Hitting the right spot

Being small doesn't mean you can't strike it rich, but it does mean you need to be methodical in your approach, says JACKIE MENDOZA

Childhood First provides residential care and education to severely traumatised children aged between five and 18 years old. We are 90 per cent statutory funded. Past fundraising activity focused on some trusts, special events and the Flora London Marathon.

What we do and how we do it is quite complex which means our ask is far from straightforward. Beneficiary numbers are relatively low (we have four centres in the East Midlands, Norfolk & Kent) which could give an impression of limited reach and impact in comparison to other charities.

Our audiences are very specific and we need to engage with individuals and organisations that are able to invest time and thought into understanding how our work benefits the children that come to us.

Our strategy therefore focused on maintaining the running events we already had, developing trusts and embarking on major donor fundraising because we knew that high-net-worth individuals were

MAJOR DONOR MATERIALS WERE DESIGNED BY WAVE.

the type of people who would be prepared to invest time, thought and money into our work.

With our key income streams defined, our next challenge was to gain commitment from the board. There were three main hurdles to clear: the first was to help them understand the rationale behind developing major donor fundraising, the second was to set their fundraising sights way beyond what they'd been used to and the third was to help them understand the active role they had to play in approaching people.

We were clear from the outset that we needed an external person to help strengthen our case to the board so we enlisted the support of a director of development at a leading arts organisation. She attended a trustee away-day, supported our case for major donor fundraising, talked about her experiences and reinforced the need for active involvement from the board. Most importantly, she was able to ask the vital questions only an outsider could ask: do you have the right people on the board to undertake this fundraising? If not, should you think about restructuring and/or are you able to use your contacts and networks to form a development committee?

We then hired an agency to screen a section of our database for high-net-worth individuals. We were surprised to find 136 matches from a total of 576 submitted, which we cross-referenced to see if any were connected to our trustees. A meeting was then held with the trustees to discuss how we could re-engage with these people (most had lapsed up to seven years ago).

We invested in a fundraiser to focus specifically on this area. Attracting a specialist was difficult because initial responses indicated that major donor fundraisers prefer to work on established income streams. We therefore widened the spec to include corporate fundraisers looking to broaden their experience. We also allocated half of our administrator's time to research and support and up to 60 per cent of my time to development and income generation.

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After building our case for support and having strengthened our donor care processes, we encouraged our trustees to find prospective donors within their contacts and networks.

All of this resulted in our first major gift of £250,000 (our full national development projects budget for 07-08) from one individual who our chair knew.

While this was a major coup for us, we are not resting on our laurels. We are at the beginning of our journey into major donor fundraising. We now know we need to devote additional time and thought to our strategic vision and ensure that everyone – staff and trustees – are fully committed to it. Without this, we will not be able to make the most of major donor fundraising nor will we be able to truly engage with donors and maintain their support.

Above all, we need to work with our board to answer the challenging questions posed at the beginning and to help them understand how to work with us to ensure we care for our donors. ■

Jackie Mendoza is development director at Childhood First

On the case...