Fundraising is practiced in many parts of the world. In some places, the practices are indigenous and developed at the grassroots level due to religious or cultural influences. At other times and in other places, practice is based on principles defined by U.S. professionals and these principles are adapted to meet cultural expectations. Therefore an understanding of cultural elements which are critical in determining how fundraising is carried out in a particular society and country is vital for professionals who seek philanthropic support for their organizations; such an understanding is both enriching and enlightening.

**Fundraising, Culture, and the U.S. Perspective**

by

Lilya Wagner

In an article titled “Developing Globally Literate Leaders” the authors relate the following incident. “Walk into the headquarters of Ping An Insurance Company, look up, and you’ll see a bust of Confucius—not at all surprising in this Chinese company. But look again. Facing Confucius from across the lobby is none other than Sir Isaac Newton. In fact, paintings of great Eastern and Western thinkers serve as a backdrop all the way down the entry hall to where Confucius and Newton peacefully coexist” (Rosen and Digh, 2001, p. 70). This illustration can easily be translated to the world of nongovernmental organizations throughout the world. Local roots that give modern-day philanthropy its impetus exist alongside with western, particularly U.S., ideas on how to motivate philanthropy that is based on ancient roots.

U. S. citizens, regardless of their own cultural and ethnic heritage, often view philanthropy as their domain, forgetting that their own roots, whether distant or recent, contain elements of giving to others. As Eugene R. Tempel wrote, “Americans tend to be myopic about philanthropy. We sometimes even think and talk as if we invented it” (Tempel, 2003, p.26). True, a formalized means of giving and receiving, of offering and asking, has perhaps been most recognized as an organized and substantiated practice in the United States, but many of the traditions, habits and professional pursuits that are part of our daily lives as donors or fundraisers came from other lands as the United States was settled.

Philanthropy is as ancient as human existence. Most religious and cultural entities express charitable expectations from their members, and yet little attention has been paid to this subject, particularly by Americans for whom philanthropy is a way of life. The editors of *Philanthropy in the World’s Traditions* wrote in the introduction, “That so little attention has been paid to this subject is surprising” (Ilchman, Katz and Queen, 1998, p. ix). They also state that philanthropy is rooted in the ethical notions of giving and serving to those beyond one’s family and often driven by religious traditions as well as shaped by cultural behaviors and practices. The term “philanthropy” also causes some difficulty, with confusion over related concepts of charity and altruism. Voluntary giving and serving others is the oft-
accepted definition of philanthropy, and yet there is no universal acceptance of values which promote and drive philanthropy, because cultural values vary greatly. Recognition of the cultural roots and influences on philanthropy allows us to understand more completely how philanthropic activities are related to societal benefit in different settings. The editors of *Philanthropy in the World’s Traditions* concluded that “philanthropy was not a free-floating activity separated from the complex elements of the societies in which it resided, but was influenced, indeed structured, by the specificity of particular cultures” (Ilchman, Katz and Queen, 1998, p. x).

Culture is valuable for providing a foundation or framework to a practice and tradition of giving. According to Wilson, “Culture strongly influences how one behaves and how one understands the behavior of others, and cultures vary in the behaviors they find proper and acceptable.” (1996, p. 1). There is the external culture, which is exhibited in outward behaviors and traditions that are readily discernible, such as a performance of a mariachi band. Internal culture is less evident because it involves the way people think about situations and conceptualize information. Culture can be most easily explained as a people’s way of life. All cultures view reality differently. These views are set in unique communities that have beliefs and behaviors not always shared or understood by others in the “outside” world. Some cultural meanings are easily recognized; others are more subtle and demand careful observation in order to come to conclusions about the culture itself. For the fundraising professional, therefore, consideration of cultural elements is vital prior to any fundraising activity in any country. Unfortunately, many fundraisers approach a relationship and solicitation from their own perspective, therefore leaving themselves unprepared for cultural differences that can easily be misinterpreted and misconstrued. The cultural dimensions of charity and philanthropy, terms which engender much academic discussion yet have the end result of giving to others, and the distribution of income and wealth all have a variety of meanings from culture to culture.

Two main lessons emerge. There are thought leaders who maintain that in our borderless society, in our global community, culture doesn’t matter. In actuality, culture matters more. As discernible borders come down and information flow as well as movement of peoples occurs, cultural barriers go up and present new challenges and opportunities. Learning about fundraising in various cultures isn’t a one-way transaction. While many countries look to the U.S. model for understanding how various principles and strategies can work, we in the U.S. can also learn a great deal about expanding our own knowledge and practice through observation of how fundraising works in other lands. For example, while telephone solicitation may not function well in many countries due to limitations on this means of communication, the Internet may reach people in the most remote areas and therefore is used by NGOs quite effectively. The second lesson is that within cultural differences that shape fundraising practices, there is a universality of principles which every good fundraiser must practice. The elements of making a strong and compelling case for support cut across borders. How these elements are shaped when case expressions are prepared and presented is another matter, but making a case remains a universal concept. So, as we consider culture and its
importance in forming the foundation of philanthropy and fundraising anywhere in
the world, we can share the views of Rosen and Digh who wrote, “Culture is no
longer an obstacle to be overcome. Rather, it is a critical lever for competitive
advantage” (2001 p. 74).

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), as nonprofits are known in much of
the world outside of the U.S., have played a critical role in the shaping of local civil
society because of shifting social and political developments. Events of the last
fifteen years, perhaps best seen during the post-Soviet era and the developing
democracies in many parts of the world, have caused citizens to push for more self-
expression and freedom of expression, for the opportunity to voluntarily gather
together for common vision and goals, and for the aid of those in the poorer
segments of society. Nonprofit organizations, or NGOs, are organized to serve the
public good and their profits are not distributed to members or owners. Therefore
NGOs have served as excellent vehicles for the development of democratic ideals.
There are societies where NGOs are controlled by government and therefore not as
highly developed, but still they maintain the traditions of voluntarism and
philanthropy.

But, returning to a statement found early in this chapter— that the U.S. vision
of fundraising in the rest of the world is myopic, limited, and even
unknowledgeable—we restate our belief that an understanding of what occurs in the
cultures giving and receiving around the world is valuable for professional
understanding and growth—to say nothing of therefore not appearing to be parochial
or provincial.

As our international colleagues have indicated in the chapters that follow,
fundraising occurs in all areas of the world. Some regions or countries experience
fundraising as something managed from the U.S. but designed to assist locally,
such as work done by UNICEF and CARE. Other examples are projects instituted by
U.S. organizations such as Counterpart, which establishes programs and aids local
personnel in assuming their management and funding. Alongside these efforts,
however, philanthropic traditions continue locally. For example, while international
causes function and succeed in Kenya, locals also take up and fund causes such as
caring for street children or AIDS victims.

In some parts of the world U.S. trainers, consultants and fundraisers have
been invited to become part of the philanthropic scene. The Fund Raising School at
the Center on Philanthropy at Indiana University is one such example. International
participants come to the U.S. to learn principles and techniques of fundraising which
they in turn implement in their own countries. Or, the School has been invited to
teach classes in various countries, making it more possible for many to learn how it
does work in the U.S. and how these principles can be adapted to local cultures and
practices.

In a book published by Resource Alliance, The Worldwide Fundraiser’s
Handbook, the authors discuss why fundraising is important for an NGO’s success.
Every organization needs money to survive, develop, and expand. Fundraising is
vital to reducing dependency on some parent organization, or founder, or limited funding source. Fundraising is vital for an organization’s viability over time. Fundraising is especially significant in building a constituency that will not just use the NGO’s services but will also foster its ability to provide services and carry out its vision.

In carrying out fundraising efforts, on the one hand, professionals in every land have found commonalities in some practices and concepts. In order to develop and flourish, and do more than just survive, good management practices must be implemented. Ethical practice and stewardship, while interpretations vary from culture to culture, are vital for NGO success in gaining the confidence of donors of all types. Making a compelling case, regardless of types of case expressions which are culturally defined, is necessary in order to appeal to regional and national constituencies. Certainly motivations for giving tend to be universal—giving to meet a need, make a difference, bring about change, and more. When participants in fundraising courses are asked to list motivations they believe are inherent in their cultures and subcultures, the commonality of reasons for giving is quite surprising.

On the other hand, fundraising professionals or NGO personnel who raise funds find that some practices and concepts differ considerably. For example, in some cultures prospect research would be impolite at the least and highly intrusive and suspect at the most. Consider former Soviet republics, where the KGB maintained records on its citizens. Making the leap from this mentality to the positive reasons for accumulating information about prospects and donors is quite a challenge. In many countries volunteer activity is minimal and not widely accepted as a practice. In other lands, people may do pro bono work on behalf of a program or organization they believe in and not recognize such activity as volunteering in the U.S. sense. Volunteering for fundraising is not a widely accepted practice, yet activity exists in many places that can lend itself to an organized effort leading toward such endeavors. Strategies used for fundraising vary from country to country, sometimes due to economic and societal pressures and restrictions or capabilities, and sometimes due to cultural acceptance of certain means of communication.

These types of similarities and differences, and many others, will emerge as the reader pursues the sampling of fundraising descriptions by world regions which follow this chapter.

Returning, then, to how culture in all its parameters affects the practice and techniques of fundraising, we use Edward T. Hall’s “Silent Language”, from an article published in a 1960 issue of the Harvard Business Review, which became a classic in understanding culture and its effects. An anthropologist, working with collaborator Mildred Reed Hall, he developed four categories which define cultural variables. These relate very well to fundraising in varying cultures.

First is Relationships. Because Hall wrote about overseas business, he used business terms—in deal-focused cultures relationship grew out of deals, and in relationship-focused cultures, deals derived from already developed relationships.
When this concept is applied to fundraising, donor development processes and strategies take on new meaning. Some donors come on board because of a quid pro quo mentality, while others become donors due to relationships already established.

Second is Communication. In some cultures, concise and precise communication is preferable, while in others, many details and stories are necessary for complete understanding. The astute fundraiser will understand the context of culture when preparing a case and presenting it.

Third is Time. Some populations are punctual and adhere to schedules. Hall called this “monochronic.” Other people consider time fluid and flexible and personal relationships are more important than schedules; this is defined as “polychronic.” A classic example, almost a stereotype, is the difference in how Latin Americans relate to time versus Western Europeans.

Finally is the matter of Space. Proximity may cause discomfort in some places, while in other sites it’s a way to form quick and warm relationships. This cultural concept will define what strategies for making the request for funding will be used and be successful.

Other characteristics that complement Hall’s work are how cultures define status, accomplishment, social position, and distribution of power, or whether there is more emphasis on the individual rather than the group, or vice versa. The list could continue, but the above illustrates how cultures shape fundraising principles—principles that are applicable in many settings if they are appropriately adapted.

Within the confines of this small volume, the above is intended simply to point the reader toward the richness and variety evident in global fundraising practice, while recognizing legitimate differences which shape application of principles. Further discussion on individual nation’s philanthropic roots, use of language to define fundraising, definition of philanthropy versus charity, the role of philanthropy in society, and how philanthropy and NGOs can function under various forms of government, are all issues and concepts that merit much more and thorough discussion. The power of fundraising for NGOs internationally is impressive, and this volume provides a mere sampling of what lies “out there.” We hope that U.S. practitioners will be intrigued, tantalized and inspired by getting acquainted with the wider world of fundraising as it occurs in many cultures and nations.
References:


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