

The Best of....

Building Relationships

Articles reprinted from Augment's Newsletter



Building Relationships began as a newsletter for Augment's clients. Later, I distributed issues to students in classes I taught and to colleagues in the fundraising profession. My original intent was to post past issues of *Building Relationships* on the augmentdirect.com website. In reviewing the content, I found that at least one article in each issue included information that was dated. Not wanting to share statistics that are two or three years old, I decided to select the Best of *Building Relationships* articles and share those. I hope you find these articles as interesting and helpful as past readers have found them.

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Fundraising Lessons from My Garden

A few years ago I visited the Chelsea Flower Show in London. Near the entrance I was approached by a matronly woman who invited me to join the Royal Horticultural Society. I pointed to my companion and said, "Ask her. I am only a garden voyeur." The RHS lady laughed and replied, "*I'm going to have to remember that one.*"

I was intrigued by the beautiful gardens at Chelsea and throughout England and have subsequently been seduced by garden catalogs and plant sales.

Gardening has taught me many lessons — and some of them are also appropriate for fundraising.

Lesson One - Expectations & Surprises

1. While it's important to plan, it is also wise to be spontaneous. In the garden use plants that fit your climate, soil, budget. When you are entranced by a tropical or alpine plant that is unsuited for your garden, take a chance. You might be surprised at its adaptability.

In fundraising, if you make a schedule and stick to it, you'll



accomplish a lot — perhaps at the expense of seizing new opportunities. Knowing when an opportunity is right for your nonprofit comes with practice.

Lesson Two - Prepare the Ground

2. I read this in a novel: It's better to put a 50¢ plant in a \$5 hole than a \$5 plant in a 50¢ hole. There is value in preparing the soil, adding nutrients, gentling the plant into the ground — setting the stage for success.



In fundraising, if we want our donors' gifts to grow, we need to prepare

the ground. That means building an appropriate relationship with each donor, one that focuses on the donor's needs first and the nonprofit's desires second. When donors put down roots with us, their passion to give grows.

Lesson Three - Failures

3. Put failures in their place. Showy-leaved hostas are my failures. They should love the shade in my garden, but every one I've planted has disappeared.



I'm resolute — no more hostas. That makes room for some beautiful plant I haven't yet met.

In fundraising, as in life, we tend to dwell on our failures. If we have 18 successes followed by one failure, we spend more time wondering what we

did to fail than we invest in studying our paths to success. Successes and failures are learning experiences.

Lesson Four - Every Day

4. Do a little every day. My old gardening strategy was to clear out the debris, prune everything in one day, and forget about the garden until it was overgrown again. My new strategy is to garden 15 minutes a day. Snip here, tie a vine there — and over the course of the week it looks pretty good.

In fundraising this strategy works too. In fact, a quick review once a day of all of your areas of responsibility helps keep everything on time and on target. Fit the task to your mode of operation. I like to do it toward the end of the afternoon, creating a quick must-do list for the next morning.



Lesson Five - Change

5. Change takes time. Really big plants are really expensive. I found this out when I ordered four vines from a specialty nursery. I dug those \$5 holes and planted the vines carefully. I watered, fed, and coaxed. And they died.

The next year I saw tiny plants in 2-inch



pots at a discount nursery. They came home with me and spent their first year in pots on my deck. Over the next couple of years most of them have moved into the garden and are thriving. They look like they belong in the garden in a way those big plants never did.

In fundraising, it takes time to identify what needs to be changed and more time to discover how to make that change into a reality. Then comes the really hard part — changing.

Lesson Six - Anticipation

6. If there could be just one perfect day in my garden, which day would I pick? Would it be the day the roses bloom profusely and everything is neat and tidy? What about the warm day when I sit in the garden and enjoy the newly unfolded brilliant green leaves on the cottonwood trees? Or the day when the first yellow daffodil opens and welcomes spring?

None of those would be my choice. For me the perfect day would be when the roses and clematis and lilies are fully budded and I can anticipate that tomorrow — or at most the day after

tomorrow — I will be exclaiming, “Wow — what a show!”

Anticipation plays an important role in fundraising as well. Think of that moment before the doors of the grand ballroom open on your signature special event. You know it’s going to be wonderful.

Or the moments after you’ve asked for a major gift — you know — that time when you are silent and waiting — anticipating that the donor will say, “Well of course, I can do that.”

Lesson Seven - Learn from the Pros

7. Over the years I’ve taught a lot of novice fundraisers. Some of them write down nearly every word I say — because there’s a lot to learn and they are excited about getting started in their new career. When I began my career in fundraising, I did the same thing at workshops and seminars. I sometimes read articles about fundraising several times, hoping to absorb every morsel of knowledge.

There’s never a time when you can’t learn any more from the professionals.



Over time, your focus may shift. After years in the profession, you may be more interested in how a seminar trainer organizes the material than you are in the content — which may not be new to you. You may be stimulated to design a new way to present a concept to your staff. Or you may pick up a tidbit of information that gives you new clues on how to design a successful approach to a previously-unapproachable donor.

The same is true of garden tours, magazines, and books. As a novice gardener, you study it all. Later on, you look for a new plant, a tip on propagation, or a way to use less water in your garden — but you keep on learning.

Lesson Eight - Know When to Stop

8. It's easy to be enthusiastic when selecting plants or seeds. Part of it is the anticipation factor — imaging how beautiful your garden will be when they are all in bloom. It's easy to get carried away and forget how little space you have for new plants or how limited your resources are — time, energy, dollars.

It's often hard to know when to stop.

The same thing happens in fundraising. Perhaps you are researching a donor who has given you a large — but not quite major — gift. It's easy to get



carried away, wanting to learn every last bit of information about this individual. But, it's best to stop researching when you have enough information to take the next step — which may be to ask for a major gift. If you document your research, noting the source and date of each piece of information, you can go back later and, if you need more information, start researching where you left off.

Knowing when to stop makes wise use of your limited resources.



Lesson Nine - Retention or Acquisition

9. When do you dump a lapsed donor — or an underperforming plant?

I've coaxed some plants a long time — maybe too long. Sometimes I'm rewarded with a rejuvenated plant. Other times, I give up and remove the sad, wilted thing and replace it with a vigorous new plant.

When it comes to donors, the same process applies. Cultivate all of your donors. Spend some extra time on lapsed donors — because retention takes fewer resources than acquisition.

But, when you've decided you cannot re-capture the lapsed donor, let go, and look for a replacement.

Lesson Ten - Sharing

10. Fundraisers and gardeners are generous people. Ask a fundraiser a question, and you'll receive good advice.

Gardeners share advice and wisdom — and often seeds and plants. Sometimes these gardeners are strangers. You walk by someone's house and tell them you admire a plant — and they'll offer you seeds they collected last year. In the small upstate New York village where I grew up, housewarming gifts were often plants from the giver's garden. I remember the lilac cuttings in milk bottles we received when we moved into a new house.



Gifts from friends and strangers make your garden bountiful.

Likewise, gifts of knowledge from other fundraisers enhance our abundance.



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Garden photos — from Nancy's garden

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