

Subject: The Art of the Ask in 4 Steps

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The Art of the Ask in 4 Steps

“All you have to do is ask.” If only it were that simple. But in the work of engaging community, fostering coalitions, building public will, or raising funds, making an ask requires a clear, well-thought-out strategy. Before an ask begins, you need to know *who* you’re asking and *why*, *what* you’re asking them to do, *when* the best time will be to approach them, and *how* you’ll approach them.

Step One: Know Your Target

First, think about your overall goals. Are you trying to build support for a policy change? Raise money? Encourage volunteers? Once you’ve clarified your goals, think about the people who you need to take action and *why* they are the ones best suited to take that action. For example, a key city council member may be the one domino that leverages the others, or a specific funder may be the lynchpin that opens the checkbooks of others, or a local sports hero may encourage hundreds of others to volunteer with one simple endorsement. These people are the primary target audiences for your ask. Depending on your existing relationships with them, you may feel comfortable

Three Keys to a Successful Ask

There is a strategy to making a successful ask. There are also three big mistakes that many people make when going for a “yes”: complexity, rigidity, and giving up too easily. However, you can avoid these mistakes by following the following three rules in EVERY ask-related outreach or engagement:

approaching them directly. But more often than not, you may need to think about the people who influence your primary target audiences, such as constituents, peers, mentors, or other community leaders. Your first ask may need to be directed to this secondary group.

Step Two: Create a Call To Action

Every ask needs a clear **call to action**: a description of what you'd like your target audience(s) to do. It won't be the same for all audiences. For example, you may want one community leader to write an Op-ed, while you simultaneously mobilize other community members to participate in a call-in or petition campaign, or simply tell their networks about an issue. Remember, your ask can be for time and talent as well as treasure. You might even ask for your target to lend their influence, reputation, or brand to your cause.

The more you can simplify the call to action for each audience, the more likely you'll be to get a "yes." There are many moving parts to a campaign or a community engagement or outreach efforts, so consider how you might divide and distribute different roles, and ask your targets to do individual actions, such as writing a letter, making a call, posting on social media, hanging flyers, speaking at an event, or writing a check.

Step Three: Mind the Time

Any high schooler can tell you not to ask to borrow the car when Mom is in a bad mood. Knowing **when** to ask is just as important as understanding what you'll ask for. This is true for planning your approach to individuals and also for deciding when to ask for engagement around your cause more broadly. Be aware of any issues or events that may be distracting your target audiences and competing for their attention, such as breaking news or a big event.

As you're shaping your call to action, you may find it worthwhile to gather input from the community around what you'll be asking audiences to do. You may also need to spend

1) Keep your ask simple. Make it easy for people to help you. First, limit your ask to **one** task – preferable the one task that the person you're asking is the best-suited to perform. Second, do the legwork required so the amount of time or attention they'll need to supply is as minimal as possible. If you want them to make calls, supply the numbers and a script. If you'd like them to send emails, provide draft text that they can customize if they choose. If you'd like them to donate money, be able to accept multiple forms of payment.

2) Be flexible. Learn how to recognize when what you're asking may not be the best match for the person you're asking — and be willing to offer alternatives on the spot. Helping you should never be a "my way or the highway" proposition. Providing options will allow your target audiences to identify actions they're more comfortable taking or that fit better into their current workload or schedule. For example, someone who may not have time to host a gathering on your behalf may be quite willing to write an Op-ed supporting your cause. And as a bonus, allowing your targets to offer their own suggestions of how they might support you may provide exciting new ideas you'd never considered before.

some time building trust with key audiences or communities before diving into ask mode. If you are engaging the same audience multiple times, you may consider whether to spread out your requests or consolidate them into one big ask.

Overall, think of the timing of your ask as part of a larger, ongoing arc of relationship with your audience. Asks should be balanced with other elements of relationship building (such as responding to requests they make of you or working together on other projects), lest your relationship become too one-sided and you begin to find that your audiences are always busy to respond when you reach out to them.

Sometimes, your engagement with an audience may be a one-time-only proposition and you probably will not be contacting these individuals again (such as when gathering petition signatures in support of a standalone policy action or raising money for a one-time capital campaign). In these cases, it might be important to lead with your Call to Action. Be prepared to succinctly explain what you are asking your audience to do, why the issue is important, and why you've identified them as the ones best suited to perform this role.

3) Revisit. A “no” doesn’t usually mean “never.” And a “yes” rarely means “just this once.” Asking again (within reason) is part of the process of long-term relationship building, so don’t hightail it out of the picture after the first ask. Instead, concentrate on gradually shifting your conversations from those between asker and provider to those between two partners aligned in a similar cause. You’ll know you’ve reached a milestone when your target audience member – without any direct prompting or ask from you — offers ways they’d like to be supportive for your cause.

Step Four: Show Up

For many people, all the planning and strategy around “the ask” falls to the background when it comes time to actually ask a target audience – in person – for what’s desired. Although sending an email or even talking on the phone are less intimidating ways of connecting, making a face-to-face ask is by far the most powerful way to get what you want. So how do you make the most of it?

Remember that the person you’re talking to is a human being, just like you, who most likely wants to help if offered a clear and simple way to do so. When you meet face-to-face, smile and make eye contact. Bring and share the information they’ll need to understand your ask and make a decision, but don’t overwhelm them with paper or presentations. Explain directly why THEY are so important for this role, and don’t be afraid to allow for a pause in the conversation while they consider.

If they ask for more time to consider your request, cheerfully give it to them, but politely confirm when you should check back (A day? A week?). Be prepared, if they object, to offer other roles as alternatives to supporting your cause. Someone who can’t write a check may be willing to make a call or two, or those who don’t want to publicly support your effort may be happy to make a quiet donation.

If the answer is still “no,” ask if there is anything you can do to help them reconsider: Do they need more time? Need help explaining the ask to a higher-up? Need more information about your effort? Regardless of whether or not you get to “yes,” thank them for their time and ask if you can

keep them in the loop on your progress. This can be the first step in building a more fruitful relationship down the road.

Asking people to engage with you to pursue a common interest is a natural human interaction. It's also the lifeblood of any work to build inclusive, supportive and prosperous communities. So what are you waiting for? All you have to do is ask!



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