

Parables for fundraisers

By Melinda R. Heppe

After a blissful hour or so climbing around the World War II-era airplanes that had flown into our local airport, my seven-year-old son, Yang, determined that it was time to go to the shopping area. He's a conservative spender, so I warned him that the items were pricey. "Does the money go to keep the planes flying?" he asked.

"Yes," I said

"OK. Then it's a good organization."

Let us be honest. That's about as sophisticated as are most of our initial decisions about giving: Is this a mission that speaks to me? Can I see the result? OK, here's the money.

If Yang had simply been asked for an outright donation at that point, it probably would have been forthcoming.

But when he looked over the merchandise, his frugal sensibilities were offended. He pondered the videos with longing, but ultimately decided that we could find some of them cheaper online. He did buy an old bullet — a distinctly low-end purchase.

A truth about fundraising: Initial decisions don't necessarily last very long. Furthermore, support of a mission does not necessarily imply agreement with, for example, marketing practices. Or, for that matter, the way consumers are treated.

And those disagreements can have a negative effect on future fundraising.

Here's a cautionary tale to demonstrate that how you "manage" your students today may have effects into the future:

I'm fiercely loyal to the school from which I received my undergraduate degree. I'm still in awe of the education they provide there. They widened my perception hundreds of degrees and taught me to delve deep. But for many years, I didn't give them a penny, because I figured they had taken quite enough, and unfairly.

I was a fairly late admission, and so a late financial aid applicant. Although we had been promised "considerable" aid, my father got a bill for the first semester's tuition and, as an honorable man, he paid it. But as a working-class man, paying the tuition bill required him to take out a loan that was about half his annual salary. The next day, he got the financial aid package — they had crossed in the mail. And the next week, he got a letter from the financial aid office, stating that they were happy that he had found the funds to pay for the semester, and that while my work study wouldn't be revoked, the rest of my financial aid would not kick in until the next semester. A simple, honorable man, my father did not think to argue.

I did the mental math about what that couple of thousand dollars, well invested, would have been worth from time to time. Not much in the grand scheme of things but, come

to think of it, more than I might have given until then.

But my point is this: However much your donors love you, they probably have commitments that run even deeper. At the end of the day, an organization that I think took advantage of my father when he could ill afford it is one that will never have my entirely unreserved loyalty.

My boycott wasn't quite permanent. At some point, the school announced that all alumni gifts, unless otherwise earmarked, would go to funding scholarships. Well, OK. But my giving is still markedly less than it would have been otherwise.

Where your treasure is, there your heart will probably be also, but whether it's a happy heart or not has much to do with the circumstances under which the treasure was placed.

Even for the simple-hearted, affection for mission is only one factor — however major — in their giving decisions. It isn't just that your school does what is dear to your funders' hearts, but it matters how you fulfill your mission. And how you present it. And with how much respect you treat everyone, from the poorest freshman family to the oldest, richest donor. **IT**

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