

FundraisingTalent

Increasing Nonprofit Revenue through Compelling Written Copy

How to start your fundraising career at a regional AFP, CASE or AHP conference.

... By Matt Hugg (1023 words)

A surprising number of people are considering fundraising as their life's work. The profession is becoming popular with young persons right out of college, mid-career changers looking for a serious alternative to their career in the for-profit world, and of course, those who follow the "traditional" route of falling into the work by accident. But what's a good way to quickly get a flavor of the work without months of informational interviews and networking events? Attend a regional conference.

Regional AFP (all nonprofits), CASE (education) or AHP (healthcare) conferences are great places to make contacts, see a variety of fundraising methods explained and to simply explore where you might fit in this decidedly less than monolithic sub-culture of the non-profit world. But once you've made the investment to attend (yes, saving time costs money - anywhere from \$200 to \$400 depending on the region and any additional programs you pick) and receive the program book in the mail, how do you get the most out of your regional conference experience? Here are nine ways to a successful start:

- 1) **Well prepared is well done.** Before you go, have a sense of what aspect of fundraising or fundraising support that you find most attractive. This doesn't mean that you need to decide your life's work before you set foot in the hall, but have an idea of what kind of fundraising attracts you. Doing this can be as formal as taking a Myers-Briggs or DISC to learn about your strengths and aptitudes, or simply looking at a list of fundraising jobs (see www.FundraisingTransitions.com for a list that could be helpful). Know whether you want to have more people contact, such as major gift, special events, corporate relations or campaign work, or more information contact, such as direct mail, research or database functions. Are you a writer? Then look more carefully at foundation work, communications and solicitation letter writing. You get the idea.
- 2) **Snag a mentor for the day.** How do you do this? Some CASE, AFP or AHP chapters offer mentoring programs – either on the conference site or as part of their ongoing chapter activities. Whether it's with this formal mentor, or with someone you met at the information desk (who is likely to be an experienced fundraiser volunteering to help), ask for tips on

- sessions to attend that meet your interests. Don't forget to end the conversation with one last question: "who else should I be talking to today?"
- 3) **Go to the "boot camp" sessions.** Many AFP chapters offer a "boot camp" basics course in conjunction with or as a pre-conference session ahead of the main conference. This is a great place for an overview of the profession. It's also an excellent place to meet kindred souls – other seekers who are looking into, or have just entered the profession. Compare notes to see why they signed on, and where they plan to go that day.
 - 4) **Schedule time at the vendor booths.** This is a great place to get information about fundraising. First of all, many of those behind the tables are veteran fundraisers who have made a switch to serving the fundraising profession. There's a wealth of experience in the room waiting to be tapped. Second, there could be a place for you behind the tables. I'm not suggesting that you job hunt there, but I am telling you to look at the kind of support work that goes on "behind the scenes" in the quest for donor gifts. You may find that these opportunities are as attractive as those discussed at the conference.
 - 5) **Attend every open networking period.** You will find that the typical regional conference schedules plenty of time for networking – usually in the vendor hall with lots of food. How do you break the ice? One question: how did you get into fundraising? Everyone has a story – and sometimes a pretty amusing one. How many professions do you know that bring together scientists, artists, journalists, business persons and more who now have a common interest in funding missions that each finds important?
 - 6) **Meet the speakers.** At the end of a session, introduce yourself to the speaker – especially the ones who talked about a subject that you want to explore further. These people aren't gods, but veteran fundraisers who over the years learned something that's worth sharing. Getting to know them a bit better could pay dividends for years to come – for both of you.
 - 7) **Any idea what mission you might want to serve?** Disease related health, education, arts? This will be a great opportunity to meet others who are already working in that area. Before you attend, have an idea, then scan the attendees list for organizations. Scan nametags as you walk in the halls – don't worry, everyone does it.
 - 8) **Don't be afraid to skip a session.** At a regional conference the sessions are the excuse to attend, but the real work is done in the hallways. If you have a choice between sitting in a meeting room with 30 people to hear a

talk or meeting one on one to learn about a career path, the choice should be easy.

- 9) **Follow up.** The hallmark of the best fundraisers is their ability to follow up. Compounding this, you'll find that the fundraising profession is a small world. Follow up on all of the promises you made. Did you tell someone you'd send them a resume? Did you think that someone you met should be introduced to a friend of yours? Do it, now. If you do, you'll be talked about in all the right ways. If you don't, well, let's just say that your reputation will precede you either way.

Regardless of the results, your attending a regional conference will be successful. It will be a great success if you find, and I think you will, that there is some aspect of fundraising that's right for you. But it will also be a success if you come away saying "no way!" After all, this is a life decision, and knowing what's wrong is as important as know what's right. No pressure, really!

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