

“The Art of the Ask” in Today’s Donor Landscape

2026 National Conference

NICKI INMAN: Good morning, good morning. If you haven't had a chance yet, please scan that QR code for access to a workbook which will help you follow along today and give you a resource to use when we do some actual practice, because this isn't going to be an hour and 15 minutes of me just talking at you. You are going to talk amongst yourselves, and also we'll ask some questions and have some participation opportunity as well. And having that workbook will be a handy tool for you to be able to do that.

So, asking is one of those things that is incredibly uncomfortable for a lot of people. It's challenging, but it's also kind of the core of what we do as fundraisers, right? If we don't ask, we are not going to get. Even seasoned fundraisers can be really uncomfortable asking, but if we can learn to really enjoy that conversation, we can be more confident in our asking and ultimately have more success in our fundraising. As I said, I'm not just going to talk at you today. We're going to do a little bit of practice so that you can build some confidence and have some tools available to you to be better askers out there in the field.

First, a little bit about myself and RSC. For myself, I started as Erica said, 26 years ago now, but when I started my career in fundraising, I was a new fundraiser. I took my first job. I had a great boss. He was one of those people who took me along on calls, but he was one of those people that we think of as a natural fundraiser. He was curious. He was interested. He was fun. He was a social person, and so he had no idea how to actually teach me how to be a strong fundraiser. And so I was really craving some of those tools. I moved on to other parts of my career, increasing leadership positions, came to conferences like this one, and the thing that I wanted more than anything else was to have some sort of development, professional development around asking, but there wasn't any.

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And so when I joined RSC in 2020, I was excited to see that they had developed a tool called "Art of the Ask" for helping boards, staff, other kinds of people be better at fundraising and asking. And so what we're going to look at today is based on that Art of the Ask work that RSC had done. Also a little bit about RSC if you don't know us. We're 100 focused on revenue generation for the arts. We've worked with 175 organizations across 125 markets. Our experience is in big orchestras, small orchestras, other kinds of organizations as well. But one of the things that we are the most proud of is that we've worked with thousands of people just like you who are trying to be better fundraisers, and we've coached and worked to help them be more successful and raise lots and lots of money over time. So let's jump in. But before we get into asking, it's really important to think about our mindset because part

of being confident in our asking is feeling good about what it is, as well. So we're going to start with why people actually give.

Do we have two or three people who just want to share something that they said in their conversation? Raise your hand. Erica's over here and would—Oh, come on.

TRISHA COMSTOCK: I'm Trisha Comstock with the Harrisburg Symphony. We said that when donors give, they become a part of something bigger than themselves.

INMAN: Yes, I love that. Gentleman, right; Erica, to your right, right this way, towards me.

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ANDY BUELOW: Hello, Andy Buelow from West Michigan Symphony. We didn't really get past introductions, and then we were just starting the conversation. I would say I prefer the word "receive" to the word "get," and I think what people receive, what our donors receive is love and connection. They really love the symphony, and they love giving, and I love the opportunity to ask them.

INMAN: I love that, thank you. I would say that I used "get," because it's shorter and fits on the slide better. [LAUGHTER] So if you Google, "What do people receive from giving?" you'll find lots of things. You'll find institutional research blogs, you'll find terrible blogs, you'll find lots of different things. They ultimately all say the same thing. When people give, it makes them feel good. And so when we as fundraisers approach asking with that mindset, that we are doing something that is helpful and good for people in giving them the opportunity to support our organizations, to do something for the community, we are doing something that is good for them. And when we approach it that way, we'll be more confident and more successful ultimately in our asking.

So instead of thinking about it as onerous, an inconvenience, begging, think about it as that you are helping people be part of their community, realize something that is important to them, and it will make a really big difference within your asking. So, asking fits within a cycle, right? And the way that people give isn't because they're suddenly asked for \$5,000, \$10,000, whatever your ask is. They already love and respect you, they care about your organization, and the way that they do that is through engaging—we engage with them, essentially through a donor cycle.

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Whether you've intentionally done this, or it has just happened to be the way that you approach things, it is going to make a difference. So, I want to put asking in context of the donor cycle. This will be familiar to especially the fundraisers, but ultimately it starts with us

identifying who it is that we want to ask, who our best prospects are. We move into cultivation, inviting them to events, sharing communications, getting them involved in our organization, and when that has been done well, and they are ready, then we move into asking—which is what today is, but it doesn't happen in a vacuum. It happens within a cycle of communication and relationship-building and work that we have done together with them.

And then the last piece is stewardship, which is kind of cultivation, but on the backside in appreciation and thanking, and it's really key to keeping that donor and setting up for the beginning of the cycle again to get people to give and to ask a second time around. So—when it comes to the actual ask, we want you to think about using not a script, but a roadmap. So, why a roadmap? Simply, if you use a script, it's really easy to sound like you are a professional actor. You can get stuck in what you were supposed to say, rather than what the donor is telling you and what you should reflect back as. And when you use a roadmap with a couple of key steps along the way, you have the opportunity to be flexible, to incorporate other people's perspectives into the conversation, and still move the conversation to the actual ask that you need of that donor. And so by thinking about it as these five steps that we're going to look at here in a second, you can stay on track but not restrict yourself to a certain way of saying or approaching that donor.

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The roadmap has five sections to it. Some of them may only take one or two minutes. One of them is just one question. But doing them in this order is going to help you move to a more successful ask along the way. So let's look at that framework. It's five steps. And when you work through these, you naturally build to a successful ask and are more likely to get that gift. Just to touch on each of these briefly: The first one is share. This is about sharing three things about your organization, what is important to you, where you're going, your strategy, what's coming up next. It's where you can make some meaningful connection and see where their eyes light up, to understand what might be connecting most with them.

The second step here is engage. This is about asking questions. Most often, this is the one that is forgotten when it comes to an ask kind of meeting. We're used to selling, right? We can talk about our organizations. It's harder for us to stop and be thoughtful about what we want to know or learn about a donor prospect. The middle step here is permission, and this is the one question, but it is magical, and it will make everything different about your meeting and give you confidence and the donor confidence about what's happening next, as well.

Then you need to do an ask. It has to be clear and specific, with the number attached. We'll come back to that more. And the last step is just to determine next steps. This sounds

obvious, doesn't it? But this is where most asks start to fall apart. We start to say things like, "I'll reach out next week," or, "Oh, I'll wait for you to call me" or whatever. You're never going to close on that specificity, and that next step is really, really key. My guess is none of these is a really big surprise to you. You've probably used all of them, in some kind of order.

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You've also prepared in each of these steps or different parts of the steps for those conversations with donors. And when it comes to using the roadmap, preparation is key as well. So let's just look really quickly at how we get prepared for an ask meeting. The first thing is, you should probably have some background on your prospects. Whether you are a volunteer or a staff person, it's helpful to just take a moment to figure out, what do I know about this person? What do they know about our organization? What is their giving history, then? Who knows them? All of that is a good reminder to make sure that the conversation that you are setting up is going to be one that connects with that person.

The second thing is, you need a partner. Ideally, every ask has two people. It's some combination of volunteer, executive director, CEO, development staff member, could be a musician, could be a music director. Lots of different kinds of board members can join that as well, whether it's a board chair, development committee, just another board member or other volunteer along the way. But being really clear about who the partner is in the conversation is helpful to the planning and sometimes getting the meeting, too.

From there, you need to plan your approach. Keep the planning simple. We like threes. So think about what are the three things that you want to share with someone, and what are the three things that you want to ask? You don't need to know everything. We often hear, especially from board members, that people don't know what we do. They don't need to know everything that we do. They need to know what they're going to care about. And so by setting up some things that we think they're going to care about, and then asking questions, we're going to be better able to zero in on that and to have the conversation that is going to be relevant to that donor.

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So we're going to actually practice these. And so for the share part, earlier on there was the question on the screen about what's important to you about your orchestra. That was there if you made a few notes. It's just helpful in being able to feel better about that practice part of things as well. So we're going to come back to this. The other piece is the engaging, and ultimately what we want to do is to create a dialogue with our donors. When I was preparing for this, I did some Googling about like, "So what does the world say about what good asks look like?" And many of the tools that I found were like 30-minute presentations before

anyone actually stopped and asked a question. And so the standard way that you very likely have heard or learned about how you do an ask is to go talk for 30 minutes. If you've ever gotten a telefunding call along the way, have you ever timed how long it takes them to stop and breathe? I've had 90 seconds, at least a minute. It can be a really long time. What that doesn't do is engage the donor as an active part of the conversation, which is going to ultimately get them to be more excited about your organization and support it along the way. So let's look at some questions for how to get to both of these pieces.

First on the share side, this is your chance to develop your story, especially if you are a board member. What we will often say is, staff brings the facts, volunteers can bring the feeling. And so if you're a volunteer here today, if you're a board member, your role is to especially talk about why that orchestra is important to you, what it means to you, why you care, why you're on the board, what music means to you in general, even. You can bring all of those things. If you're a staff member, those things are important, especially if there isn't a volunteer. But what you also need to do is bring some of those facts.

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What is it that your organization is doing? Where are they going? How many people are they serving? Whatever is relevant to the donor, based on what you know about them. These are all questions that can help you get at what that story is. Ultimately, the theme here is building on your experience and your feeling, because you are the only person who can deliver that to those donors. So let's take a look at some of the questions. And when it comes to engaging donors, think about—we like threes—think about questions in three categories: Personal, organizational, and aspirational. We're just going to take a look at each of these. All of these questions are in that workbook also, by the way.

First of all, when it comes to the personal side, these are questions that focus on the donor's background, their history with your orchestra. They are things like, what does your involvement with our organization mean to you? What uniquely defines our organization in your eyes? These are all questions that get at them and what they think in their personal experience about you. The second set are organizational questions. What does your involvement with our orchestra mean to you? We've discussed plans, I've shared some things earlier in the conversation. How does that sit with you? What excites you about where we're going? What uniquely defines our organization in your eyes?

And then the third set of questions. These are the aspirational. What are the things that are happening in the community? This is where you have a chance to learn what the donor's philanthropic interests generally are, so that you can start to connect those to what your organization is doing. So think beyond your organization and more at a community level. It's

things about what opportunities do our youth need in the community? How are people connecting? What are you seeing coming down the road?

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So it sounds like you all had some great conversations and some great practice. Let's just reflect a little bit about that. I've got a couple of questions. If you want to share something, Erica again has the microphone, and so raise your hand. But as you're thinking about that experience, some of it probably was like, "Oh, yeah, I've done this a million times. This is easy. I'm comfortable with this." Some of it you might have thought, "Ooh, I'm not used to asking those questions. And so if we just take a moment, what surprised you about this experience and that kind of practice, particularly the engaged part? Was there a moment when the conversation shifted from nervous to natural for you? And did you notice anything about how your partner responded when you led with curiosity? So who's got something that they would want to share?

FEMALE COMMENTER: Thank you so much. No, I think it was really wonderful, leading with curiosity, asking certain questions to my partner who was great, from the Allentown Symphony. And I noticed initially the responses were very one-sentence, very kind of closed. And as I kept asking questions, he kind of broadened up. Towards the end of the conversation, what was really interesting is that he asked me questions about the capital campaign, what we were doing, and so it came—he started to lead by asking questions. So instead of feeling like I was forcing information down his neck or down his throat, he was just more very willing to hear it. So that was great.

INMAN: I love that. Thank you so much. Yes, that idea that you become equal participants in the conversation, instead of one selling to the other, one just being the listener. I love that. Thank you for sharing. Who else? Oh, over here. Almost the furthest away from Erica, but she has flats on, so she can run.

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MALE COMMENTER: Thank you. For me, it was a very interesting process. I think for many of us who deal with fundraising, you fake it 'til you make it. And sometimes that's a good thing, and sometimes it's not. So for me, the conversational part, finding something that you are interested in together is one way that I can kind of relax myself a little bit, because it can be really one-sided or just a one-sentence type of thing. And you're asking for a lot of money, so you always try to find something and try to make it before—you know, that type of thing, but fake it 'til you make it. But I find that fake it 'til you make it, I think is a wonderful tool, but I also feel like it's something that you have to be really good at. So I try to go with

some of my strengths, and just in our conversation here, trying to find something that's in common. So that helped me a lot.

INMAN: Wonderful, thank you. I heard someone say one time, "Instead of fake it until you make it, think about fake it until you become it." And that always sticks with me, and I love that because we can become something that we never imagined if we just keep trying and working on it. One more question up here, Erica at the front, or not a question, a response.

MALE QUESTIONER: Actually, it's a question. When engaging, sometimes I'm concerned about asking the wrong question that will lead my potential donor away, for example, how much you love classical music. And, you know, I live in Florida, North Florida. It's a community, relatively small, and unfortunately, the love for classical music is not always there. And the question is, if I ask that question, there's more than 50% probability they will say, "Well, not really." And then I kind of lose them there. So concern is, do we avoid questions that may give us a problem? Like, for example, what do you think about donations? Because if I ask that question, and he says, "No, no, no. He's going to ask me, so I don't like it." So what's your opinion about it?

INMAN: So, this is where preparing for that meeting becomes really important to understand whether that person is someone who loves music or even likes music, or not. And if it's a not, what is it that they do care about in the community? So you can think about how to connect what your orchestra does with what that person cares about. People give in response to something because they love it, they care about it, they believe in your mission. And so, starting with questions that get at that, versus what do you think about giving?—will help you better understand the case to be made to then ask for an actual number.

MALE COMMENTER: So just emphasizing the point that you just made, I couldn't decide what to share until I knew what was important to the donor, which normally you would know going into the meeting. But if you spontaneously reach someone, if the thing I wanted to share wasn't even on their list, then it's pointless. So, what's your number one or number two or number three? My donor had only one. That's the thing I needed to address.

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INMA: It's a great point, and thank you, because there were—we have a limited time today, and so there are things that I obviously didn't cover. And one of them is that donors that you're meeting with, you will have gone through a cultivation process. You will know them, and so when you're putting together those points, you should incorporate that into what you would want to share with them. Today's a little different. Role-playing is a little different, and so that's a piece, but something else that gets to your point is, while I've shared this as a share and then engage, those two can be interchangeable, and if you either don't know your

donor well, you could start with more questions and then build your share based on what you heard. Or you can do kind of a layer between the two of them. The main point here is ask questions. And so as long as you build some question-asking into the part, this early part of your conversation, you're going to be in good shape. And then if you have to share a second, share a second. It's great. Thank you for bringing that up.

Okay, so let's get to the actual asking part of things. We often hear that the actual ask is the awkward part. What you all just did, even if question-asking was newer to you in this kind of venue, it's still something that you're used to doing. What we aren't used to doing is actually saying, "Would you consider giving us a gift of X?" There's a magic question that can help you make that easier along the way. It helps you move from all of that conversation to asking. And that is permission-based asking.

So, what is that? It's really simple. You're just asking if you can ask. That's it. It can look like this. It can look like other versions of this. "We're calling on our supporters today. Can we talk about your investment?"

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It is the kind of question that does three things for you. The first thing is, it tells your donor what is going to happen next. And if they say yes or no, then you have a chance to know how to move forward. The second thing is, it can give you a really clear green light to move ahead with an ask when they say yes, so you know exactly what to do. So now they know, and you know. And the third piece of this is, it's a little yes, and little yeses stack up to be big yeses. And so by getting this little yes, the next one becomes a whole lot easier along the way.

So you're probably thinking, what if they say no? Wouldn't you rather have a no right now, versus—? I know I would. And the thing to remember about a no is when they give that to you in this moment, it allows you to pivot to understand and to create what the next actions might be to overcome that no in the future, before you've put yourself out there to be able to get that no. And that's why this is magical, because everybody knows what's coming next. There are no surprises, and you have a way that you can move forward confidently when they say yes.

We aren't going to talk today about overcoming that no, but there are things out there, definitely, that you can use to help continue that conversation. Today we're going to pretend everybody says yes. [LAUGHTER] We should probably ask now. So although I say that, and it's not quite time to insert that number, even though we've set up what it is that our organization is doing, we've asked them some questions, we've now asked, "Can we talk about your involvement?" We do actually need to say some sort of case. We need to share

something about, "Our orchestra is doing this. We'd like you to consider something that would help us do this other thing instead."

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So this is where it's the time to outline briefly what their support will do. And if you can, connect it back to what you heard, show them that you have listened to the first part of the conversation, and that you were reflecting back to them. It builds trust, which is really key to getting someone to say yes. But let's not wait too long to actually ask. We need to ask. And here's a simple thing. An ask isn't an ask unless it includes a specific number. Saying, "Would you support our orchestra?" is insufficient. To say, "Would you support our orchestra with a gift of \$2,500 to the annual fund?" is an ask. And so specificity matters, and when you are moving to this, you always need to ask for that specific number. They already know it's coming. You asked if it was okay to ask. So ask. Just be ask. And then shut up. [LAUGHTER] People need space, and if we are going to ask for big dollar amounts, give them that space. They may not say yes or no in this moment. In some ways, we don't want them to say yes, because probably we didn't ask for enough money. But whatever they do, give them space to think about it and consider what your request is and how it might play into things. They may come back with some questions. What's the recognition? You can also lay that out ahead of time, but for simplicity, let's just not do that right now. But ultimately respond to the questions that they've got. Help them understand, but give them space by being quiet for them to consider.

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Once that's happened—and they've responded in some way, because you do need some indication of what to do next—it's really important in closing the gift to be clear about what those next steps are. And so after that ask, we need to be clear about what is happening next. It's about defining who will do what and by when. We want to avoid vague promises like, "I'll be in touch." This is also really helpful for you as the fundraiser to take control of when that follow-up is going to happen. If we rely on the donor to get back to us, half the time they're never going to. They have other things going on. If you just set it up that you are going to do the follow-up on this date, it will make it clear for everyone, and everyone knows what to do next.

The second thing is to be responsive if they ask a question or they want more information. Respond to that. Respond to whatever it is that they say. Answer their questions, be clear about that, and show that you care and are interested in what they have to say. And then the last piece is be consistent. Do what you say you're going to do. If you say you're going to follow through, actually get that done when you say that you were going to do it. So what does this look like in practice? It's simple things like, "I know you'll need time to consider this

request. Can I call you next Wednesday to follow up?" Or, "What day would be best?" "I'll send you the materials we talked about, and I will follow up and give you a call the day after." Anything that is specific, that makes it clear that everybody knows what the next step is, who is going to do it and by when will lead to more successful fundraising solicitations and therefore fundraising success.

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Okay, who would like to share something else? Josh in the middle there.

JOSH THORNTON: I'm Josh from the Asheville Symphony. We were talking in the Active Asking about specificity and what it can look like, even as you're talking, not to couch your ask in all of the language we use when we're not sure that they want to hear our ask. But getting to the situation we were in, it was \$42 for our 42nd second season. The ask ended up being, "Our organization supports education and community engagement through music. It's our 42nd season. We would love for you to consider a gift of \$42 to support our work." And then leaving it there, without the, "We also do this." Just leaving it at that basic ask and walking away with the idea that we are asking for a specific call to action, we're giving a specific path to the donor to accomplish what we're hoping to, giving them a really easy idea of what they can do to support the organization.

INMAN: Yes, that's specificity, and it's easy if you plan for it, and it becomes really clear to them what you're looking for. Yes?

SEAN MOONEY: Hi, I'm Sean Mooney from the Augusta Symphony. Sierra and I were over here practicing, and we were talking about what surprised and what felt awkward, and to piggyback off of what Josh said is that I think what was surprising to me is how awkward I felt while pausing and waiting. We all talk for a living, and we have talked about it. We made the ask, but then on top of that we were like, "But act now and get—[LAUGHTER] And we'll throw in—" Sometimes we just get that mentality of like, "Let's keep providing the value, so that way they see it, and it's illustrated."

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And sometimes I guess it's okay just to point out the main fact.

INMAN: Yes?

MALE VOICE OFF-MIC: Awkward silence, [UNINTEL].

INMAN: Yes, it's hard, isn't it? But that's also where practicing it—wouldn't you rather be awkward here than in front of a donor? I know I would, and so you can practice this with anybody, anywhere. And I know people don't like to role play, but it does help to actually talk through what you're going to do, how you're going to do it, who's going to do what, and come to an agreement that you're going to shut up. Because it's going to make a difference in letting the donor think, and you're going to get a better response. Any other reflections? Great. In the middle—

KATIE NELSEN: Hi, Katie Nelsen with the Minnesota Orchestra. One of the things that our threesome was talking about that felt easy was in the share, sharing a really specific story about something we observed or were a part of at the symphony hall or in a classroom. And so I started by talking about some teenagers that were sitting in front of me at a concert. It was their first time there. They wanted me to take their picture, and kind of establishing that impact right away. And Jamei was very kind. She's a league board member and said it came across as very authentic. You know, we have all of these stories to kind of share that and then the why, and then make your case.

INMAN: And Katie, my guess is that you have thought about that story before, you maybe have used it in other places. Stories can be really hard to come up with in the moment, and that's where preparation and thinking about those kinds of things ahead of time can make a really big difference, so that it is natural and authentic.

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And you're also not fumbling around for what's the story to share with someone along the way? The other piece is you don't need a ton of stories. One story can be really impactful, and you can use it over and over and over again. One really good story is always going to land more successfully than having a whole bunch of numbers and a whole bunch of stories that you can kind of pull out and share in the moment. So prepare, but also you don't need a ton of content, by any means. Okay. Would anybody else like to share something that changed for them about asking in this?

Okay. Well, let me share a few final thoughts, and I'm going to go back to our roadmap. So first of all, it's a roadmap. So when you're thinking about asking, continue to think in this roadmap. Share or engage, engage or share, whichever way, layer them. Permission. Was that a weird question to ask that first time as you were doing it? I see some heads nod. It's weird, but the more you do it, it'll get way easier and you'll just be like, "Hey, can we talk about your support?" Yes. So share, engage, permission, ask, next.

When you put these together, you know where your meeting is going to go. You may not have all the detail with it at your fingertips, but you will at least have a pathway to a

successful ask. So think in roadmaps, not in scripts. The second thing is the best way to get better at this is to practice. You are already better at this. You already have more confidence in being a successful asker.

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Keep practicing. You can practice with someone in your office, around. Also, just going and trying it and talking with donors is practice. You're probably already doing it, so just insert and adjust some of the things that we have talked about today to make it into reality.

Finally, the best asks are authentic. I love Katie's story about including the youth in her conversation and her share part of things. Those stories and experiences are really important to the conversation. They make it so that that conversation can only happen with you, and you are the right person to be in that conversation. So bring yourself into it, because ultimately, we're talking about art and we're talking about art of the ask. So thank you so much for today.

[APPLAUSE]

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