Objections Overruled
Understanding and countering your donor’s objections

By William Sturtevant

When it comes to soliciting gifts, I’m a firm believer in preparation. And preparing your solicitors for the objections they’re likely to encounter is unquestionably important.

I’ll describe 12 objections here. All are real.

To interpret and respond to each – which – is essential if you are to succeed – you must consider three issues of importance.

1) What may be motivating the donor to react in this fashion? If there is a hidden agenda, what might it be?
2) How will you respond?
3) Might there be any long-term strategic implications attached to the objection? If so, how might your strategic approach be amended?

Let me preface what I’m about to say with this observation: we are not capable of nor do we seek artificial control. The positive gift decision is the natural outcome of the entire moves management process which secures involvement and affirmation along the way; It is a culmination of careful planning and implementation.

The techniques discussed below are simply designed to ensure clear communications and to adapt in a caring way to what we know about the psychology of decision-making.

1) That’s a lot of money you’re asking for.

This is not generally a serious objection. You expect some degree of price resistance when you’re seeking sacrificial gifts.

Possible response.

We know it is, and we don’t take that lightly. But you’re one of the few people we can turn to for the leadership to make this shared vision a reality.

Possible response #2:

You might probe the prospect to see if the giving level truly underlies the objection. Is it the amount or the timing that concerns you most?

2) It’s a great cause, but your timing is lousy. My business has “turned south” and I may even need to restructure some of my debt.

Assuming this is more than a smoke screen, the objection is a serious one. At the very least, the prospect is not likely to be in a frame of mind to consider a major gift.
Possible response.

We're sorry to hear of your difficulties, but you're a proven winner and we know things will turn around for you. This is not a good time to discuss specifics about your gift opportunity, but we are grateful for the opportunity to make you generally aware of what we're seeking. Why don't we plan to reconvene at a better time and, in the meantime, please know that we deeply appreciate your involvement. You're a special friend and we're grateful for all that you've done.

Possible response #2:

We understand completely and recommend against making any immediate decisions. Perhaps what we should settle on is the opportunity just presented and what you would hope to do once your situation turns around. How do you generally feel about the opportunity we just discussed?

3) It's a great cause, but your timing is lousy. My son just selected an expensive private college and my daughter is getting married in the fall.

These are things which happen to all of us and while they may affect timing, they shouldn't stand in the way of a gift decision. This is especially true if your understanding of the prospect's capabilities is accurate. Therefore this may be a smoke screen for lack of passion. Continue to probe feelings about the opportunity presented.

4) Your proposal about an Oriental wing for the museum is intriguing and I'm sure the project is important, but I'm really more interested in your collection of ancient civilization artifacts.

Sometimes an objection like this indicates a lack of understanding relative to the opportunity. That is, the Oriental wing may indeed be compatible with an interest in ancient civilizations, and in this case education is needed. Otherwise, it is perfectly appropriate to ask questions about the prospect’s interest in ancient civilization artifacts to see if some type of match can be made.

The conundrum occurs if the museum doesn't have a collection pertaining to ancient civilizations. In this case, probing is recommended to see if a match is possible, although it may be that your museum will not become the organization of choice.

5) I'll need to see what my attorney and accountant have to say. I never do anything without their advise.

Recommended response:

Of course. It's important you receive good counsel. All we really hoped to accomplish today was to reach agreement regarding this particular program and the support needed to make it a reality. The details are not unimportant and need to be addressed, but what I'd like to know is your degree of enthusiasm for the opportunities we reviewed.

6) My accountant says I shouldn't give away any more money. Besides, I have all the deductions I can possible use for the next few years.

Possible response:

It's important that whatever you do make sense from a tax standpoint. But that's not what we hope to resolve today. Rather, what we hope to learn is your enthusiasm for this opportunity and all that it will mean for others. How do you feel about the project and what will be required to achieve our objectives?
7) I’ll need to think this over for awhile. It’s a big decision. Why don’t you give me some time and I’ll get back to you?

This seems to indicate a lack of passion, and you should do some probing about the prospect’s understanding of and passion toward the opportunity. You should then take control of the follow-up.

Possible response:

Of course we understand your need to consider all we’ve discussed. But I would like to have your initial reaction to the opportunity and the benefits your gift would provide. Or, stated differently, How do you feel about what we’ve discussed here today? Or, What questions do you have and what would be the key things you need to consider?

8) I’ll do something, but I really can’t do what you’re asking for.

If the prospect is capable of doing what you’re asking for, this could be a case of inadequate cultivation such that your organization hasn’t moved high enough on the priority list. It is possible to ask for too much, too soon, and this may be an example of what results, especially when you’re dealing with an “accumulator.” It also could be a lack of passion about the outcome.

Therefore, you could first probe for the degree of enthusiasm for the project presented. At that point, after selling the dream, you should avoid price haggling because it conveys the wrong message and you can always come back another day.

Possible response:

We deeply appreciate your support and your consideration of this opportunity. Whatever you decide will be the right outcome, but we felt it important to present you with this opportunity to make a huge difference in the lives of others. It is a lot to consider and I’ll plan to give you a call next Thursday to answer any questions, and to discuss the next step.

If the prospect promises to call you:

I’ll look forward to hearing from you, and I know how busy we both are, so if I fail to connect with you by next Friday, I’ll be sure to give you a call.

9) Your presentation was interesting, but there are a number of causes competing for my attention. There’s only so much to go around and I’m already committed to several charities.

This indicates a lack of passion and that your organization may not be high on the priority list. You need to instill some passion, and the starting point would be to probe for the excitement over the outcomes associated with the opportunity presented. You might also decide to suggest that this is merely a starting point and that there is no hurry for a decision. This could give you an opportunity for further involvement and cultivation.

10) I know that on paper it looks like I have a lot of money, but I’m too busy just trying to build my business to consider giving much away. I remember when I didn’t have anything, and I also remember seeing people lose everything during the depression. I need to be careful even about good projects.

This is a difficult objection because it’s obvious you’re dealing with an accumulator. What is perceived is real and this type of insecurity often exists even with the extremely wealthy. If the project is amenable to a deferred gift (i.e. endowment), that may be the only method of giving which accommodates this psychology. Otherwise, you may have to lower your sights for now, or start the prospect on a long-term installment program.
Possible response:

I understand your need to continue to focus on your business. I also agree that personal and family priorities must come first. What I have found with others is that if the opportunity is appealing, there are often a number of ways to structure a commitment over a long-term. This allows you to retain flexibility in the use of your assets as needed, while ensuring in the long-run something you care about is accomplished. Some of the gift arrangements are revocable so that you can even reverse field if necessary.

All I really hoped to accomplish today was to acquaint you with a marvelous opportunity to make a difference, which I felt strongly would appeal to you based on my understanding of your interest. I would not want you to do it if it doesn’t work or is contrary to your interest and we could always explore details such as long-term or revocable commitments. How did you feel about the program and its impact on the beneficiaries of our services?

11) I’ll need to talk it over with my spouse.

Suggested response:

We’re eager to have you talk it over with your (wife or husband or partner). We were sure you would want to do this and maybe it would make sense for all of us to get together early next week.

Spouses discuss their philanthropy, so this is no surprise. If the spouse is unimportant to the decision and you’re sure of that, this could be a put-off. However, the spouse should always be included in the proposal unless you’re told otherwise. If the spouse has not been involved, you should always build in the offer to visit with or him or her.

Suggested response #2:

Of course, we fully expected you’d want to talk it over and we’re eager to have you do so. We’d also be delighted to sit down with the two of you next week, if this would be helpful. For now, we merely wanted to discuss the general possibilities and determine if you share our enthusiasm for the potential outcomes. How did you feel about the project we discussed and its potential benefits?

12) It’s almost embarrassing for me to say this, but you’re asking me for $1 million and I really feel $100,000 is all I can give right now.

Resist the temptation to negotiate price. This would make you look unprofessional, and sometimes the prospect makes an amazing transformation given a little time to consider everything. You can always come back at another time with other options at different giving levels.

You may be forced, in some cases, to deal with other options, but it should be resisted. Instead, let the prospect consider the opportunity: you can then assess where you are during the follow-up discussion. This may also be a case of inadequate cultivation, but if we assume this isn’t true the response below would be merited.

Suggested response:

Don’t in any way be embarrassed. There’s nothing to be embarrassed about. Whatever you decide will be meaningful and deeply appreciated. However, because of the nature of the project and the degree to which you are important to the organization, we wanted to present this profound opportunity to you. That was really our objective here today. Why don’t we give you more time to consider everything. Again, we deeply appreciate your consideration and all you have done. Whatever you decide upon will be greatly appreciated, I can assure you, and we look forward to our upcoming discussion.

William Sturtevant is author of The Artful Journey: Cultivating and Soliciting the Major Gift, 1993