# Preparing to meet your prospects

*An Apollo Fundraising Guide to confidently meeting with potential supporters*

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## 1) Make your Plan

Before arranging any meetings with potential supporters (or prospects), make a plan of everything that needs to happen before you can make "the ask". Start by putting yourself in the prospect's shoes. What does their brain need to know before they can agree to support? What does their heart need to feel before they can agree to support? Then slip back into your own shoes. What do you need to know to ensure you make the best possible ask? Remember – your answers will be different for different prospects.

The answers to these three questions give you a checklist for each prospect. It is only when all of these things are in place that you can move from "cultivation" to "making the ask". Your plan should set out the steps you need to take to get from your current position to where you need to get to.

These steps genuinely focus around "touchpoints" – moments of contact and engagement between you and your prospect that seek to build the relationship. Touchpoints can take a vast number of forms, but some of the most common include formal and informal meetings, invitations to events, site visits (to see your work firsthand), emails and phone calls.

Your plan should include details of what touchpoint is needed, what the purpose of each touchpoint is (i.e. what aspect of your initial checklist the touchpoint is designed to address), who is responsible for ensuring the touchpoint happens and when it should happen.

Your plan is likely to include a number of touchpoints to build the relationship to the point that you can make the ask. One touchpoint is unlikely to be enough for either you or your prospect, so don't let yourself feel pressured into thinking you have to do everything in one go.

When it comes to meeting with prospects, check back to the plan. This will remind you what the aim of the meeting is – what information you need to give, what you need to find out and what you want the supporter to feel at the end. Having a clear objective for the meeting can relieve the pressure and help you to prepare.

## 2) Change your Mindset

When we think about meeting with supporters we can fall into the trap of seeing ourselves as a sort of Oliver Twist figure, going bowl-in-hand to beg for more. We frame the situation as one where the fundraiser stands to gain and the supporter stands to lose. The perception of this as an unbalanced relationship can lead to fundraisers feeling uncomfortable, embarrassed and apologetic.

To overcome this you need to change your mindset. Rather than focusing on what you are asking for, focus on what you are offering the supporter. During the relationship building stage (often called ‘cultivation’) you are trying to find out about their needs so that you can make them the best offer for them. When it comes to ‘making the ask’, if you have done your research and really got to know your prospect you should be confident that what you are offering them is the opportunity to address a need they have.

For companies, that will probably be a business need – you could be offering them the chance to promote their product or brand to a new audience, or maybe you are offering them the chance to boost staff morale and increase staff retention.

For individuals, you could be helping them to address a societal challenge that they have a passionate need to solve. Or you could be offering them the chance to meet an ideological need or a need relating to their sense of identity, values and self-esteem.

## 3) Do your Homework

Your supporters and prospects are busy people. They appreciate it when fundraisers are well-prepared for meetings. This means you need to take time to do your homework.

For an individual supporter you should remind yourself what you already know about their interests and motivations? What is their existing relationship with the organisation? Have they given before and, if so, what to? Are any of their friends/family/colleagues/peers involved? Who else do they support and why? If this is not the first meeting, do you know what has already been agreed or discussed so that you do not waste time unnecessarily covering old ground?

For businesses, you should go in knowing as much as possible about the business need(s) you believe you can help them to tackle. What successes have they had recently? What challenges are they facing? What are their priorities? What are their sponsorship and CSR aims? Which other companies or stakeholders are also involved with your work and what is the relationship like?

Showing that you have done your homework shows the potential supporter that you are taking this seriously and that you value them.

## 4) Know your Options

You’ve done your homework. You’ve made your plan. You turn up to the meeting knowing how it is all going to pan out and…WHAM…they say something you weren’t expecting. They’ve decided they want to give more money this year, or they are looking to cut back. Or that long-standing interest in supporting education projects for young people is so last year and they now want to focus on alleviating loneliness in older people.

Supporter relationships are two-way and, while you might think you know what is going on in their heads you should never underestimate their capacity to surprise you. Before the meeting, spend time thinking about some of the different options and projects, and what impact donations of different levels will have across your organisation. Being aware of the different options will enable you to adjust and go with the flow when your prospect takes the conversation in a whole new direction.

## 5) Pick your Team

Fundraising is a team game. As you look at the objectives set out in your plan you will probably realise that you need different people to help with different touchpoints. For example, if one of your touchpoints is to ensure your potential supporter knows you are well governed and financially stable you might want to arrange a meeting with a trustee and/or your Finance Manager. On the other hand, if the aim is to ensure the potential supporter feels excited about the exhibition you are asking them to support you might want to involve the curator and/or designer.

While personal relationships are hugely important in fundraising, as an organisation you should never take the view that fundraising is the sole responsibility of one person. In setting up the touchpoint, look at the aims for that meeting and decide who on your team is best placed to achieve them. Who can convey the information with credibility? Who can build rapport with the supporter? Who is the supporter most likely to relate to?

Avoid having too many people there – you don't want to overwhelm your potential supporter. (Also, the more people there are, the harder it is to build personal relationships and trust). However, if you are nervous about your meeting, it might be because you know you are not the best person to achieve the required aims. If you are not, that's ok! It is better to ask someone else to come with you than to feel you need to shoulder all of the burden yourself.

## 6) Practice your Responses

Like most things in life, one of the best ways to build confidence and ability is to practice. It may seem strange but finding someone to help roleplay the meeting in advance can do the world of good.

Obviously, your meeting is not scripted so this isn't about writing out word-for-word speeches. What is more important is to think about the possible scenarios that might occur and how you will respond if these situations arise.

Remind yourself what the aim for the meeting is. If it is to share information about something, try explaining it to your willing assistant. Can they clearly and accurately summarise what you have said?

The other thing to practice is your responses to questions. What questions might your potential supporter ask? What answers might they give to your questions and what does this mean for taking the relationship forward?

In an ideal world, your practice partner will be someone who understands fundraising from the perspective of the supporter and who has a similar level of understanding of your organisation and your project as your potential supporter. Alternatively, you could practice with multiple partners – a fundraising colleague to practice likely questions and an external friend to check that your explanations are clear.

If there is nobody that can help you, you can still practice on your own. Put yourself in the supporter's shoes and brainstorm all the questions they might ask. You can then practice responses. Try answering the questions out loud in front of a mirror to get used to giving your responses.

Taking time to think about the questions and challenges you might face, and practicing your responses will prepare you for your meeting and reduce the chance of you coming unstuck on the day.

## 7) Tell your Story

You've probably got lots of facts and figures about your work – your reach, your need and the impact you have. This is important information to have to hand. However, facts and figures in isolation can be meaningless if the potential supporter has nothing to measure them against. They can also be difficult to remember. So, while some people thrive on facts and figures, you need to be able to bring this data to life.

Telling stories is a powerful way of bringing your work to life in a passionate, emotive, memorable way. Before the meeting, think about the stories you can tell that bring your work to life and show the impact of your work at a human level. These are likely to be real examples or case studies, but told in an emotive way and focusing on the impact on the beneficiary. Where possible and appropriate, try and put the potential supporter into the story in the role of the hero.

## 8) Use your Ears

*"Generally you ain't learnin' nothin' if your mouth's a-jawin'!"*

Listening is a vital skill for fundraisers. Each touchpoint with a prospect is an opportunity for you to learn. But your ability to do this is limited if you are doing all the talking.

Instead, prepare questions that encourage your potential supporter to do the talking and, in particular, give you a greater insight to their motivations and how they make decisions. This means your questions are likely to be focus around "why?" rather than "what?". Your questions should also focus on getting as much detail as possible to help you build up the clearest possible picture of their interests, needs and motivations.

Remember, you are listening to understand rather than listening to respond. You need to try and rid yourself of any other distractions so that you can focus 100% on your potential supporter and what they are telling you. (This means putting your phone/laptop out of sight so you are not distracted by the thought of other incoming messages).

This level of active listening requires more than just your ears, as a lot of this information won't be communicated verbally. Listen to the subconscious messages your prospect is sending – what is their body language saying? What is their tone of voice saying? What are they NOT saying? This will help you to identify how engaged or interested they are, and whether there are any underlying concerns or issues that need to be addressed.

## 9) Share your Passion

Part of the purpose for any touchpoint is to build a personal connection and trust between you and your potential supporter. One of the ways you can build rapport is by showing that you share the same interests and passions as the supporter.

You are meeting this person because you believe they have a passion for what you do. You wouldn't be there if you didn't think they had any interest at all. Remembering that you are there to talk about a shared passion can make the situation seem less intimidating. Sharing your passion for your organisation's work can help build rapport while also bringing your work to life. This excitement and passion will also rub off on the potential supporter.

However, you need to find a balance. You don't want to make the meeting about you – that's not what you are there to talk about. The excitement also needs to be genuine and matched to the situation and your potential supporter. Too much excitement and passion can become overwhelming or appear insincere.

## 10) Evaluate your Performance

The more time you spend meeting potential supporters, the more confident you will become in these situations. You can strengthen this development by taking time to reflect on the meeting and your own performance.

Firstly, make sure you have updated your notes on the potential supporter to reflect what you have learned and how the relationship has advanced. This needs to be shared with other members of the team that are involved in looking after this prospect. Go back to your original plan and consider whether any of the future touchpoints need to change in light of what you have learned. You should also follow up with the potential supporter to thank them for their time, to confirm what was agreed and to agree next steps.

Having evaluated the relationship with the supporter it is now time to evaluate your own performance. Think back to the meeting. Start by identifying all of the things that you did well. Be kind to yourself, rather than rushing to identify the faults. Creating a list of the positives will help you to solidify this behaviour for future meetings.

Once you have identified all of the positives, think about the things that didn't go so well. For each negative point clearly identify what you would want to do differently next time. You can then revisit the list of both positives and negatives to help you prepare for your next prospect meeting.

In evaluating your performance it can help to consider things from different perspectives. How did it look, sound and feel from your perspective? How do you think it looked, sounded and felt from your potential supporter's perspective? How would it have looked, sounded and felt for a neutral observer?

## Good luck!

# What is stopping you from taking your fundraising to the next level?

Unsure about the steps you need to take? Worried that your team doesn't have the skills or knowledge they need to be successful? Nervous about putting your plan into action?

**We all need a helping hand from time to time. Apollo Fundraising can provide the support you need to achieve your fundraising goals.**

***We can help you find your direction*** – we've helped arts organisations write their first fundraising strategy, planned large-scale capital appeals and reviewed the strategies of successful teams looking to take their fundraising to the next level.

***We can help you improve your skills*** – we've trained arts fundraisers, volunteers, board members and senior managers. We've provided training on topics such as making the ask, making the most of digital technology and setting up individual giving schemes.

***We can help you build your confidence*** – we've coached theatres on approaching major donors, mentored visual arts organisations on launching crowdfunding campaigns and supported museums to put their fundraising plans into action.

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