

# January 29, 2015

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 [poisner.com/2015/01/no-magic-words-but-themes-matter/](http://poisner.com/2015/01/no-magic-words-but-themes-matter/)

I was recently asked by a nonprofit leader whether there are certain words or phrases that the organization should be sure to utilize in major donor fundraising because they tend to be particularly effective.

The leader (at the urging of a board member) was thinking about major donor fundraising as a marketing exercise in which certain words hold special power, particularly if repeated over and over.

In my view, major donor fundraising is more analogous to sales if one wishes to make an analogy to business. While I have no doubt some words are particularly effective in sales, my experience is effective salespersons think more about what stories and themes to tell than what specific words to use.

I responded to the leader accordingly. Don't focus on what words to use. Focus on what themes should show up in the stories you tell donors.

I highlighted three themes to her.

First, it's critically important to focus any donor conversation first on values and only secondarily on the work of an organization, statistics, or public policy. Connect with people emotionally by sharing your personal story and by speaking in values terms that resonate with them. Ask their story to understand what values motivate them. Only then are you likely to engage them in a conversation about your organization's strategy and details in a way most likely to lead to major gifts.

Second, it's very important that you both demonstrate there is a problem the donor wants to help you address **and** that they should have hope that your organization can be part of the solution. Don't assume potential donors already get the problem and rush into talking about your programmatic work (which tends to be your solutions).

But that doesn't mean the conversation can end with the problem. If all you demonstrate to donors is you're working to address a problem, they are unlikely to dig deep. You need stories that demonstrate your capacity as an organization (and sometimes as an individual leading the organization) to address the problem. You need to leave them hopeful.

Third, donors increasingly need to simultaneously understand that your organization is uniquely positioned to make a difference and that it's also not a "Lone Ranger." This can be a quandary. On the one hand, you need to stand out from the crowd. On the other hand, donors increasingly prize organizations that collaborate and who can articulate how their work dovetails with others. You should be able to tell the story of your work that navigates this challenge.

Do these themes match up with your own experience as a major donor fundraiser? Are there other themes of equal relevance?