GRASSROOTS FUNDRAISING: How Athletic Departments Can Learn from Recent Presidential Elections to Secure New Funding.

By: Bujar Ahmeti

There is a scene in the movie Moneyball where Oakland A’s general manager Billy Beane (played by Brad Pitt) is meeting with his scouts to discuss which players to add to the roster for the upcoming season. While I certainly don’t want to play spoiler for those who have not yet seen it, there is one exchange that is particularly interesting - Beane is arguing the A’s should pick up Scott Hatteberg because he has a high on-base percentage. None of the other scouts in the room are excited about this idea and one scout goes so far as to ask, “[s]o he walks a lot?” To which Beane replies, “[n]o, he gets on base a lot.” “Do I care if it’s a walk or a hit?”

To put that line of thinking into a different context – If you are trying to raise $10 million dollars, do you care if one person donates $10 million dollars or if 10 million people donate $1 dollar? Similar to Beane’s response in the movie, the answer is you don’t.

The 2008 presidential election was historic for a number of reasons; some of which were related to the fundraising records set by President Barack Obama. By creating a broad grassroots fundraising strategy, he was able to more than double the amount of money raised by the next leading candidate, John McCain.\(^1\) In fact, he set multiple monthly fundraising records by soliciting donations from individual small donors. While there is no bright line definition of what constitutes “grassroots fundraising,” any data that attempts to analyze the effects of grassroots fundraising focuses on donations equaling $200 or less.

Placing an emphasis on those donors who were likely donate $200 or less helped President Obama set fundraising records in 2008. However, those numbers paled in comparison to the role grassroots fundraising played in 2012. To put it in perspective, 22% of President Obama’s donors gave amounts that totaled $200 or less in 2007.\(^2\) That number jumped to 48% in 2011.\(^3\)

The amounts raised in August 2012 provide further evidence of the power that focusing on a large number of small donations can yield. President Obama raised $114 million dollars to Mitt Romney’s $112 million dollars during that month.\(^4\) The numbers may seem almost identical, but looking closer into how the money was raised is what matters. President Obama focused his efforts on small-dollar fundraising to the tune of 98% of his donors gave $250 or less.

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3 Ibid.
in August 2012. Contrast that with Romney’s efforts where only 31% of his donors gave $250 or less. In fact, the average donation to President Obama’s campaign during August 2012 was $58 dollars.

Joe Garecht is the founder of the Fundraising Authority and authored a number of books on fundraising. Garecht is well-known in the fundraising circles surrounding political campaigns and non-profit organizations. He has also published his thoughts on how to successfully run a grassroots contributions campaign at www.localvictory.com. While he has numerous ideas on how to solicit grassroots donations, he makes two very intriguing points on how to successfully utilize a grassroots fundraising campaign that should be of interest by an athletics department: (1) building a grassroots organization; and (2) instituting fundraising into your grassroots events.

Accomplishing the first point requires minimal effort on the part of an athletic department. The grassroots organization is already in place due to the alumni, booster club members, and thousands of individuals who flock to college campuses to attend home sporting events. In addition, that organization grows every year as more and more students graduate increasing the available alumni network.

The second point allows for some creative flexibility and applying a broad definition to what constitutes a “grassroots event.” Advancements in technology have allowed any person with a smartphone to become a mobile point-of-sale (POS) system (there are numerous different products and applications available). As a result, it is now possible to accept donations, regardless of the amount, at any time and at any location. Using the sport of football as an example, thousands of college football fans travel to college campuses every fall to support their favorite team. Some of whom do not even attend the game; but rather, they take part in the atmosphere outside the stadium. To that end, University of Arizona Athletic Director Greg Byrne, speaking at the 2014 NACDA Convention, stated that he believed 50% of the people who tailgated did not actually attend the game. By transforming these routine tailgates into fundraising events, an athletic department is able to unintentionally host multiple grassroots fundraising events on its campus every fall. A team of fundraising specialists equipped with mobile POS systems is able to capture a segment of a university’s donor base that may have previously been unable or unwilling to donate. As demonstrated above, accepting small donations from a large number of people over an extended period of time has the potential to produce fundraising records.

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6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
Recently, one of the more successful grassroots fundraising campaigns is a “moneybomb.” A moneybomb is a fundraising campaign that occurs over a brief, fixed time period. Generally, it is concentrated during a specific hour or day coinciding with a historical date. The most successful moneybomb took place on December 16, 2007 marking the 234th anniversary of the Boston Tea Party. It was organized by a 37-year old musician named Trevor Lyman who set up a website that solicited donations to benefit presidential candidate Ron Paul. In one day, the moneybomb raised approximately $6 million dollars from 58,407 individual donors, an average of $102.73 per donor. Standing alone, the final tally of $6 million dollars is quite impressive (and at the time was a one-day fundraising record). However, what is even more impressive is that only 24,940 donors were first-time contributors. Meaning over half of the contribution on December 16, approximately 33,000 donors, came from persons who had previously donated to the Paul campaign.

So what does this mean for an athletic department? A university’s athletics achievements are unlikely to be held in the same light as the Boston Tea Party, but that does not mean the idea used by Paul supporters cannot be utilized. A moneybomb that falls on the anniversary of a specific athletic achievement could produce similar results. The anniversaries of a national championship, conference championship, or unexpected victory over a rival are a few examples of potential moneybomb campaigns.

As the December 16, 2007 Paul fundraising event proved, a moneybomb that ties the fundraising goal into a specific event supporters relate to can result in donations from both new and current donors. This greatly increases the number of revenue streams an athletic department can use to fund future capital improvement projects.

Further, the presence of an athletic department and its various staff members across various social media platforms make promoting and advertising a moneybomb relatively easy, and more importantly, inexpensive.

Athletic departments across the country are continuously seeking new revenue streams to counterbalance the rising costs associated with running a successful department. Demands for facility improvements and rising tuition are just a few of the expenses that will continue to increase. While traditional forms of athletic department fundraising have proven to be successful, and will likely continue to be, there are untapped sources of revenue that can supplement those traditional methods as evidenced by recent presidential campaigns. By incorporating some of

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11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
these creative techniques, an athletic department has the ability to better position itself for the future in this changing landscape.