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The three ring circus in a donor's living room

A donor visit is a three ring circus. It requires attention to three very different activities, all going on at the same time. I am a one-thing-at-a-time kind of guy – don't get me started on the follies of multi-tasking. So it takes a lot of preparation to get ready for a meeting with a donor.

In **Ring Number One**, you are telling the organization's story. Donors expect this. They want to know what the organization is doing with their money, and they also often expect a show – a well-dressed, articulate person who is the perfect advocate for the cause to which they are committed. Recently published reports or other props are a good idea.

Many fundraisers get so immersed with what they are doing in Ring Number One that they forget the importance of tuning in to Ring Number Two.

In **Ring Number Two**, you are listening to the donor's story. How did you become involved in this organization or this cause? What led you to be philanthropic? What other organizations are you involved with? What is your family like? These are all critical questions to ask on the path to solicitation. Crafting the perfect ask requires knowing a lot about what the donor cares about and why. Also, most people love to talk about themselves, and they will be more likely to want to see you again if they do most of the talking.

That leads us to **Ring Number Three**, in which you are you are planning what the next step is in developing the relationship. Is it coming back with more information about a particular concern of the donor's? Is it introducing the donor to a board member, or to a staff member? Is it an invitation to an event that the donor is likely to enjoy?

If the purpose of the visit is solicitation, that takes place **at the top of the circus tent**. In addition to what is happening in the three rings, you are thinking about how and when to guide the conversation toward the ask. Not every visit should include an ask, but every relationship with a major donor should.

I have made a lot of mistakes when visiting donors, most of which are reparable. Almost all of them come down to inattention to one of the three (or four) rings of the circus. I have shown up at a meeting expecting to learn about the donor when the donor expected a show – *accident in Ring One*. I have gotten so excited about telling the donor about the program that I came away without learning anything about the donor – *catastrophe in Ring Two*. I have gotten so wound up in enjoying the exchange with the donor that I forgot to plant the seed for the next conversation – *fiasco in Ring Three*. And there have been times when I kept my attention on all three rings but did not work in the request for a gift – *disaster on the high wire at the top of the tent*.

Being, as I said, a one-thing-at-a-time guy, I never enjoyed circuses when I was a kid – I was always worried that I would miss something because I was paying attention to the wrong ring. But one of the joys of adulthood is that we can master complexity.

Ladies and Gentlemen, welcome to the Big Top!