

A black and white photograph of shoeshine supplies. In the foreground, there are three jars of shoe polish, some containing white polish and others dark. A large brush with a wooden handle and stiff bristles lies across the top. To the right, the toe of a dark leather shoe is visible. The background is a dark, textured surface.

Six Tips on Fundraising Learned From a Shoeshine Man

by Dion McInnis

The fundraising conference in Chicago was so disappointing that I received a refund. The frustration and disappointment that chased me into the streets of downtown with my camera in hand to find calm, provided me more wisdom in 30 minutes than in the two and a half days at the conference. The wisdom came from a shoeshine man.

I left the conference to walk around and take photographs; photography has been my solace for all my life. I didn't want to interact with people, didn't want to buy anything, and didn't want to be bothered. The man by the window sill interacted with me, bothered me (you might say) and wanted me to buy something. I ended up buying something that I had never before purchased at a price that was higher than originally asked of me. Do you see that your donors and potential donors could be in the mindset that I was in? Not wanting to be bothered...not wanting to donate now...never having donated...and so on.

I will tell the tale and then we'll look at the six tips of fundraising gleaned by the shoeshine man (I took his concepts and had an article published on Six Tips on Sales Learned from a Shoeshine Man in AdvantEdge magazine several years ago). If you remember this story, you will become more successful in fundraising, and will enjoy it more...and your donors will, too.

NOTE: This guide complements well the lessons conveyed in the free handout and related book, "Go First..." While the book conveys the entire process of fundraising and how it can involve your entire team, the lessons conveyed in this guide are more focused on the specific ask.

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I was irritated. I had to leave the conference to shake off my disappointment and frustration over what I was hearing from some of the experts presenting their topics. With camera in hand, I walked around downtown Chicago near the hotel. Just me and my camera. Looking through the viewfinder, I could literally block out distractions and focus on things that attracted and inspired me. Much of the architecture intrigued me, so there I was, on my knees, getting a good angle on an archway over the door at an elegant, high-end store. Focus, look, focus, focus...."Hey you. You over there."

I tuned out the voice. I did not want to be bothered. Click, click...move, adjust...click, click. "Hey you. C'mere. Over here." Click, click...move adjust....**ignore**...click, click.

"Hey you," the friendly voice persisted. "C'mere. I have a great idea for a photo for you. C'mere."

He had me. I finally looked up to make eye contact with the persistent voice. The man was smiling as he continued his message of "I have an idea for a photo for you." I couldn't ignore the smile or the persistence, and I was curious about his idea.

"Okay," I said with a smile. "I'm sure you do. Whatcha got? Tell me your idea."

"Take a picture of me. Shining your shoes." Again, the big smile.

I laughed. “Yeah?”

“Yes, sir. They need it. And the way that I shine them, and clean them before hand with this extra-fine water spray. They’re going to look better than the day that you bought them.”

“You got me there. They do need to be cleaned. How much are we talking about?”

“Eight bucks.”

“Okay then.”

The conversation continued while he shined my shoes. We talked about all sorts of things and had a great time doing it. Near the end, he said, “You know how you can make my day?”

“I’m afraid to ask.”

“Pay me \$20 and I can go home for lunch.”

“I’ll bet. Look, I’m at this terrible conference across the street but am heading to the airport today. I need money for the taxi, but I’ll meet you half way. You’re doing pretty good by me already,” I replied. I ended up paying him \$15.

“Yes, I am,” he said. “Thank you.”

And no, I did not end up taking a photograph of him shining my shoes. The pleasure of the conversation made the need for a photograph secondary.

When he was done, I returned to taking photos, having bought something that I had never purchased before at a price higher than was originally asked, and having enjoyed the entire experience. What happened that you can use in any and all of your fundraising? How can you use the six key things that he did exceptionally well to help you engage donors, make the ask, increase the ask, and create an experience that makes them ready to do it again?

## **Six Tips on Fundraising from a Shoeshine Man**

### *Meet the Donors Where They Are*

The shoeshine man called out to me, trying to get my attention. All his efforts fell on deaf ears until he proclaimed having an idea for a photo. We must meet the donors where they are—in terms of location, interests, needs, passions, goals and so on. The man didn’t say, “Hey, buy my shoeshine and you can take photos while you do it.” He said, “I have a great idea for a photo...me shining your shoes.” He placed the emphasis on me taking photos; the former example places the emphasis on me purchasing his service. No matter what cause we are fundraising for, the approach to donors has to be about them, and meet them where their hearts, minds and bodies are.

He called out to me. How do you persistently call out to your donors and potential donors to get their attention? Social media, traditional media, web site, publications, public appearances, special events...and so on. Do your messages involve and engage audiences by being about them and their interests?

### *Be Persistent*

He was persistent when he called out to me, over and over again. He had a service that he knew I needed or could use, and was consistent and persistent in trying to get my attention. You must be, too. Consider how your various methods of communication fit together to create a consistent, persistent pattern. Coordinate and complement messages as they reach various audiences. Consider all the ways in which you and your team communicate, ranging from email signatures to billboards, and everything in between.

### *Be Open With Questions and Answers*

He presented his case well—how he would clean the shoes, the effect of his way of cleaning, the value of hand-rubbing the polish into my shoes, the sheen that would come from the polishing and buffing style he used. He had answers before I had questions; he had answers to my questions; he asked questions for conversational purposes; and, he didn't use PowerPoint, flip charts, brochures, handouts, spreadsheets, surveys or advertising specialties. Some of the reasons he didn't are obvious, but I say that to say this: YOU are your best sales tool. No matter what people buy or donate to, they are buying or donating to a person...the person who wrote the letter, the person who they trust, the person who shook their hand. Somehow, a connection has been made, earning the transaction. Don't be so quick to "need" data sheets, presentation materials, and so on. Sometimes there is nothing as powerful as your authenticity, integrity, smile and conversation.

### *Be Clear About Pricing*

If you love reading your cable bill or cell phone bill, you'd hate the way the shoeshine man handled pricing. Most people prefer a clear price. The car sales industry has changed dramatically over the years because of people's distrust and disdain for complicated pricing. Be clear about pricing; be clear about donor recognition levels; be clear about your ask. How much money do you want from the donor? Say it.

### *Ask For More*

“You know how you can make my day?” he asked. We had already built up a relationship through conversation, so the shoeshine man felt comfortable using that line as his opening to ask for a higher fee. Granted, shoeshine sales are different than the needs of your organization, but the lesson is important: Once you have a donor, feel free to ask for more. BUT, be clear about why, don’t be presumptuous, don’t have a sense of entitlement, and don’t ask too often. Remember, if your donors have a good experience and see value in what they’ve done, they are very likely to support again. Also remember, just because they supported one area of your organization doesn’t mean they want to support all areas. Go back to the shoeshine man’s first lesson: meet the donors where they are.

### *Accept “No” Gracefully*

For all his persistence, the shoeshine man knew when he had reached the limit. And when I said “no,” he accepted it gracefully and with appreciation for the business we had conducted. Most responses to solicitations are negative. Accept no gracefully, always leave the donor with a good experience, and move on.

For all the high-powered, expensive expertise espousing ideas at the fundraising conference, none was as clear, or as genuine, or as useful as the lessons learned from the shoeshine man experience. Listen to teachers, no matter who or where they are, and you will be a better fundraiser (partner, parent, friend, colleague...human being) because of it.

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