

Using Focus Groups to Explain Planned Giving

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For years we kept hearing tales of woe from various clients. "How can we get our prospects to attend our workshops on planned giving?" they asked us. "How can we get people to understand the value—to them and to us—of a planned gift?" They had tried inviting estate planning lawyers, board members with expertise in planned gifts, even *us* to instruct people in the benefits of charitable gift annuities and charitable remainder trusts. Yet few prospects signed up to come or (worse), even if they had signed up, they did not appear the night of the workshop.

What was it, we wondered, about a workshop on planned giving that kept prospects away. Did they think that we were trying to sell them life insurance policies or time shares at Disneyworld? Were they afraid they would look stupid? Did they not want to waste their time, especially at an evening program that would take them away from their families? In great frustration, one particularly hard working director of development said to us "We should hold a focus group to find out why no one will attend these excellent programs."

Our immediate reaction was negative: focus groups, we thought, were too "touchy-feely" and superficial. Years before, one of us had participated in a publisher's focus group, led by a perky cheerleader type, and the only thing she got out of the experience were the too-intimate details of the life of one mouthy participant, a \$50 check, and the knowledge that she had just wasted two hours of her time.

But the director was a persuasive woman, so we agreed to host one focus group to find out why no one attended her workshops. We read up on focus groups—the "right" way to run them, apparently, left no one angry at wasting her time—and found a comfortable living room of someone we knew well in which to host it. The wine and cheese had to help too.

During the course of the focus group, something remarkable happened: the group began to take on an instructional life of its own. The participants, in order to give advice about workshops on planned giving, had to ask questions about CRTs and CGAs, and as they listened to our explanations, they *learned* what these acronyms stood for and how they could, indeed, benefit not only the charity they believed in but their own family. The next morning a participant e-mailed us to ask how she could "do one of these CGAs" herself, and voila . . . a new teaching format was born.

Like so many people who have made unexpected discoveries, we had inadvertently found our answer where we least expected it: holding a focus group instead of a workshop. The best venue for a workshop was a not a workshop at all but a focus group.

We believe the focus group concept works well for the same reason the best academic seminars work well: participants become involved, and as they do, they learn. People will attend because they have been invited to offer advice (*that someone will listen to!*) about helping the charity whose mission they already share and which they already support. And it turns out, we really *do* want to hear what people have to say about planned giving. Participants have offered us numerous ways of thinking about planned gifts, of approaching hesitant prospects, or of marketing CGAs that we never would have thought of by ourselves.

Here is what we do:

1. We pick a place and time that is convenient to the participants. If most of the participants are big-city lawyers, we hold a focus group as a breakfast in one of the lawyer's firm's meeting rooms. If the participants are parents of independent school students, we hold the group during the cocktail hour—with good wine and cheese—in a home of one of the parents (preferably a home everyone has wanted to see the inside of). If the participants are residents of a retirement community, we hold the meeting in the community center and offer good food.
2. We always promise participants (be they busy lawyers or retirement community residents) that we will be done in one hour. One hour, no matter what. If people stay after to ask questions (as they inevitably do—except for the lawyers at the breakfast meeting), well, that's fine with us. But promising an hour and really delivering on that promise is important.
3. We begin each session by asking a general question that everyone can respond to briefly, such as “How long have you been involved with X charity?” Having everyone say something in the first five minutes is the key to ensuring that everyone participates throughout the hour (this arcane fact remains the only useful piece of information one of us learned in a teacher education course 40 years ago). For this reason, we limit attendance at the focus groups to no more than 15 people, so that everyone can actively participate.
4. Both of us always play a part in the focus group. Usually one of us explains a few basic concepts on PowerPoint handouts so that participants have the concepts in writing to take home. (Never, *ever* do we use PowerPoint by itself, where participants turn into immobile zombies staring at a screen, but that's another essay). The other looks carefully at the faces and bodies of the participants and interrupts when some look lost (as they are wont to do--yes, even the lawyers).
5. Most of our "teaching" is done by telling stories. Most participants learn more by responding to a case study (that we always design specifically for the audience in the focus group) than by being lectured to about an abstract concept, no matter how brilliantly instructive we believe our lectures and their accompanying schematic charts to be. We limit ourselves to no more than three case studies (and sometimes to only one or two), depending on the particular points we want to make with that specific group of people.

6. We assume that no one (and we do mean *no one*) understands what a charitable gift annuity is. When we begin by asking how many people know what a CGA is, usually about half the participants raise a hand. But on further inquiry, we soon learn that the word “annuity” triggers in them memories of stories in the *Wall Street Journal* or *New York Times* about the evils of some commercial annuities, with their variable interest rates and their excessively large commission to a middle man. So, many participants are initially hostile to the concept of a CGA (and to us) because they assume we are the middle men, so to speak, come to fleece them.
7. The one of us that is scanning the participants for their facial expressions and body language is also charged with ensuring that no one person dominates the discussion. No one learns anything when one person does all the talking, so we draw upon our 50-plus (combined) years of college teaching to direct the discussion away from an obsessive talker. We ask questions such as “Jane, do you have another perspective?” or “Jack, I wonder if you agree that a “variable start” deferred CGA would be an important detail to market to your charity’s donors?”
8. Yes, we do have to “teach” everyone the basic concepts of, say, a CGA, but we have found that if we use case studies and if we keep our formal presentation to 15-20 minutes, we can introduce enough material to generate lively discussion. When the “teaching” is done, we spend the rest of the hour asking about the different benefits of the vehicle “to someone like you.”

Using focus groups in these ways benefits everyone. We have benefited greatly from these groups. From the varied participants we have gained real insights into new markets for planned gifts and the tipping point for giving that gift. Our clients have benefited by having people actually learn about planned giving in a supportive (and reinforcing) small group atmosphere—the best possible atmosphere for teaching difficult concepts. Our clients also benefit when their prospects not only learn about but also give a planned gift. In the 40-50 focus groups we have conducted in the past three years, almost all have resulted in at least one (sometimes several) new planned gift (s) following in the wake of the meeting.

Thus, focus groups have opened a whole new, and remarkably successful, avenue to teaching about planned giving. They attract participants. They diminish donor suspicions about any hidden agenda of the gathering. They involve donors in the marketing of planned gifts. They convey new and vital information in non-threatening ways. And, they are a delight to facilitate. Most important, they generate new gifts.

Although we do not offer our participants \$50 checks, most of them thank *us*—some profusely—for inviting them. Most, we know, will be better donors to the charity they believe in because they are, now, more involved in its future. Some of their faces, happily smiling, may soon show up on marketing pieces.

Carol Kolmerten and Bruce Bigelow are founding partners of Charitable Development Consulting, a consulting firm that, among other things, offers specifically designed focus groups for non-profits across the country.