Fundraising by Friends of the Library Groups:
Profitability Trends and Effectiveness of Recent Initiatives

Sally Neale
Southern Connecticut State University
New Haven CT

ABSTRACT: Recent fundraising initiatives are examined to identify profitability trends. Surveys were distributed to Friends of the Library members (N=45) and library directors/library fundraisers (N=31) through nationwide online surveys. Library patrons (N=50) completed surveys at a public library on the eastern shoreline of Connecticut. Four trends emerged: 1) The importance of advanced technology tools in fundraising; 2) The importance of continually revising the used book sale; 3) The insignificance of eBooks on used book sales; and 4) The importance of divergent initiatives and joint collaboration.

Libraries and their funding sources are sensitive to economic climate. Recent inflationary trends impacting negatively on library budgets were found as early as 2005 in a study by OCLC. The Foundation Center (2010) reported fiscal year (FY) 2009 as the worst year for foundation giving in this country since the Great Depression of the 1930s. A 2011 survey conducted by ALA (2011) Office for Research & Statistics, found an increasing number of states reporting public library closures due to funding cuts.

Due to budgetary shortfalls, libraries have come to rely on auxiliary fundraising initiatives (Dempsey, 2010). Friends of the Library (FOL) groups provide their associated libraries with the planning, production, and management of auxiliary fundraising initiatives (Wolfe, 2005). Developing effective fundraising initiatives, however, requires understanding fundraising trends (Silverman, 2008). FOL groups have demonstrated an ongoing need for fundraising information in order to fulfill their mission (Wolfe, 2005) but that information is not necessarily readily available. In searching databases including Google Scholar, EBSCO Host, Academic OneFile, Emerald, ABI/Inform, ProQuest, and LexisNexis and reading in the literature found little in the way of recent studies regarding FOL fundraising initiatives. Indeed, D’Andreaia, Fitzpatrick, and Oliver (2011) wrote that the majority of printed materials regarding FOL fundraising is comprised of either practical advice on establishing FOL groups, and/or creating and producing fundraising initiatives.

One possible reason for the lack of formal fundraising research studies might be due, in part, to preconceived opinions about FOL groups. In a related OCLC (2008) study of library support, elected government authorities viewed the fundraising efforts of FOL groups as insignificant. This opinion could be accounted for in that FOL fundraising initiatives are sometimes seen as disconnected, unrelated activities (Lehmann, n.d.).

Notwithstanding the lack of research on FOL fundraising, the literature does provide advice if not guidelines for successful fundraising. Browar and Streit (2003) stress the necessity of developing a long-range fundraising mission rather than, for
example, a FOL group relying solely on the proceeds of a used book sale as their fundraising initiative. As Browar and Streit point out, a single-vehicle strategy could potentially jeopardize the continuing success of the FOL’s fundraising outcomes if that initiative is not well timed with current local interests and conditions.

Along with a long-range fundraising plan, Silverman (2008) tells us that effective fundraising incentives need to build donor relationships. Building donor relationships means determining effective services, programs and resources in order to promote successful fundraising initiatives (Silverman, 2009). Among the more common vehicles for fundraising initiatives are major appeals, annual contributions, and foundation funding; though, alternative fundraising activities have also been effective (Corson-Finnerty, & Blanchard, 1998). Swan (1990) observed that people often prefer to donate when there are exchanges of goods involved. This might be one reason why used book sales, which enable community members to buy and discard unwanted books (Swan, 1990), are such a popular fundraising initiative (FOCL, 2011).

Often, used book sales offer other items for sale, such as book bags (Nawrocki, 2010; Tucker & Mosely, 2008), gift or note cards or pads (Nawrocki, 2010; Reed, Nawalanski & Peterson, 2004; Tucker & Mosely, 2008), bookmarks (McClellan, 2007; Nawrocki, 2010; Tucker & Mosely, 2008), plants, baked goods, DVDs, CDs, tapes, tee shirts, and magnets (Nawrocki, 2010).

Another reason for the popularity of used book sales as an FOL fundraising initiative might just be their perceived net profitability (Swan, 1990). However, a 2010 survey conducted by Library Journal found the used book sale was not the top, auxiliary fundraising income producer (Dempsey, 2010). The top fundraising initiative was the passport center where libraries are approved by the National Passport Center as a Passport Acceptance Facility to process patron passport applications (Dempsey, 2010). The passport center was found to have almost seven times the median income (M=$34,000) as a used book sale (M=$5,000) (Dempsey, 2010).

Used book sales have faced some challenges. In 2009, the Poulsbo Friends of the Library reported used book donations considerably decreasing and the group was forced to delay their used book sale because of it (Sheppard, 2009). An investigation into the source of the decreased donations revealed a competing non-profit organization’s proliferation of the FOL group’s area with used book donation bins (Sheppard, 2009).

Decreasing book donations also became a concern for a Connecticut Friends group in the winter of 2010 (personal communication, February, 2010). Shortly afterwards, sales of eBooks were reported on the rise (“Sales of e-books…,” 2010). Between January and June 2010, Amazon’s eBooks sales reportedly tripled compared to 2009, and were outselling printed books (“Sales of e-books…,” 2010). In 2011, Bosman reported concern regarding the continuing efficacy of the used book sale as a library fundraising initiative due to rising eBook sales.

Browar and Streit (2003) found effective fundraising income is generated from a variety of sources and many sources were found to offer suggestions into alternate fundraising activities. Alternate activities included auctions (Landau, 2008; Taylor, 2010; McClellan, 2007; and Reed, Nawalanski & Peterson, 2004); tours and recycling (Landau, 2008). Additional suggestions include fee-based courses (Landau, 2008; Dempsey, 2010); sales on baked goods or cookbooks or plants (McClellan, 2007); coffee shops and passport centers (Dempsey, 2010) and gift shops (Dempsey, 2010; Tucker & Mosely,
Offering branded merchandise for sale (Dempsey, 2010; Taylor, 2010) and online wish lists (Dempsey, 2010) were also mentioned.

Special events as a fundraising vehicle can include weddings and bar mitzvahs (Dempsey, 2010) as well as book/author programs (Kirch, 2009). Landau (2008) and McClellan (2007) suggested fashion and art shows. Several authors wrote of family-oriented fundraising vehicles such as sports-related events (Landau, 2008; Levine, 2009; Taylor, 2010), as well as the “Mother/Daughter Tea” (McClellan, 2007). Other special events could include “theme parties” (Landau, 2008). Landau (2008), McClellan (2007) and Kirch (2009) suggested food-related social events such as wine and food tastings. Special events can also find increased success through mutually advantageous collaborations with key constituents in the community (Kirch, 2009). These collaborations can help increase profits and long-range public relations plans, as they create community involvement (Kirch, 2009).

**Method**

To facilitate understanding what makes fundraising initiatives successful today and how their relevant trends will predict their effectiveness in the future for Friends of the Library (FOL) groups, a survey solicited responses from three populations: FOL groups (n=45), Library directors/library fundraisers (n=31), and library patrons (n=up to 50). FOL group members and library directors/library fundraisers participated by responding to an email sent via three listservs: 1) Friends of Connecticut Library members (N=247) (personal communication, June 27, 2011); 2) Friends of Libraries USA members (N ~500) (personal communication, June 23, 2011); and 3) ConnTech members (N ~958) (personal communication, June 24, 2011). Library patrons participated via a convenience sample recruitment at a Connecticut shoreline public library.

A structured survey contained both closed- and open-ended questions on topics to reveal what fundraising initiatives are currently being used and how successful they are in order to determine trends for the future. To identify potential trends, these questions included the effectiveness of used book sales (i.e. are they still profitable, are donations down, how successful is the sale of other items, etc..), what events are being conducted and how successful they are, what, if any, advanced communication technology is being employed for fundraising purposes, and what if any changes to fundraising initiatives are being planned. The study was conducted during summer 2011.

**Results and Discussion**

**Public Relations and Advertising**

For all these fundraising initiatives to succeed, however, one key element must include public relations and advertising (Silverman, 2008). Posters, email, and regular mail can be used to promote fundraising activities (Silverman, 2008). Other publicity/advertising venues could include notices in newsletters, newspapers or even more advanced technology tools such as websites (Reed, Nawalanski, & Peterson, 2004).
Advanced technology tools such as blogging, email and social media websites such as Facebook can increase communication efforts with FOL members and donors (Silverman, 2008). As library users and potential donors develop communication preferences towards technology tools (Hunter, 2002), fundraising initiatives should utilize them to help build connections with donors (Silverman, 2008). The FOL fundraising website while providing information on events and initiatives can, by using it to acknowledge members and donors, be a powerful tool for maintaining and building support and uniting members and donors who share common interests (Corson-Finnerty & Blanchard, 1998).

Advanced technology tools could also assist FOL groups in determining the level of success of their fundraising initiatives. Stein (1996) stated websites have the capability of tracking page hits, providing feedback through surveys and emails, as well as making it easier for donors to connect with fundraisers. A cohesive, advanced communication plan would not only accept donations online (Hunter, 2002), but also allow the FOL group to obtain feedback from each donor.

**Advanced Technology Tools in Fundraising**

Advanced technology tools (ATT) prevail in library, education and business environments. In a survey conducted by The Nielsen Company (2008), 78% of households in the United States were found to have Internet access. This raises the question whether ATT is an effective fundraising tool. In Hunter’s (2002) survey, while two library directors reported not using online fundraising because they believed personal contact was more effective, the research suggests that the majority of library patrons surveyed prefer using the Web and email for fundraising communication, especially for those who attended at least one library fundraiser. Additionally, for those patrons who only preferred the used book sale, survey data suggests the majority might be responsive to fundraising connections if ATT were utilized.

The majority of FOL groups and library directors/library fundraisers (LD/LF) reported using some type of ATT. Trends toward increased ATT utilization for fundraising is positively indicated by the library patron survey data, especially through the usage of email. A third of library patrons surveyed also reported donating online. While only one in three patrons participated in online donations, to limit the donor-base to only those who mailed or delivered funds in person could potentially diminish the effectiveness of fundraising efforts. One FOL participant saw ATT as a fundraising itself, calling for, “more Internet based rather than print based” as “this saves money in printing and mailing costs.”

This is not to say, however, the report’s findings indicate a trend toward the cessation of more traditional fundraising outreach efforts (i.e. fundraising events themselves and/or advertisements in newspaper and flyers)—almost half of library patrons utilize the traditional practices. But with more than half selecting ATT, it indicates predominance towards it. However, it is important to remember that ATTs are tools and as such should be used to support fundraising initiatives, not supersede them. The survey data showed that even though nearly half of the LD/LF participate in some type of online fundraising, they do so at varying levels of participation, depending upon the specific initiative. Additionally, a large percentage (47% total combined of 30% preferring to go
to book sales, 11% preferring to volunteer, and 6% preferring to buy event tickets) of library patrons surveyed still prefer to physically attend fundraising events. In terms of publicity and communication preferences, patrons preferred ATT (56% total combined of 40% preferring email and 16% preferring Websites) over more traditional publicity methods (44% total combined of 18% preferring posters and flyer, 16% preferring newspapers, and 10% preferring regular mail).

The Impact of eBooks on FOL fundraising

Notwithstanding the many who have reported rising eBook popularity, library patron data indicated an overwhelming and continuing preference of printed books, including anticipated future preference. And, for those that reported preferring eBooks, only one reported having not attended a used book sale. Good news regarding the continued popularity of printed books can also be found in data from the FOL survey, where only three participants reported their book sale donations decreasing.

However, the eBook revolution should not be ignored completely. Researchers predict that by 2015, eBook sales will have tripled (Rosenbloom, 2011). If paper shortages, publisher profit margins and consumer preferences all lean more in favor of the eBook technology, we could expect a decrease in at least some markets for printed books. One library patron gives us one perspective on potential shifts in trends stating eBooks were preferred “only as a convenience when traveling.” FOL groups for whom the book sale is their only initiative can be proactive in planning for an eventual shift in preference. One idea is to grow the variety of items sold at used book sales, for example by encouraging donations of DVDs and CDs; and offer a variety of non-audio/visual and book items for sale such as calendars, “book nameplates, games, maps and art” as one FOL survey participant wrote. Another idea would be to increase the variety of fundraising initiatives offered by the FOL group instead of relying on the used book sale as the sole FOL fundraiser.

The Used Book Sale as an FOL fundraiser

The majority (58%) of library patrons surveyed attended used book sales at least once a year, with over a quarter (27%) having never attended a used book sale. This suggests less frequent, but larger, more comprehensive sales may produce, overall, equivalent revenues to multiple events but with a more focused, and therefore efficient, effort. One FOL respondent wrote, “We find ‘Mini-Sales’ are too labor intensive to be worth holding; we rely on our one very big book sale.”

All FOL participants surveyed conducted some type of book sale, which revealed a trend towards the continuing efficacy of the used book sale. More than half of FOL survey participants believed used book sales are very successful; library patrons were by and large enthusiastic about donating books and FOL respondents reported virtually no signs of the book donations decreasing—all an indication of continuing community enjoyment of used book sales as well as an awareness of library fundraising needs. The importance of the used book sale initiative for FOL groups was clearly evident in this study. However, because of its importance, it then becomes an imperative to ensure its success in the future.
Many FOL members reported revising their used book selling techniques. These included adding online book selling, revising/increasing book prices, as well as creating library bookstores. The creation of and importance of maintaining a used bookstore was mentioned by several FOL. One wrote “We identified a space in the library that was not being used and opened a book sales room for daily sales…The income we have generated to help the library has risen from about $10,000/yr to over $40,000 to $50,000 and up per year.” These up-to-date trends indicate that FOL groups are aware of a continuing need of revising the used book sale model.

There can be no doubt, with 100% of FOL survey participants conducting them, that the importance of continuing book sale profits is vital. And though this trend indicated the continuing effectiveness of the used book sale, it does cause concern should the model suffer in any way due to say eBooks or loss of interest in more traditional fundraising initiatives on the part of the public. But for now, particularly on intangible grounds, the majority of LD/LFs surveyed reported the book sale as a very meaningful fundraising activity.

**Current Fundraising Initiative Trends**

Fundraising trends for library patrons overwhelmingly favors the used book sale (61%) as a preferred library event, followed closely by book/author events (58%). A wide variety of other events are being conducted as well with patrons preferring special programs (39%), lectures and classes (39%), movie nights (26%), and art shows (26%). Support for a broader range of fundraising initiatives was echoed in the library patron survey data. Although the majority (73%) reported attending used book sales, only 26% did so exclusively. Used book sales and literature/author events were also preferred by LD/LF (48% each) and Friends groups (100% and 20% respectively).

Divergent fundraising initiatives had some interest. Slightly more than a quarter of patrons surveyed attended non-book sale initiatives. Two patrons wrote that youth-focused initiatives could bring additional possibilities: “Library events I prefer (and would like to see more of) are child-focused,” and “I also think children’s special events could be great money makers.” A youth-focused used book sale could be an interesting additional event, particularly if combined with coupons for a free book distributed to, for example, local youth groups or select grades in the local school. This might provide a good opportunity to increase awareness of the library’s youth services through brochures and information tables and activities.

While the overwhelming trend is for Friends groups to hold a single, auxiliary fundraising initiative, library patrons had a broader interest in alternate contribution opportunities, potentially offering a significant opportunity for FOL groups to reach donors in many other ways. Patrons also favored books/author events, special programs and lectures/classes and thus sources of contributions.

Another way to promote variety in fundraising initiatives is through membership drives/dues. As reported from the survey data, membership dues can be an effective fundraising initiative. But as successful as it can be as an initiative trend, further analysis of the survey data also revealed rating fluctuations—these might have indicated that the effectiveness or even the appropriateness of charging dues might depend on the FOL group’s mission and needs.
It would stand to reason that the more opportunities an FOL group has to offer its community in terms of both tangible and intangible fundraising activities, the greater its potential for effective fundraising. Leonhardt (2011) discusses the importance of intangible fundraising in terms of growing donor loyalty and relationships. The staff of the Worthington Library (2010) wrote that goodwill increases social capital. And social capital can be translated into fundraising dollars. Consider this comment by one FOL participant: “We used to focus primarily on book sales. We are now branching out to initiatives that will reach more people and also provide opportunities to advocate library services more regularly.”

**Joint Fundraising**

Adoption of initiative diversification can be affected by lack of time for fundraising. Joint collaborations might be one solution. By adding a collaborator’s time, energy and manpower, FOL could increase their overall fundraising opportunities. Consider this comment by one LD/LF participant, “It would be good to partner with a retail-savvy FRIENDS gift shop!” While collaborations were not highly represented in the data, they were not unprecedented. Almost half of Friends participants surveyed did participate in at least one form of collaboration. However this Friends comment: “We are just beginning our fundraising initiatives and have not had as many opportunities for collaborative efforts as a long-established Friends group may have” suggests that while the desire for joint fundraising is there, however realizing it is more of a challenge. This suggests perhaps the need for collaborations or at least mentoring between more established and experienced collaborators and newer Friends groups. Many LD/LFs respondents reported that the FOL group was most often a fundraising collaborator.

**Conclusion**

Fundraising variety, collaborations, remodeling, adoption of ATT, as well as to proactively and continually assessing initiatives are all trends to enable the future success of FOL fundraising initiatives revealed in this study. For FOL groups and LD/LFs who rely largely or even solely on the used book sale initiative, there are many actions that can be done to ensure its success in the future. Keeping up-to-date on the latest ATT fundraising techniques is just one of them. Being mindful of the possible impact of eBooks on the used book sale is another. And lastly, being aware of what the community responds to in terms of communication and fundraising needs, both tangibly and intangibly, is important as well. It is not so much as determining the one, best method of FOL fundraising, but this report’s survey data revealed that by allowing for many different avenues and opportunities, fundraising success could be better realized.

The importance of FOL fundraising initiatives cannot be understated. The majority of LD/LFs reportedly had one, and many FOL participants reported being the library’s most important fundraising component. As one FOL participant wrote, “Every event the library puts on, the friends contribute their time as available.” Additionally, by analyzing the data received by the LD/LFs, it revealed a lack of variety in fundraising initiatives and therefore identified its potential need. Further evidence as to this need could potentially be found in the total number of not applicable selections regarding
rating fundraising income by initiative type for LD/LFs. The not applicable selections were twice the combined total of very successful and somewhat successful selections.

Could this data be indicative of LD/LF need or the fact that for many, their FOL group is their only fundraising component? For the majority of LD/LFs participants, they had no dedicated fundraiser on staff. This reality could seriously put the LD/LF's fundraising mission in jeopardy. As one LD/LF commented, “Fundraising is another responsibility for an over-burdened Director.” Thus, the fundraising efforts by FOL groups can provide vital aid to help libraries cope with ever decreasing budgets.

But how much can one, FOL volunteer group expect to do in light of the increasing responsibilities for fundraising? Increasing fundraising initiatives could be another challenge for groups already pressed with overwhelming responsibilities and little time to take on more volunteer work. But that is just where a joint collaboration might help. And for FOL groups who are interested in conducting more ATT initiatives, but lack the expertise, perhaps the library would be a good place to receive guidance? Blogs are free, not overly complicated to set-up and this is the same with enabling online donating through a service like PayPal.

These recommendations will hopefully serve to offer FOL groups both concrete and important suggestions in furthering their fundraising initiatives. As evidence of this potential, following the initial creation of the study, an offer was received from the President of the Friends of Connecticut Libraries to present the survey findings at their annual conference in November, 2011 was made. Additionally, the Executive Director of the Association of Library Trustees, Advocates, Friends and Foundations, a division of the American Library Association has also asked for collaboration on a newsletter article about this study’s findings. These presentations will hopefully serve FOL groups with effective fundraising ideas to better support their associated library’s missions far into the future.

References


APPENDIX

**Figure 1.** Patrons preferences for receiving publicity/communication

- Newspaper (n=15)
- Posters/flyers (n=16)
- Websites (n=15)
- Email (n=36)
- Regular mail (n=9)
Figure 2. Friends Use of the Internet (1 blank)

- To advertise events/programs (n=30) - 68%
- To communicate with members (n=26) - 59%
- To recruit members (n=21) - 48%
- For online book selling (n=17) - 39%
- To email newsletters (n=16) - 36%
- To accept donations online (n=10) - 23%
- To ask for donations (n=10) - 23%
- Not applicable (n=5) - 11%
- To highlight significant donors/volunteers (n=4) - 9%
- To sell tickets for events/programs (n=3) - 7%
Figure 3. LD/LF Online Fundraising Initiatives (2 blank)

- To advertise events/programs (n=21): 72%
- To communicate with patrons (n=18): 62%
- To email newsletters (n=14): 48%
- To ask for donations (n=10): 34%
- For online book selling (n=8): 28%
- To accept donations online (n=8): 28%
- To sell tickets for events/programs (n=5): 17%
- Not applicable (n=5): 17%
- To highlight significant donors/volunteers (n=3): 10%
Figure 4. Patron Preferred Library Events (12 blank)

- Used book sales (n=23) 61%
- Book/Author events (n=22) 58%
- Special programs (n=15) 39%
- Lectures/classes (n=15) 39%
- Movie nights (n=10) 26%
- Art shows (n=10) 26%
- Theme parties (n=4) 11%
- Dinner/social events (n=3) 8%
- Fashion shows (n=2) 5%
- Tours/trips (n=1) 3%
- Antique appraisals (n=1) 3%
- Auctions (n=1) 3%
**Figure 5. Patron Preferred Library Contribution**

- Buy event tickets (n=5)
- Amazon Wish List (n=5)
- Respond to appeals (n=8)
- Volunteer (n=10)
- Cash donations (n=14)
- Buy library merchandise (n=12)
- Go to book sales (n=27)
- Not sure (n=8)

**Figure 6. Friends Fundraising Initiatives**

- Used book sales (n=45) 42%
- Online used-book sales (n=19) 27%
- Gift sales/stores (n=12) 20%
- Literature/Author events (n=9) 18%
- Bake sales (n=8) 11%
- Auctions (n=5) 7%
- Recycling (n=3) 4%
- Tours/trips (n=2) 2%
- Antique shows/appraisals (n=1) 2%
- Coffee shops (n=1) 2%
- Theme parties (n=1) 2%
- Family game events (n=1) 2%
- Fee-based courses (n=0) 0%
- Fashion shows (n=0) 0%
- Passport centers (n=0) 0%
Figure 7. Friends Used Book Sale Income vs. Total Other Fundraising

- 0-20% (n=3)
- 20-40% (n=6)
- 40-60% (n=11)
- Over 80% (n=25)
- Not Applicable (n=0)

Figure 8. LD/LF Fundraising Initiatives (10 blank)

- Used book sales (n=10) 48%
- Literature/Author events (n=10) 48%
- Gift sales/stores (n=8) 38%
- Recycling (n=5) 24%
- Auctions (n=3) 14%
- Coffee shops (n=2) 10%
- Bake sales (n=2) 10%
- Passport centers (n=1) 5%
- Family game events (n=1) 5%
- Tours/Trips (n=1) 5%
- Fee-based courses (n=1) 5%
- Antique shows/appraisals (n=0) 0%
- Fashion shows (n=0) 0%
Figure 9. LD/LF Used Book Income vs. Total Other Fundraising (4 blank)
Figure 10. LD/LF Joint Fundraising Initiatives (16 blank)

- Friends of Library group (n=11)
- Other non-profits (n=7)
- Authors (n=3)
- Commercial businesses (n=1)
- Publishing companies (n=1)
- Local clubs (n=2)

Figure 11. Friends Joint Fundraising Initiatives (2 blank)

- The library (n=9)
- Local clubs (n=3)
- Authors (n=2)
- Publishing Companies (n=0)
- Commercial Businesses (n=1)
- Other non-profits (n=8)
- Not applicable (n=25)
### Table 1. Listing of alternate sale items by survey participants

- Art sales
- Games
- Perpetual Calendar
- Library advocacy items
- Jigsaw puzzles
- Maps
- Drawings
- Spin art sale
- Book nameplates
- Strawberry Social
- Used Jewelry
- Used magazines

### Table 2. Listing of auxiliary fundraising initiatives by survey participants

- Sell sidewalk bricks engraved with donor’s name
- Rent or sell books to movie production companies
- Team Scrabble Challenge
- Child-focused events/Paint-a-duck contest
- Gingerbread house competition in December
- February Tea Party
- Direct Mail Art Sales
- Parade of Parties events hosted by individuals or org[anization]s to benefit the Library
- Make a list of priorities of library’s collection needs and inviting people to donate
- Murder Mystery Event
- Parade of Pooches dog show
- Community-wide Spelling Bee
- Macy’s Shop for a Cause
- Holiday Dinner Meeting
- Golf Tournament
- Restaurant food tastings
- Raffle of floral bouquets based on books
- Strawberry Social
- Memorial wall
- Music Nights
- Gift wrapping at Border’s
- Children’s halloween party
- Vending center
- Copy and printing receipts