



# Silent Phase to Public: When to Announce a Fundraising Campaign

It's much more than a percentage of goal raised in advance

BY RICHARD TOLLEFSON

Fifty percent. Sixty. Ninety... Conventional fundraising wisdom says nonprofits should have more than half of funds committed or in hand before publicly announcing a campaign.

The intention, after all, is to ensure campaign success. While a silent campaign phase allows fundraisers to secure lead gifts and recruit volunteers behind the scenes, there is always the risk of disincentivizing potential donors. Launch with too many gifts, and prospective donors may ask, "Why should I give? My gift won't have any impact." Launch without enough and it becomes more difficult to rally additional donor support.

## One Size Does Not Fit All

So, when is the best time to go public? It depends. Some nonprofits have situations so unique, they bypass the quiet campaign phases altogether.

Lauri Tanner, CEO of Treasure House, can relate. "We're too new, too young," she says of the Glendale-based active living community for young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities. "We had less than 2,000 donors in our database, so we've done it the other way."

Rather than starting a silent campaign focused on top donors, the nonprofit has been filling the funnel with prospects and distilling them. What's more, Treasure House needed to move its generous benefactors, Brenda and Kurt Warner, from funders to founders so that the nonprofit could diversify and build revenue sources. "We're blazing a trail and need to get to know people that don't know us yet," says Tanner.

Treasure House capitalized on existing events to announce its *Growing Home* capital campaign: during its annual Celebrity Game Night that raises operational funds, and during a Super Bowl Weekend VIP-event hosted at the Warners' home. "The Super Bowl event



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gave us access to high net-worth individuals who are interested in continuing the Treasure House dialogue," says Tanner.

But what about organizations that don't *have* a donor constituency? Grant-funded institutions that have never before raised money may face building and program needs. In that scenario, it's appropriate to emerge publicly, and early — trumpets blaring. Billboards, banners and advertising become important for building awareness, while percent-of-goal-raised plays little to no role in ramp up.

"Those percentage goals are good guideposts but don't capture the softer dynamics that must be taken into account beyond just numbers," says Gregory Leet, senior consultant with Aspen Leadership Group.



## Three Components of Campaign-Announcement Readiness

Before publicly announcing a campaign, organizations should focus on the readiness of:

- 1 The Board.** Do they embrace the culture of philanthropy? Have they achieved 100 percent campaign participation or, for those who can, committed to lead gifts? Are they aligned and synchronized with the two constituencies below?
- 2 The Executive Leadership Team.** Are leaders prepared for the challenges that arise during campaigns: shifts in the economy, staff and executive leadership turnover, board changes? Whether a small social services organization or a complicated public research university, the institution's leadership must be ready to execute a campaign — particularly the finance and accounting teams. "Campaigns have a budgetary impact," says Leet. "Additional resources need to be funded. Ongoing funding will be needed to support the campaign, so the budget office needs to be ready." Has finance bought into the campaign? Are they setting budgets for it?
- 3 The Development Staff.** Is the organization sufficiently staffed and trained? Do they know how to engage on- and off-campus constituents so that they feel energized about the campaign? "When I was hired as vice president of development for ASU, the university had already conducted an internal assessment from raw data in the donor base and concluded there was enough of a potential donor pool to move forward with a campaign," says Leet. To pull off a \$1.3 billion goal, though, Leet knew he needed more frontline staff. "We made a strategic decision to forgo a campaign right then and instead hire an internal team of leadership and major gifts officers to build a bigger pipeline of major gift donors." the best results.

In a perfect world, all three of those stakeholders would be ready in a synchronized fashion, says Leet, providing high confidence for a successful public launch.

## What happens during a typical quiet campaign phase?

Nonprofits are:

- > Raising lead gifts from those close to the organization
- > Building and deploying their volunteer bases
- > Creating collateral materials
- > Developing themes

## Who benefits from the public campaign announcement?

A campaign can't be only for the professional fundraisers. Nonprofits must rally the troops internally while also identifying the lead donors and higher-potential prospects with whom to celebrate.





## The Role of Momentum

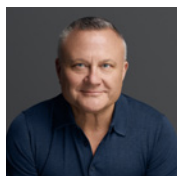
Momentum, which often results from influential donors giving large, highly visible “head-turning” gifts, is critical to the timing of public campaign announcements.

“When those gifts come in, it’s like a Good Housekeeping seal of approval,” says Tanner, noting a significant gift announced during her organization’s Celebrity Game Night. “It definitely inspired others to give. And it inspired our residents to be a part of the campaign, too — through a bake sale.”

## Ensuring Readiness for Campaign Success

What other ways can nonprofits ensure a successful campaign launch?

- > **Choose bold initiatives** that are attractive and inspirational to prospective donors.
- > **Consider natural institutional milestones** in conjunction with the campaign’s launch: the organization’s anniversary, the naming of a new president, a ground breaking or grand opening of a new or refurbished building funded, in part, by the campaign.



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