

Running Prospect Management Meetings – One Researcher’s Perspective

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In the Fall issue of *NEDRA News*, Amy Minton’s article, “Trends and Issues in Prospect Management” captured the collective wisdom of both small and large shop researchers regarding their role in the moves management process. One element of this process which is often assigned to researchers is running the prospect management meetings. Often weekly, sometimes monthly, these meetings serve as strategy sessions for major gift officers to discuss top prospects under review.

While strategizing is an essential component of prospect management, I’ve found that there is a bit of a disconnect between theory and practical application when it comes to these meetings. In one of my former research positions, I was tasked with not only coordinating and preparing reports for our weekly prospect management meetings, but I was also charged with running them. This proved to be a challenge because not everyone shared the same expectations for these meetings.

When I was first hired, the development officers looked at me as an agent of change, armed with knowledge of how “it’s” done elsewhere. Prospect management meetings in this office had historically been a bit convoluted and unfocused. The hope, or expectation, was that my tenure would usher in a new era of productivity and ultimately, accountability.

After a few attempts at tightening up the meetings, aided by my fancy prospect management reports and nicely formatted agenda (which often featured a silly piece of clip art to add some levity), I began to feel as though the staff was concerned that the meetings were, perhaps, a bit convoluted and unfocused.

So, I did what I always do when faced with a challenge in development: I solicited input from others in the field. I must have polled a dozen development professionals, from researchers to development directors, from universities to hospitals. The advice they imparted sounded excellent – their input smart, incisive, “road-tested,” and, well, very much like what I was already trying to do.

For example, it was suggested by most that we review each gift officer’s Top 3-5 prospects, rather than attempt to review one’s entire portfolio. Sounds simple, obvious and wise. But what exactly makes them “top prospects?” Was it the 3-5 prospects with the greatest capacity, or perhaps the individuals closest to solicitation timing-wise, regardless of capacity? Or, was it the 3-5 prospects where input on strategy was most needed? Hmm... Suddenly, this one simple cure-all seemed a little more complicated and ambiguous.

And then I started to think, perhaps, as a means of pushing accountability, we should actually be taking a look

at those with a high capacity, and/or a high inclination, who aren’t yet cultivated or have not even been seen by a gift officer yet. Not a popular approach, but surely one that could prove effective. I was somewhat partial to this approach because if you’ve got a plan and a strategy that’s working, there’s not much to talk about. Instead, you’re just recapping what is in that prospect’s record and hence, in the action report. But again, from my own experience in other offices and from what I’ve heard from my peers, a “let’s-look-at-what-you’re-not-doing” meeting is a bit of a morale killer.

Furthermore, it seems that with the time frame allocated for a meeting – generally an hour and a half maximum – you don’t really have a chance of accomplishing your goals beyond the rote reiteration which I previously mentioned. If a gift officer does seek in-depth strategy from his/her peers in the hopes of creating a cultivation plan, one could easily spend half an hour or more on one name alone. If this prospect can make a million dollar gift, it’s certainly time well spent. However, there goes the meeting agenda. More often than not, this was the scenario that played out during the meetings. Helpful? Yes. Practical? Perhaps. But certainly not the purpose of the meeting. The opportunity for all attendees to mutually benefit, contribute and gain valuable insights about their own prospects under management was often sacrificed.

Don’t get me wrong – I am not making the case for the elimination of such meetings; it’s never a bad thing to meet face to face. We all learn from each other. Whether it’s input on a strategy, or the stumbling upon critical background information on a prospect from another gift officer, more often than not, one comes away from a major gifts meeting with more knowledge than when they entered.

So, for that reason alone, I’ll keep encouraging these meetings, even if the goal, laid out in the agenda, isn’t really feasible.

I suppose, ultimately, the best way to keep a group of development officers and researchers functioning and moving prospects through the pipeline is by maintaining an open door with one another. Don’t wait for that meeting to talk strategy with your peers or your superiors. Keep open lines of communication with one another and always be bouncing ideas and suggestions off each other.

There are a lot of prospects. Almost by definition, more than any development office can ever thoroughly cultivate or fully research. And certainly more than can ever be vetted in a meeting with half a dozen or more other officers, each with 150-250 assignments. Focus your gift officers, and your meetings will become a productive component of the prospect management process. 