

A Definition of Grassroots Fundraising

By Kim Klein

What is grassroots fundraising? People often characterize grassroots fundraising as small special events, like lemonade stands or bake sales, or as being about getting a lot of very small donations, or perhaps just being some politically correct thing to do in order to placate the masses. These people will often think the real money is in foundations or corporations. Since I have been in grassroots fundraising for the bulk of the 32 years I have spend in fundraising, I think it is useful to define it. How is it different from any other kind of fundraising? Fundraising is a pretty straightforward field—even the name is plain and simple. We need money and to get it, we have to raise it. Foundation fundraising means researching foundations, writing proposals and seeking grants. Corporate fundraising means figuring out how our nonprofit: what we do, who we serve, who we have contact with, might help a corporation so that they would want to partner with us and give us some money. Government fundraising means seeking funding that originates as taxes for our projects and programs.

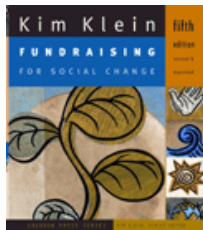


The term “grassroots” is a term used to denote any kind of effort that derives most of its power and reason for being from a community, and from common ordinary people. Grassroots political movements are characterized by organizing in specific communities or among specific types of people, such as factory workers or students and organizing these groups to advocate for the changes they want to see. Any kind of grassroots effort denotes the common people as constituting a fundamental political and economic group. So grassroots fundraising follows the same principles. Grassroots fundraising means and organization uses a wide variety of strategies to invite as many people as possible to give donations of widely varying amounts. It also means a lot of people are involved in raising the money needed. A grassroots organization is independent: no one source of money is very important to that group. If a person or a corporation says “We don’t like what you are doing and we don’t want to fund you any more, the nonprofit can say, “Well we are sorry to hear that and we will miss you.” The nonprofit will not say, “Oh, no, don’t leave. We will change what we are doing to please you.” A grassroots organization is also independent of any one person: it has leaders, but no one leader is so important that if that person left or died, the organization would not be able to continue. Leadership is shared, skills are taught to all members of the organization so that each person in the organization has her or his job, but also has skills to do other jobs and a goal of the organization is to share information and skills to as many people as possible, as well as to invite as many people as possible to give money.

Grassroots fundraising welcomes and encourages small donations and large donations. Keep in mind that the way you raise your money reflects your values. If you get most or all of your money from the government, you are saying that the work you do should be supported by taxes. In most countries around the world, social services that aim at keeping people out of

poverty are provided by government funding. This is fine. If you get most or all of your money from corporations, you are saying that the work you do can be done in partnership with for profit companies, and that your agenda as a nonprofit can exist in harmony with the agendas of corporations. In many countries, a lot of arts and culture, as well as research and higher education is supported by corporate giving. This is fine. Grassroots fundraising does not preclude corporate, foundation or government support for your organization. But grassroots fundraising does mean that if you believe that the work you do should be supported by the people who most benefit from it, as well as saying that the work you do needs to have the maximum amount of independence, then you will want to have your money from as many people and places as you can manage.

About the Author



Kim Klein is internationally known as a fundraising trainer and consultant. She is a member of the Building Movement Project and leads workshops on tax policy and the importance of the “commons” for them as well as being a regular contributor to their website. She is the Chardon Press Series Editor at Jossey-Bass, an imprint of John Wiley & Sons, Inc. which publishes and distributes materials that help to build a stronger nonprofit sector, and the founder of the bimonthly *Grassroots Fundraising Journal*. She is also the author of several books including *Fundraising for Social Change, Fifth Edition* (Jossey-Bass, 2006). Widely in demand as a speaker, Kim Klein has provided training and consultation in all 50 states and in 21 countries. Learn more at www.kleinandroth.com.