



The Art of the Ask: How to Ask Major Donors for Large Gifts to Your College or University

by Joe Garecht

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In this eBook, you'll discover how to:



Conquer the fear of asking for large donations to your school



Practice and prepare for requesting major contributions



Approach prospects easily and confidently with a substantial ask



Know when and how to frame the ask to get the donations your school needs

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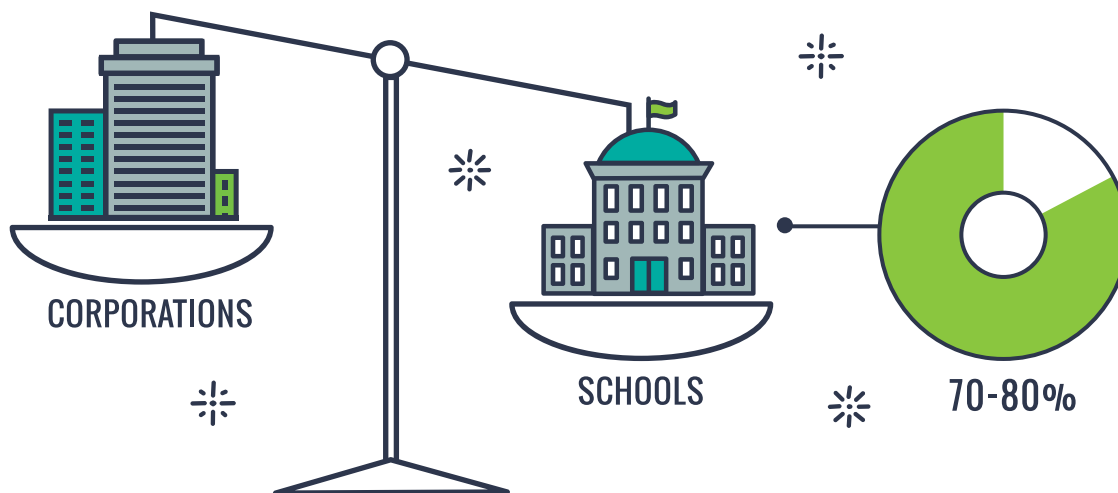
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INTRODUCTION

There's no doubt about it—making asks can be one of the most intimidating job requirements for any fundraiser. The thought of sitting across the table from someone and asking them to give your school \$25,000 or \$500,000 is enough to make many people avoid the profession altogether.

Yet the ability to make a donor request in person or over the phone is one of the most essential skills any fundraiser can possess. Sure, writing great grants is important. Holding seamless events is too. But nothing compares to the ability to make a convincing, non-threatening, inspiring fundraising ask.



Individual fundraising constitutes between 70% and 80% of the total fundraising revenue available to colleges and universities. This more than exceeds what is available from foundations or corporations. A significant portion of this giving is the result of direct, personal fundraising requests (as is the vast majority of the largest gifts). If you're a development professional, it is imperative that you master the art of the ask.



CHAPTER ONE

OVERCOMING THE FEAR FACTOR

Making asks can be scary, but it doesn't need to be. The most important advice to remember is the more you practice, the more your fears will diminish. Not only will practice help you overcome anxiety that naturally comes from approaching major donors, but it will also make you a better fundraiser. You'll have your pitch memorized, know how to anticipate objections, and be capable of crafting a customized ask based on the prospect you're approaching.

I always advise new fundraisers and those who are not comfortable making asks to spend time practicing first by themselves—running through a script, writing out answers to common objections, imagining themselves across from a donor, and asking for money. Then I suggest they practice with other development staff members, faculty or administrative colleagues, or even with trusted volunteers.



Finally, I encourage them to get out in the field to make real asks, preferably with an experienced member of the development staff sitting in on the meeting to offer feedback afterward. What went well and why? What could have gone better and how?

Remember that asking donors to make contributions to your college or university isn't dirty, slimy, or unethical. Your school does many great things, and it needs funding to continue that excellence. Without making asks, there is no fundraising, and without fundraising, your school can't carry out its mission.



CHAPTER TWO

CULTIVATING BEFORE ASKING

The success rate for your fundraising will increase dramatically if you understand and implement this basic rule: Prospects should be cultivated before they are asked.

Many fundraisers—particularly those new to the game—try to bring in big donations quickly by asking donors before any relationship is built. The hope is that once the donor says yes and writes a check, a relationship can be cultivated later.

The scenario usually looks something like this: Your new development associate chats with a prospect at your annual fundraising event. This prospect came to your institution as a guest of another donor. The development associate follows up with a call the week after the event to set up an in-person meeting. So far, so good. Right? After some quality conversation at this meeting, your development associate makes a large ask for your new capital campaign.

Big mistake.

The development associate is confusing the prospect's relationship with another donor for a true relationship with your college. The fact that the prospect came to an event and knows a current donor does *not* mean the prospect has a relationship with your school. However, it is the *start* of a relationship.

Asks like these rarely work, and when they do result in a donation, it is usually a one-time gift without any ongoing support. Don't make this mistake. Cultivation must come before your ask.





CHAPTER THREE

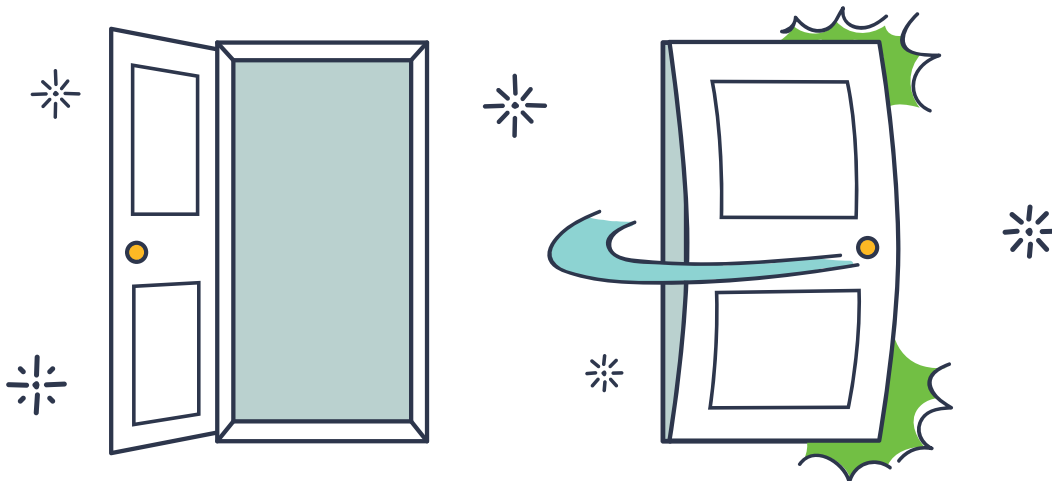
THE PRINCIPLES OF THE ASK

As you plan to approach donors, keep these key principles in mind:

1 People don't like to be sold.

Whether it's a car salesperson at a dealership, insurance agent making a cold call, or university fundraiser making an ask, people don't like feeling as if they are being sold something. That's why the best salespeople use conversations to draw out wants and needs from buyers, and then present them with a product or service that fills those needs. It's the reason why a lot of sales are made possible through referrals by friends, family, and current customers. And that's why school fundraisers need to cultivate first and ask second.

People don't want to feel as if your school is selling them something. They worry that they will make a donation to you and wake up the next day with donor's remorse. The best way to prevent this from happening is to build a relationship with your prospect. Discover what they are interested in. Determine which of your school's programs or services are most important to them. Identify how they want to give. Make your cultivation and your requests about *them*, not about you.



2 People want to give.

While people don't like to be sold, they do like to give. Giving makes them feel good and provides them with very real psychological and emotional rewards. Your job is to make it easy for them to give. Paint a compelling picture for them. If you cultivate a relationship and captivate them with your vision, they will want to contribute to your school.

3 People don't give unless they are asked.

This is a key point that needs to be driven home for every college or university fundraiser. It's extremely rare when a school receives a sizeable donation from a person or company without first having a fundraiser ask that person or company to donate. People want to give, but they won't give unless you ask them.

Far too many schools set up fundraising events and hope for the best, without making any real asks. Sending out invitations to a fundraising event is the weakest form of an ask. Requesting that board members or supporters co-host the event and sell 10 tickets each—that is an ask. Appealing for companies to sponsor the event at \$1,000 a pop—that's an ask, too. Slapping stamps on invitations doesn't really compare.

The other major problem is the belief that if you carry out some promotion, press, and networking to highlight budget needs, then the money will come rolling in. Nothing is further from the truth. Mentioning how much money your school needs is not an ask. Talking about how much money your school needs, then directly asking someone to give a certain portion of that amount—that, my friends, is an ask.

*Asks are questions. Asks mention specific amounts.
Asks are direct. People give when asks contain all
those pieces.*

4

People want to understand where their money is going.

Prospects feel much better about saying yes to your asks when they understand where their money is going. If you ask someone for \$100,000, that person will want to know what that money will be used for. If you need a committee member to sell 10 tickets to your event for \$100 each, that committee member will want to know why you need to raise \$1,000.

Do you know why your school needs the money? Does your staff know? Can your staff, development committee, and fundraising volunteers all explain in a succinct and clear manner why your school needs the money that you're currently seeking?

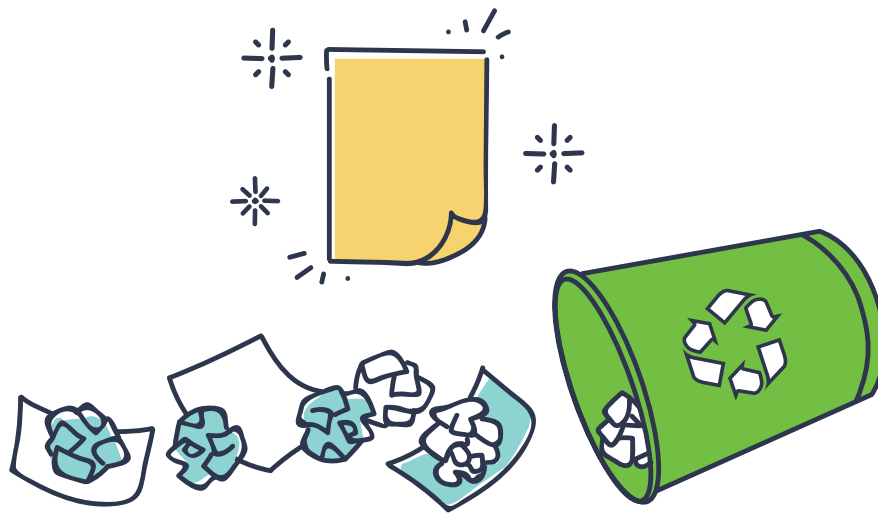
How much does it cost your school to sponsor a tenured position for one year, run a campus outreach program for one day, or provide one more scholarship? Break down your program budget into bite-sized chunks. Imagine you're approaching a donor who attended your school and has a passion for serving the underprivileged. You ask that donor to make a \$5,000 gift to your annual campaign, and you explain how that \$5,000 will create five \$1,000 scholarships for students living below the poverty line this year. That's far more powerful than simply asking for cash for general expenses.

Be transparent with your donors. Your prospects (particularly major donor prospects) will understand that a certain portion of every donated dollar goes to cover overhead. Keep these expenses reasonable, and be willing to share with donors what percent of their donation will go to overhead costs.

5 People want to know that they are making a difference.

If your college or university doesn't have a captivating vision—if it's carrying out the same programs as last year, serving the same number of students in the same facilities—then it's going to be very hard for donors to understand why they should give a large gift to your institution.

Donors want to know that they're making a difference and moving the dial. It's easier to make major asks and raise money when your school has a clear, compelling vision that you can articulate well. If you ask them for a large gift simply to maintain the status quo, they will likely donate elsewhere. So, make sure your prospects know they're making a big impact by contributing to your institution.



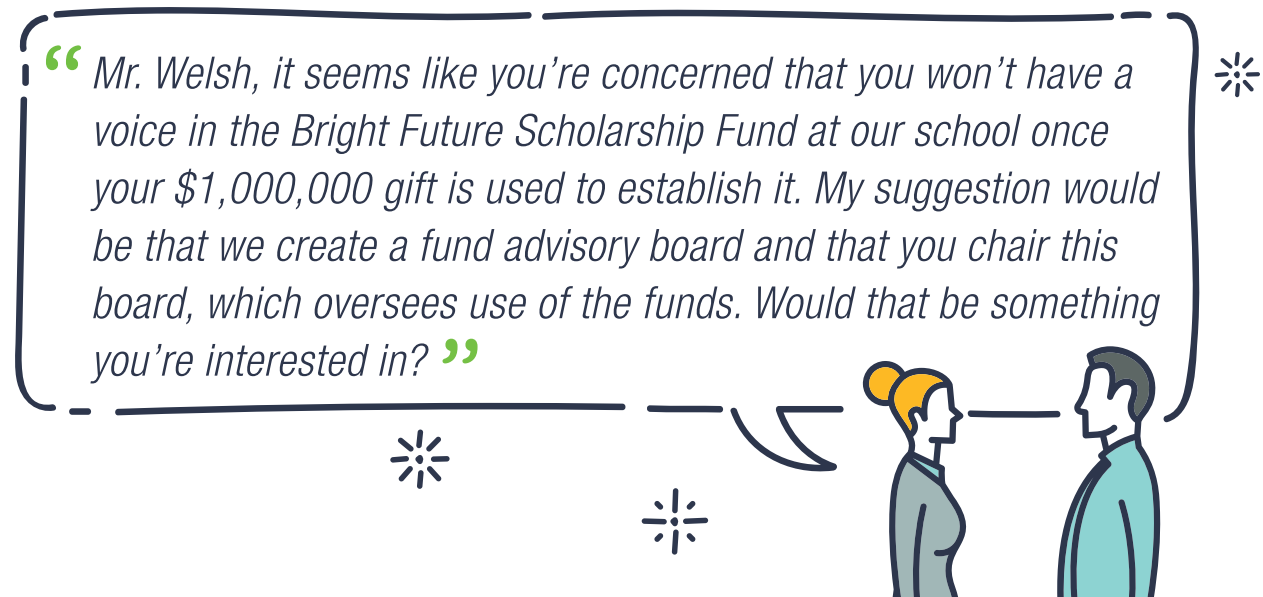
6 People need to have their objections answered.

Just as in sales, your donors *will* occasionally have objections when you make asks. And again, just as in sales, they may not always voice those objections. It's your job as a school fundraiser to anticipate those objections and answer them quickly and convincingly based on your relationship with the prospect.

Some of the most common objections or aversions donors have are:

- Believing that their gift will not make a real difference
- Lack of trust in the institution to use the money as planned
- Doubt that the school will be able to accomplish its mission
- Misunderstanding the terms and conditions of the gift agreement
- Concern that once the donation is made, their input will not be heard

The best thing your development staff can do if they anticipate a donor's objection is openly address and answer it. For example:



Notice that you’re not giving Mr. Welsh a seat on your school’s board of trustees (though that may be a possibility depending on the size of the gift and the size of your institution). Instead, you are creating an advisory group to oversee the fund created with Mr. Welsh’s sizeable donation.

7

People want to give to institutions that they trust.

It is imperative for your school to establish trust with your prospects and donors. People give to schools and organizations they believe are honest. Nothing is a bigger deal breaker than lack of trust. It is developed through the ongoing cultivation process, as well as a culture of transparency at your college or university.

One way to help build trust is by offering campus tours. People want to see what goes on at your school. Print up annual reports, including full financials. Donors want easy access to this information. Gather data showing the effects of your work. Prospects want to be sure that your school is making a difference, and sometimes the only thing that really proves this is cold, hard numbers.

Last, but not least, be accessible. If a prospect calls your office and no one answers or calls them back for a week, your school’s staff is going to seem unprofessional and unworthy of a donor’s trust.

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People give based on relationships.

Remember that fundraising is all about relationships. People give based on relationships with your school and with the people at your school. Take the time to build personal connections with your prospects. Get to know them. Then make your ask.



CHAPTER FOUR

PLANNING YOUR ASK

Before you approach a donor or prospect, be sure to consider the following questions:

1**Who am I asking?**

It's important to know your prospect. Do you have any insight about this person? During your cultivation of the prospect, did you find out what parts of your school's mission and vision matter most to them? Have you crafted an ask tailored to this specific prospect based on his or her interests and desires?

2**What am I asking for?**

How much money are you asking this person to give to your institution? During the cultivation phase, did you determine the prospect's giving capacity? What type of gift are you asking for: Capital campaign? Annual fund? Endowment? Planned giving? Are you asking for a one-time gift or a multiyear commitment? Do you have a gift agreement prepared? What are its terms and conditions?

Approach the donor with the following mindset:

- **Understand that you will be told no.**

And that's OK! It happens to the best and most experienced fundraisers. Don't let them get you down. They're part of the game.

- **Expect a yes.**

Attitude matters in fundraising. If you pursue a prospect assuming that you will get a negative response, you probably will. Remember, your school's mission matters! Go into every fundraising ask expecting a yes and asking for a yes.

Show your donors or prospects how they can make a concrete difference or help reach a substantial goal. If at all possible, ask them to contribute to something specific, even if it's only your personal fundraising goal. For example: "Would you contribute \$5,000 to help pay for our senior research program this year?" or "I'm trying to raise \$100,000 for our school's new library portico. Will you donate \$10,000 to help me reach that goal?"



CHAPTER FIVE

THE ANATOMY OF AN ASK

So you've built relationships. You've planned out your ask. Now you want to know how you actually make an ask? The best way to request a donation (whether for money, time, volunteer hours, or anything else) is by following these simple steps:

1 Get pleasantries out of the way.

Talk about kids, family, work, the last time you saw the other person. Get the small talk out of the way first.

2 Make a transition.

Once the small talk is out of the way, make a transition so that people know the topic has changed to something more serious. Good transitions include, "Listen...I want to talk about something important," or "I've got a serious question for you," or "Jane, I need your help."

3 Highlight the connection.

Once you've transitioned into more serious conversation, remind the donor or prospect of the connection that they have with your school. For instance, "Jackson, you've been a supporter of our school since you started your freshman year in 1968!" or "Colleen, you've been to three events at Crescentville College and have been an active member of our service advisory board."

4 Inspire emotion in them.

You want to make sure that the person you are talking to understands the impact of your mission. Remind them what your school does and why it's important. Good examples are: "I'm proud of the fact that we have the strongest liberal arts program in our state. Every year, our students and alumni amaze me with their talent. Here's just one example..." or "We offer the best education in the city, hands down. This year, we had two previous students elected to Congress. They both credit the education they received here with their desire to serve the public."

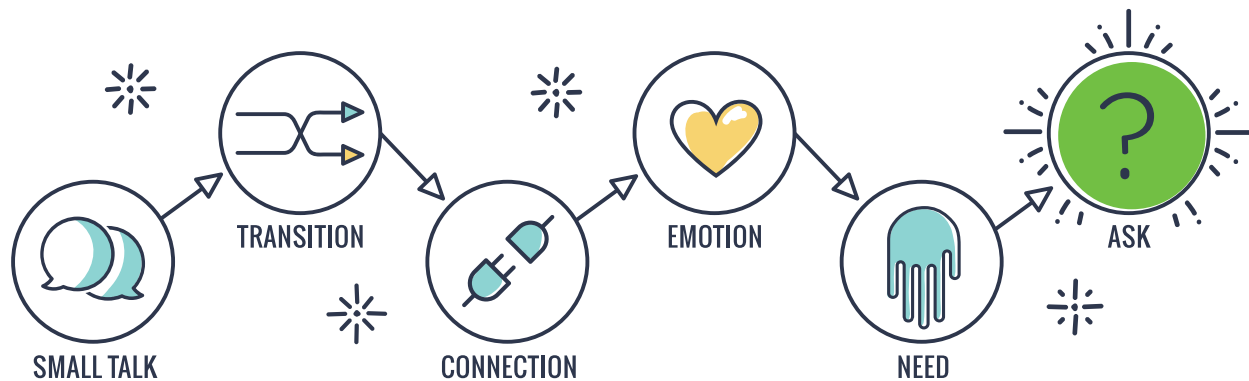
5 Help them understand your needs.

This is the background for your ask. If your prospect asks why you're inviting them to an event, a good answer would be: "We're trying to raise our public profile." If your donor wants to know why you're asking them to give \$500, craft a specific response such as: "We want to open a new cafeteria on campus," or "We want to provide more scholarships to students who need them."

6 Make the ask.

Remember to ask for something concrete and specific.

So, the formula is:



That may seem like a complicated formula, but once you've practiced it a few times, you'll see that it's actually quite natural and makes for a pleasant experience. Using this formula, your ask may sound like this:

Hi Ruth, how are you? How are the kids? (Pleasantries)

Listen, I've got something important to ask you. (Transition)

You have been one of our school's most enthusiastic supporters. We wouldn't have a new baseball field if it wasn't for the event you hosted at your house! (Connection)

We're very concerned about the cost of tuition here at Burholme College. As you know, part of our mission is to help local inner city students receive a top-quality college education. Last year, we had over fifty who were accepted and offered small scholarships but still couldn't afford to attend our school! (Emotion)

Ruth, our annual scholarship endowment only provides \$50,000 per year for need-based scholarships. Our goal is to offer a scholarship to every accepted student who qualifies. We need to raise another \$1,000,000 to make that dream a reality. (Need)

Would you be willing to contribute \$25,000 to help us reach that goal? (Ask)

As part of your planning process, don't be afraid to write a script and practice it so you'll be ready. And remember, always profusely thank everyone who responds to your ask, and be sure to thank them for their time and consideration even when they decline to donate.



CHAPTER SIX

BONUS TIPS FOR GETTING DONORS TO SAY YES

Here are three additional tips to help you make better, more successful major donor appeals:

1 Always ask a question.

If there's one change you can make to your asking strategy that will have the most impact, this is it. Far too many fundraisers make requests without ever really asking a question. Have you ever found yourself making statements instead of asks? If you say things like, "I really hope you'll consider making a gift to our school," or "Please think about making a donation. We could really use your help," then you're not making asks. You're making statements.

In order to be effective, requests need to be posed as questions. After you make an ask, the donor should feel like he or she needs to respond with a concrete yes or no. If you've gotten into the habit of making a statement instead of asking a real, honest-to-goodness question, then making this change could double the number of donations your school receives through in-person asks.

2 Always give a number.

A second key component of a strong fundraising ask is an included set dollar amount for the requested donation.

Far too many fundraisers will ask a question like, "Would you be able to make a donation to our school today?" This is good because it's a question (not a statement), but if you aren't asking for a set amount, chances are that donors who say yes will give far less than you had hoped.

Instead, say something like, "Would you be able to make a \$5,000 gift to our school?" This is a strong ask and offers a suggested giving amount that is in line with your goals for the meeting and the prospect's giving capacity.

3 Stop talking after you ask.

Here's a little secret from the business world: After you make your ask, don't say a word. Let the donor speak. If the donor speaks first, it's usually to say yes. If you speak first, you risk talking yourself out of a gift by backpedaling on your ask.

As a rule, when a donor doesn't immediately respond to an ask, it isn't because they're angry or trying to squirm out of answering. They are almost always thinking of a way to say yes—considering if they can afford the gift, whether or not they need to check with their spouse or business partner, and where the money will come from.

After you make your ask, stop talking—even if it seems uncomfortable. Give the donor time to think and respond.

Practice, practice, practice.

4

My final tip for those who feel nervous making asks: The best way to become comfortable is to consistently practice. This means running through a script in your head, practicing in front of a mirror, and holding mock fundraising meetings with your friends or coworkers.



CONCLUSION

Making asks in person and over the phone is the single most important skill you will need to master as you approach major donors and prospects for your college or university. Asking doesn't need to be scary or intimidating. Use the simple six-step process presented in this guide, and be sure to practice until it becomes second nature. Remember, great fundraisers are not born. They are made!

About the Author

Joe Garecht is a nonprofit fundraising consultant, author, speaker, and the founder of The Fundraising Authority. Joe has been a professional fundraiser for over a decade and during that time has served as a development director, executive director, and fundraising consultant to numerous nonprofits and political campaigns.

As the executive director of Business Leadership Organized for Catholic Schools (BLOCS), Joe led the effort to raise \$50 million in endowments for individual schools, raise \$4 million yearly in scholarship funds, and modernize and professionalize the fundraising capabilities of over 175 parochial schools in the Philadelphia region.

Joe is the author of *How to Raise More Money for Any Non-Profit*, *The Silent Auction Handbook*, *The Non-Profit Fundraising Formula*, and *Raising Money Without Going Crazy*. All four books are available on Amazon®. For more great information on how to raise money visit Joe on the web at www.thefundraisingauthority.com.

About Blackbaud

Serving the worldwide philanthropic community for 35 years, Blackbaud (NASDAQ: [BLKB](#)) combines innovative software, services, and expertise to help organizations achieve their missions. Blackbaud works in over 60 countries to power the passion of approximately 35,000 customers, including nonprofits, K-12 private and higher education institutions, healthcare organizations, corporations, foundations, and other charitable giving entities. The company offers a full spectrum of cloud and on-premise solutions, as well as a resource network that empowers and connects organizations of all sizes. Blackbaud's portfolio of software and services supports nonprofit [fundraising and relationship management](#), [eMarketing](#), [advocacy](#), [accounting](#), [payments](#) and [analytics](#), as well as [grant management](#), [corporate social responsibility](#), and [education](#). Organizations use Blackbaud technology to raise, invest, manage, and award more than \$100 billion each year. [Recognized as a top company](#), Blackbaud is headquartered in Charleston, South Carolina and has operations in the United States, Australia, Canada, Ireland, and the United Kingdom. For more information, visit www.blackbaud.com.



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