

Five reasons why churches limit the length of capital campaigns | Church Executive

<http://churchexecutive.com/archives/five-reasons-why-churches-limit-the-length-of-capital-campaigns> February 04, 2011

Posted by [admin](#) [FEATURE STORIES](#) Tuesday, February 1st, 2011

Three years is a long time to commit in any economic environment, let alone the uncertainty in these fast-paced times.

By Ben Stroup

Churches are approaching capital building projects differently and in more unique ways than ever before. The effects of the recession and the changing habits of our culture have driven a growing number to lay aside the more traditional 36 month campaign for much shorter options.

While their reasons are greater than pure fund-raising strategy, the good news is that the results appear to be as good as the traditional approach when it comes to total dollars raised.

One. Perhaps the most obvious reason to shorten the length of a campaign is the fact that three years is a long time to commit to any one goal in any economic environment. The recession has left many people unwilling to commit to much beyond the present.



While three years isn't a long period of time, an attempt to consider where one might be in three years is a lot more of a stretch for many people today than it would have been two or three years ago.

A growing sense of insecurity about employment and personal finances is a looming reality that must be reckoned with, not to mention unanticipated events such

as natural disasters.

Consider the tragic flooding of Nashville, TN in May 2010. Jenni Catron, executive director at Cross Point Church, says, "One negative factor we've had to deal with during our one-year campaign was the impact the flood had on peoples' capacity to give." No one could have anticipated the events as they played out.

A traditional campaign might have been stalled or postponed after just a few months, but it was easy to push through the tragic situation due to the finish line being clearly seen from the beginning. Catron says, "We couldn't afford from an outreach standpoint to postpone the ministry opportunity related to the launch of a new campus to coincide with a longer-term campaign."

Two. A second reason churches choose a compact campaign cycle is the growing competition from other nonprofit organizations and causes for the share of mind and share of dollar of the person in the pew. Don Webber, director of Strategic Planning at Community Church of the Valley in Temecula, CA, says, "We feel more comfortable being able to maintain the focus of the people involved over a shorter period of time."

Churches and nonprofits have always co-existed. The growing perception of a limited dollar and a more intentional donor have forced churches to become more strategic in their response to a very effective, systematic approach to fund-raising from non-

religious organizations. Even though Giving USA and other philanthropic research maintains giving to religious institutions remains relatively steady in spite of the uncertain economic condition, normal is not a word you hear much from the pulpit or the pew in reference to giving and capital fund-raising.

Three. The proximity of time in which the church intends to use the funds offers a very practical reason for churches to consider a modified fund-raising schedule. Dr. Chris Stephens, senior pastor at Faith Promise Church in Knoxville, TN, says his church chose a four-week capital campaign model because “we needed the cash immediately and knew the longer campaign process would have taken too much time and lasted too long.”

The first rule of fund-raising, especially capital efforts, is to project need and opportunity on the back drop of a stunning sense of urgency. Those who do this well raise the most money.

Four. Another reason churches are taking a second look at a shorter capital campaign cycle is the push for organizations and causes to demonstrate a “return on investment” in the form of ministry impact and life change. Catron says, “Our decision to opt for a short-term campaign allowed us to cast succinct vision. The church knew the plan and could see pretty quickly the result of their giving.”

Webber observes, “People tend to be enthusiastic for a ‘season’ rather than a longer period of time.”

There is certainly an advantage to offering any congregation the opportunity to give and see the tangible impact of their gift over a short period of time. Fund-raising 101 teaches organizations to help donors clearly understand the impact of every dollar given. Many churches have given little effort to overtly and intentionally connecting every dollar given with the ministry impact of life change achieved.

Five. Finally, a shorter approach to conducting capital campaigns is producing very positive giving results. Webber admits that only 63 percent of the total dollars committed were raised in their last three-year campaign effort. The current 18-month campaign will conclude in March and the projected number of giving units total dollars raised will exceed previous campaign levels. Catron expressed similar hopes and expectations.

Dr. Stephens reports that his church’s four-week campaign yielded 125 percent of the campaign goal and reflects that it was a very healthy experience for his congregation. Compelling results like this are certainly cause for a second look at a modified capital campaign schedule.

The challenge of every campaign is getting enough people to buy-in, commit, give, and fulfill on their initial financial pledge throughout the entire effort to ensure initial goals are met. As churches struggle to find a new tempo in the dance with the donor, the short-term capital campaign approach seems to be a viable option for those looking to make an immediate impact and clearly communicate the ministry value of every dollar raised.

Ben Stroup is a writer, consultant and blogger on the subjects of church funding, stewardship and generosity. You can read him on his blog www.BenStroup.com and www.churchgivingmatters.com.





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