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Case Study: How a Nonprofit Created Sustainable Funding

By Jay W. Vogt



Enjoying a 20-fold return on its investment, one family services organization is convinced it has found the holy grail of nonprofits: a reliable, proven path to sustainable funding. It took guts and it took discipline, says the executive director of The Children's Room in Arlington, but it raised more than just the organization's bottom line.

A year ago, [The Children's Room](#) (TCR), which helps grieving children and families, committed the upfront costs and significant investment of board and staff time required for joining the Benevon program.

Benevon, a private company, provides a paint-by-numbers formula for raising gifts from individual donors by relentlessly focusing on mission. Staff and board teams attend two-day trainings and then return to their organizations with a detailed game plan and the expertise of a coach.

With training completed, and Benevon's bill paid, Children's Room Executive Director Barbara Clarke is reveling in a 20-fold return (in donations and pledges) on the investment in Benevon training in one year—just by producing one event. And the event income was all new money from new donors or from existing supporters who upped their donations.

Benevon also supplied a successful strategy to ensure that the initial training dollars came from new money. A \$6,000 grant from the state's Workforce Development Program was matched by a single new private gift.

Numbers Don't Tell Full Story

Those numbers don't tell the whole story, Clarke said.

The initial training set the tone. "It was a great use of my time," she recalled. "When we left the training, we were totally psyched. The coaches warned us, 'This is the best you will ever feel.' Still, we had a game plan. We knew exactly what we needed to do."

Eliminating the usual trial-and-error method in favor of proven formulas was a relief. "You can't overstate the value of it being a framework, a cookbook, a template," Clarke explained. "The way you do Open Houses, every detail, every minute, is mapped out. Some people find that confining. In our case it saved us countless hours we would have spent saying, 'Shall we do it this way, or that way?'"

"The framework took those decisions off the table. Instead we knew we had to tell three stories, so we focused on picking the very best ones. We spent our time on the mission."

The first step in the game plan was a free breakfast fundraiser that drew about 200 people, most of whom had been recently introduced to The Children's Room. The one-hour event focused solely on TCR's mission of providing support to grieving children, teens, and families in 75 Massachusetts communities. On the spot, 30 attendees made a long-term pledge to donate on a regular, annual

basis.

“We made more at this event than we have at any other fundraiser,” Clarke said. “That really made us feel better about future fundraising.” Indeed, TCR’s story clearly moved one attendee, who posted his glowing review on FirstGiving at <http://tinyurl.com/55ncl9>

Tours and Tells

Clarke was encouraged to sign on with Benevon after two organizations in her field had achieved great success with the program. Now, in just one year, she said TCR has achieved far more success than one of their benchmark organizations through one signature Benevon strategy: a biweekly series of very small open houses called Tour and Tells. People who take a tour, and then attend a breakfast or lunch “ask” event, donate six times more money than those who don’t.

“I had very high hopes, and it exceeded my expectations,” she said.

Benevon raises money in what it calls “the old fashioned way”: by engaging individuals in the mission of the organization.

“We have such a great mission and are so well run,” Clarke remarked. “Benevon is totally designed for that. There is no razzle-dazzle, no entertainment, or special events. Just focus on the mission—just the right thing for this economy.”

“The coaches are hard-core,” she warned. “It’s all about the metrics and the method. They are not afraid to say ‘no’ to you. Some people don’t like that. They like to play the bad cop, which is good. They keep you on track. Do you know how much time that saves you?”

To see Benevon’s methods first-hand, register for a Children’s Room Tour and Tell at <http://childrensroom.org/tour-and-tell>

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