



Feasibility Studies Rethought

A fundraising feasibility study is an essential planning tool for any organization that is proposing a new major gifts program or a capital campaign. The typical process includes engaging outside fundraising counsel who will assess the proposed case for support, campaign goal, volunteer leadership potential and identify donors that would be inclined to support your charity and the suggested program or campaign. The consultants gauge your readiness and potential of success through face to face interviews with stakeholders and prospects. This includes your organization's ability to mount the effort from a human resource and organizational readiness perspective.

The standard procedure is for the consulting firm to do these interviews alone – without representatives of the charity in the meetings.

For years, consultants have said that involving the Executive Director, Director of Development or a Board member in the study interviews would turn the interviewee off – the interview would not disclose how they really feel if someone from the charity was in the room.... The interviewee wouldn't talk about their interest in the project... they wouldn't talk about leaders and donorsand they for sure wouldn't talk about whether they would support the charity. One had to question if this is really true.

So for decades feasibility studies have been completed by third parties – and the third parties have gained incredible insight that they cannot share with the charity because the interviews are deemed confidential.

The reality is donors, prospects and stakeholders want to be asked their advice and share their ideas with those closest to the organization. This makes intuitive sense.

Jim Janzen, CEO of the YMCA's of Southwestern Ontario has participated in and has had his staff involved in two feasibility studies. "We learned so much about the donor community; gained insight into feelings about the YMCA and our project, that would have taken years to learn if we had not taken the time to engage with community leaders in personal interviews. My role as CEO was to present the vision, answer questions and most importantly: listen. Our consultant carried the balance of the interview asking the fundraising and campaign related questions. This insight helped the Y accelerate our campaign planning and I personally developed new relationships that were instrumental in recruiting leaders and forging donor relationships. In my view, interviewees were comfortable talking about other community leaders, potential donors and in most case, their own inclinations to support the proposed campaign. "

Gina Eisler, former Vice President of Major and Planned Giving for the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Ontario has been on both sides of feasibility study – a consultant and the participant from the charity. "I have seen firsthand the candidness of interviewees with both the consultant and the staff person in the room, and I would never go back to a consultant-only process. As the development professional responsible for the campaign, I need to know who likes our cause and who is cautious because I can then develop long term cultivation strategies that are personalized based on we learned. "

Whether it is the CEO, Foundation Executive Director or Board Chair participating in the interviews has a host of benefits – both for the charity and the prospective supporter:

- More personal learning and insight by your team on the issues (positive and negative) and how they will impact fundraising goals, timing and access to leaders.
- Involvement of senior charity leaders sends a message to the interview that their advice is valued at the highest levels of the organization.
- Provides the most accurate and insightful information about how your organization is meeting your mission.
- Strengthens your culture of philanthropy.
- Trains internal leaders on how to talk to potential donors.
- It appeals to donors because they prefer to give advice and interact with decision makers.
- Donor insight that is gained through the interview process is not the confidential property of the consulting firm. Knowing who might volunteer and who is inclined to support your campaign is essential information for the charity to know.
- The next phases of campaign readiness can be accelerated by the charity based on insight gained during the interview process.

Is there still a role for consultants in the process?

Absolutely. Consultants have vast depth and experiences which are used to evaluate your campaign readiness, provide an external validation of your ability to reach your goals and benchmark your study results with other similar organizations. To ensure a valid process is in place, the consultant must always prepare the study recommendations and write their report independently, without influence.

A good consultant will also coach the interview team to be sure they are “on message” and listening appropriately. Debriefing after each interview is an important part of the process.

The art of the feasibility study process is to also ensure that each interview is planned based on as much prospect insight as possible. Based on this information, you may decide that a consultant-only interview would be the best strategy. In some cases, such as interviews with Board Members, you are more likely to select your consultant to do the interviews solo in order to ensure that you get an accurate and independent assessment of organizational health.

Feasibility studies are an essential business planning tool where much is learned and relationships are furthered. It makes incredible sense to show your donors and prospects that you really value their insight and time, by being there to listen and learn through the study process.