. https://www.bwf.com/published-by-bwf/client-advisory-5-tips-for-effective-meaningful-performance-reviews/

[69] "Most programs have a gift officer who has a portfolio filled with prospects in a state of perpetual cultivation that never get solicited…. The time in cultivation metric would serve as a red flag of inaction and a barometer of the efficiency with which prospects move from discovery through cultivation to the actual solicitation." Grabau, T. W. (2010, July). *Major gift metrics that matter.* https://www.bwf.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/00090978.pdf

- Maybe fundraisers are being the wrong story character. (The friendly "jester" character may be popular, but advancing the long-term journey requires the wise and persistent "guiding sage.")
- Maybe prospects lack the capacity to play the major gift donor-hero role. (The major gift "weapon" may be too heavy for this prospective hero to lift.)

Metrics aren't magic. Metrics can't tell the story for us. Character doesn't come from a spreadsheet. But metrics can nudge the right storytelling behavior, especially the hard stuff. They can be a diagnostic "check-engine" light when story parts are missing. If everything else is in place, they can help. They can help to advance the donor's hero story.