

POLITICAL FUNDRAISING THE *SMART* WAY

*10 Strategies to Raise the Money
You Need to Win*



JOE GARECHT

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10 Strategies to Raise the Money You Need to Win**

By Joe Garecht

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About the Author

Joe Garecht is the founder of Local Victory and The Fundraising Authority. Joe has been a professional political consultant and fundraiser for over 15 years, raising more than \$50 million for political campaigns, non-profit organization and civic groups around the world. Joe has served on the fundraising staff of national political committees and statewide and local political campaigns as well as consulted with hundreds of political organizations worldwide.

For more great information on how to raise more money for your political campaign or committee, visit Joe on the web at **LocalVictory.com**

Legal Disclaimer

Political fundraising is a highly regulated industry. Before beginning your fundraising efforts, be sure to research the laws and regulations that apply to political fundraising in your area. While it is our intention to offer you the best fundraising advice available, nothing in this special report should be taken as legal advice.

Introduction: You Can Do This!

Fundraising can be an intimidating thing, even for seasoned political candidates. You may pick up the paper and see that a presidential candidate raised \$3 million in one night, or that a statewide candidate has \$5 million in the bank, and think, “There’s no way I can do this!” I want to let you in on a little secret, though:

95% of all political candidates and office holders, at every level, started out exactly where you are right now. Most presidents, senators, governors and prime ministers were once city council candidates, state senators, and county commissioners. Most of them started each and every campaign wondering how they were going to be able to raise the money they needed to win.

You see... no matter what office you are running for, the first time you run for it, the fundraising required can seem insurmountable. But it isn’t. Hundreds of candidates for that exact office have done it before you, and hundreds will do it after you. All you need is a good solid plan, a strong fundraising strategy, and the willingness to do the work.

It’s not easy. Far from it, in fact. Fundraising is hard work. And though it may seem that lots of political candidates are “born fundraisers,” the truth is that there are very, very few politicians that actually like the process of fundraising. Most candidates would much prefer to write policy papers, shake hands at events, and participate in robust political debates than fundraise. No one likes to fundraise, but it’s a necessary part of the political process.

Notice, though, that while I said that fundraising is “necessary,” I did not say that it is a “necessary evil.” Far too many political candidates, consultants, activists and pundits will tell you that there’s too much money in politics. And many, many candidates have let that canard sink in, and used it as an excuse to not really engage with the fundraising process.

Here’s the real truth: there’s nothing evil, smarmy, or shady about political fundraising. And there’s not too much money in politics. How could there be? The greatest decisions of our day are decided in the political sphere. Every day, our political leaders make choices that involve life and death, trillions of dollars, and the future of our city, country, and world. How could we possibly spend *too much* on debating the pros and cons of those decisions? If the stakes are so high, shouldn’t we be fighting hard to make sure that the right candidate – *our candidate* – wins?

If you want to win your election, you need to get involved in fundraising. There’s nothing wrong with that. Fundraising is important. It allows you to get your message out, hire a staff, take polls, send out mailers, and win on Election Day. If you want to win, you have to fundraise.

You can do it – I know you can. I have seen hundreds of candidates for office at all levels who thought they couldn’t raise enough money to win... who had never asked for a donation before... who didn’t know where to start... who were *afraid* to raise money... and who overcame their fears and anxieties to raise the money they needed to win. And you can too! Start by reading these ten strategies to supercharge your fundraising efforts:

Strategy #1: Appoint the Candidate as Fundraiser-in-Chief

Every candidate for office needs to take responsibility for his or her campaign's fundraising. You can't just hire someone to "take care of all that" for you. Sure, depending on the size of your campaign, you may be able to hire one or more staff members to help with fundraising. These staff members will make calls, plan events, write direct mail, and keep your Finance Committee on task. But ultimately, the candidate needs to be the fundraiser-in-chief if he or she wants to win the election.

Donors (particularly big donors) want to talk to the candidate. They want the candidate to do the meetings, make the calls, and ask for the check. Donors want to feel like they have access to the candidate, and are far more likely to say "yes" when the candidate personally asks for a donation than when a staff member or consultant does it.

Your finance committee can do meetings and make calls. Your staff can do meetings and make calls. But the most successful asks will come directly from the candidate. This fact is so important to the success of a political campaign that as a consultant, I refuse to work with any candidate who says they don't want to do fundraising. If a candidate won't fundraise (or will only do it with lots of arm twisting and cajoling), then it is highly likely that they are going to lose the election. It's that simple.

Appoint the candidate as the fundraiser-in-chief for your next campaign. This means that early in the process, your candidate should be spending well over 50% of his or her campaign time raising money... and even once the grassroots campaigning starts, the candidate should still be spending a significant amount of time meeting with donors, making calls, and raising money.

Strategy #2: Make Fundraising a Priority in the Campaign

This goes hand-in-hand with Strategy #1. Fundraising must be a priority in your campaign. If your candidate or campaign staff see fundraising as something that you need to "get through" in order to get to the "fun stuff" (debates, events, door to door campaigning, TV interviews) then your campaign is in trouble.

Almost everything your campaign does relies on fundraising. Want to hire a press secretary to drum up news stories? You need money. Want to send out postcards to the super-voters in your district? You need money. Want to put up a professionally designed website? You need money. Want to hold an event for the committee people in your district? You need money.

There are lots of things you need to do to win your election... and almost all of them cost money. Thus, fundraising absolutely needs to be a top priority in your campaign.

What does this mean in practice? It means that when push comes to shove (and it will, in the heat of battle) fundraising should win. Fundraising should rule the candidate's schedule (at least until the last month or two of the campaign). Fundraising should be *the* staffing priority.

If someone wants to take time away from fundraising, they need to have a really, really good reason. As a young Finance Director on a major political campaign, I can vividly remember dragging my chair down the hall and sitting in front of the candidate's door for an hour to make sure nobody bothered him as he made fundraising calls. Dozens of people tried to get in, and I stopped them all. (Luckily, I had a campaign manager who believed in the power of fundraising and supported me as they went to her office, one by one, to complain about this "kid" blocking their access to the boss).

That's how important fundraising is to winning your election.

Strategy #3: Build a Finance Committee to Help Lead Your Efforts

While the candidate *must* be the fundraiser-in-chief for your campaign, that doesn't mean that he or she needs to do it alone. Every campaign, no matter how small or large, needs a Finance Committee to help the candidate money.

A "Finance Committee" is simply a group of people who agree to help raise money for the campaign. This is a group of 3-100 people (or more, for national campaigns) who introduce the candidate to potential donors, send out letters and e-mails to their friends, and hold fundraising events in their homes and offices to raise money to support the campaign.

One of the first things the candidate should do (after filing all of the necessary paperwork to begin fundraising) is reach out to his or her friends, business associates, supporters from past campaigns, etc. to ask them to serve on the Finance Committee. The Finance Committee should have a set fundraising goal for members (e.g. every member is asked to raise \$1,000 or \$25,000 or whatever the appropriate amount is for this campaign).

The campaign should hold regular meetings of the Finance Committee, provide them with the materials they need to effectively fundraise (pamphlets, letter templates, making the candidate available for meetings and events, etc.) and track each members' progress. Putting together a strong Finance Committee to help with fundraising can make or break your campaign, so be sure to start thinking about potential members as soon as possible in each election cycle.

Strategy #4: Whenever Possible, Plant Your Money Seeds before Harvest Time

Most political campaigns are short... they last 4 months, 6 months, perhaps a year, or maybe even 2... but rarely longer than that. You only have a limited window, in each campaign, to raise the money you need to win. For this reason, you should be sure to start cultivating potential donors as early as possible, before you need to make an ask.

Sure, you can call up someone you haven't seen in 8 years out of the blue, tell them you are running for office, and ask them for a donation to your campaign. And they might give. But... wouldn't it be better to touch base with them well before you need to make the ask to check in,

see how they are, and tell them you are thinking about running for office? Then, when the time comes, you can ask them for money, and they be far more likely to give.

My advice to you is that if you are thinking about running for office in the next couple of years, now is the time start reestablishing connections with everyone who might be asked to donate to your campaign. Pull out your holiday card list, look through your social media contacts, and check your rolodex. Make a list of as many people as possible who might be interested in donating to your campaign, should you decide to run. Then, pick up the phone and start calling them.

Your goal is to reestablish the personal connection you once had with them, or to keep the current personal connection you have with them as warm as possible. Avoid the temptation to simply send them an e-mail or social media message. In order to really connect with them, you need to pick up the phone and call them. The call doesn't need to be long, but you do need personal contact. For some of your contacts (particularly potential larger donors) you may even want to set up a time to meet and reconnect in person.

Strategy #5: Meetings > Phone Calls > Letters > E-Mail

When it comes to fundraising, the more personal you can make the communication, the better. If you can hold a meeting with someone to ask them for a donation, then that is always better than a phone call. If you can't hold a meeting, a call is better than a letter. And, when it comes to letters, a handwritten note (or a typed letter with a short handwritten blurb at the bottom) is always better than an e-mail.

Of course, during your campaign you'll need to make wise use of the candidate's time (as well as the time of your staff and Finance Committee members). Thus, it is important to figure out how big an ask needs to be to warrant a meeting with the candidate, as opposed to a phone call, and which donors get a phone call instead of a letter.

For example, in many local campaigns, the candidate will call to make a personal ask of a donor if he or she thinks the donor could give \$500 or more to the campaign. On the other hand, for many statewide campaigns, the minimum threshold for a phone call is \$5,000 or \$10,000.

Whatever your campaign decides, remember that whenever possible, the more personal the ask the better. Big donors who have a personal meeting with the candidate, or who get a personal phone call from the candidate, feel special and like they are a key part of your team. Thus, they are more likely to give and to refer other donors to give as well. Similarly, smaller donors who get a visit from the campaign's finance director or campaign manager will feel more goodwill than donors who simply get a mass e-mail communication from the campaign.

Strategy #6: Make Real, Honest to Goodness Asks

If you want people to donate to your campaign, you have to make asks. This means that you will need to sit down in front of potential donors (or talk on the phone with them) and ask them to make a donation. Far too many candidates, campaign managers and finance directors think they will be able to raise all the money they need for the campaign through online fundraising, e-mail, direct mail and impersonal fundraising events. While all of these tactics are important for your campaign, none can supplant making personal fundraising asks.

Your candidate (and to a lesser extent your campaign manager, finance director and Finance Committee members) will need to make real, honest to goodness fundraising asks if you want your campaign to win.

What do I mean by “real, honest to goodness” asks? I mean that your asks have to be *actual* asks... you need to ask for a certain amount, and you need to phrase it as a question that can be answered “yes” or “no.”

If the candidate ends a fundraising call by saying, “I hope you’ll consider donating to the campaign,” he has *not* made an ask. That’s a statement... and a weak one at that.

Likewise, if the candidate ends a fundraising meeting by saying, “Will you make a donation to my campaign?” she’s made an ask (it’s a question) but it’s extremely wishy-washy, because she hasn’t asked for a set amount. The person she is asking is likely to give far less than he or she would have if the candidate asked for an set donation amount.

A good fundraising ask looks like this: “Jim, I really appreciate your support. Would you be willing to make a \$1,000 donation to the campaign?” Or, “Sue, I’m glad you share my vision for a better Sarasota. Could you make a \$500 donation to help us win?”

Get comfortable making asks like that. Practice them in the mirror. Work on them with friends, volunteers, and staff members. Those are the types of asks that make people say, “Yes!”

Strategy #7: After the Ask, Focus on Referrals and Upgrades

Once you make your ask and the person makes a donation, your work isn’t over. After you thank the donor and continue to cultivate them (by sending newsletters, keeping them on your mailing list, sending them e-mails, etc.) you’ll want to go back to them for another donation. Assuming the donor hasn’t “maxed out” by making the maximum contribution (or aggregate contributions) allowed by law for your election campaign, you should always go back to your donors to ask them for another donation during the campaign.

Remember, your current donors are your best prospects for future donations. Your campaign donors have already shown they support you and are willing to write a check to help you win your campaign. Unless they have maxed out, you should go back and ask them for another donation, either through a phone call, visit, a letter, an e-mail, an event invitation, or all of the above.

And, no matter whether your donor has maxed out or not, every donor can be asked for referrals on behalf of your campaign. This means that you can go to every campaign donor (or as many as time allows) to ask them to serve as ambassadors for your campaign, introducing you to other people in their network that might be interested in donating to your campaign.

Some of your donors will decline to make referrals... that's ok. Other donors might be willing to set up a phone call for you, or perhaps even a breakfast or lunch meeting where they bring a friend or two who are interested in meeting and supporting the candidate. Still other donors may be willing to hold a fundraising event at their house on your campaign's behalf and invite all of their friends and colleagues to come and support the campaign. Referrals can be a huge source of support for many campaigns – but you'll never know unless you go out and ask for them!

Strategy #8: Use Your Campaign Website the *Smart* Way

The vast majority of political campaigns use their campaign websites for two purposes: as an online brochure detailing the candidate's bio and positions on key issues, and as a place to put up a big "Donate Now!" button to accept online donations. Both are important strategies for your website, but if that's all you're doing on your campaign site, you're missing one of the key things you can do to raise more money online: building an e-mail list.

Your campaign website is a passive medium. You put it up and drive traffic to it... people read the site, and a very small percentage of them click on the Donate Now button (perhaps as low as 0.10 % of visitors). If people visit your site and don't click on Donate Now (or don't sign-up to be a volunteer) that's it – you've lost them. You don't know who they were, and you have no way to stay in touch with them.

That's why every campaign should make sure to have a big, prominent form or button on every page of their website asking people to sign up for the campaign's e-mail newsletter. If someone comes to your site and is interested in your campaign (and doesn't make a donation or sign-up to be a volunteer) but *does* sign-up for your e-mail newsletter, you have a way to stay in touch with that person going forward. You can communicate with them through your e-mail newsletter, and eventually send an e-mail fundraising letter to ask for their support.

Obviously, not everyone who visits your site will sign-up for the newsletter, but in my experience, if you display your sign-up form prominently on every page, a far higher percentage will sign up for the newsletter than will donate or sign-up to volunteer. If 10,000 people visit your site and 5% sign-up for your newsletter (a very achievable goal) that's 500 people who visited your site, support your campaign, and want to hear more from you on a regular basis. If those same 10,000 people visit your site and you don't have a newsletter option, those 500 are gone, possibly forever.

Strategy #9: Always Ask for More than You Think the Person Can Give

One of the things you should always do, prior to making a fundraising ask for your campaign, is to think through how much you think the person could afford to give, if they really wanted to. Notice that I didn't say, "How much the person *will give*." No... think through how much the person *could* give, if they were your number one best supporter.

Coming up with this number isn't an exact science. You can come up with an educated guess based on what the person has given to your campaign in the past, what he or she does for a living, what you know about him or her (and their spouse), where the donor lives, where they send their kids to school, etc. Spend a few minutes thinking about it... but don't waste lots of time trying to come up with the "perfect" answer. You'll never know exactly how much the person could give, so do your best, and then write a number down.

Once you have your number, add 10% (or some reasonable amount that will keep it as a nice round number). If you think the person could give \$100, make it \$110. If you think the person could give \$2,500... make it \$3,000. (Obviously, if your campaign is limited by law in terms of how much a donor may give, that number is the most you will be able to ask for). Whatever the number is, make it more.

Why? Because when making fundraising asks, you should always ask for more than you think the person can afford to give. Remember – if you ask your donor for too little, they are not going to "talk you up" or offer more. If the person is secretly willing to give your campaign \$1,500 but you only ask for \$1,000, you'll get \$1,000. The donor won't volunteer to give more than you ask for. On the other hand, if you ask for too much, the donor can *and will* "talk you down." If you ask for \$2,000 and the donor can't afford it, they'll say something like, "You know Al, I'd love to donate, but I can't do \$2,000. How about \$1,500?"

Always ask for more than you think the person can afford to give. Believe it or not, donors don't get mad if you ask for too much (unless you ask for an egregious amount... for example, they can afford \$1,000 but you ask for \$100,000). If the donor can't afford it, they will offer less. If they *can* afford it, they will often say "yes!" I can tell you from personal experience that if you aren't asking for more than you think the person can give, you're leaving money on the table.

Strategy #10: Have a Written Fundraising Plan

In the heat of battle, it can be hard to know what to do next. When you're in the middle of a political campaign, people will be coming at you with ideas, you'll be pulled in a million directions, and you'll wake up in the middle of the night with new thoughts on everything from fundraising calls to direct mail and everything in between. That's why it is extremely important to have a written fundraising plan in place *before* the campaign begins (or at least as early in the process as possible).

By writing a fundraising plan before things get too hectic, you and your campaign team will be able to calmly survey the field and come up with a smart strategy for raising the amount you need to win your campaign. You'll have the luxury of knowing that when things get tough, you have a well thought out plan to guide you. When people come to you with ideas in the middle of the campaign, you'll be able to say, "Thanks for the idea... I'll see if it fits into our plan."

Sure, campaigns are fluid, and your fundraising strategy may need to change mid-campaign (though needing to change fundraising strategy happens far less often than needing to change political strategy). That's ok. Having a written fundraising plan in place for your campaign will give you a strong foundation to build on as the campaign progresses, and will provide the guidance your campaign team needs to raise the money you need to win.

Bonus Tip: Make Your Fundraising Legal and Ethical

Before we wrap up this guide, I want to leave you with one final tip: always keep your fundraising activities both legal and ethical. Make your fundraising operation something to be proud of.

There are many reasons for this. First and foremost, because political fundraising is so heavily regulated, if you break the law which raising money the consequences can be severe... everything from having to return the money to paying fines to, in extreme cases, criminal prosecution.

Secondly, and almost as important, is that fact that if you flout campaign finance regulations (no matter how ridiculous some of them may seem), you are disqualifying yourself in the minds of many voters. They figure (and often rightly so) that if you can't follow the law, you shouldn't be entrusted to *make* the law as an elected official.

It's also important to understand that you, and your campaign, should not only follow the letter of the law, but also act in a way that shows everyone that you are ethical, honest, and trustworthy. Just because something may be legal doesn't necessarily mean you should do it. Don't do anything in your fundraising that you wouldn't want your mother to hear about, or that you wouldn't want to see on the front page of your local paper. Chances are that if you do, it will end up there... and even if it doesn't, your campaign staff, donors, and team will know about it... and so will you.

Good luck in your next campaign!