

# Which Fundraiser Is Right for You?

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by Christy Forhan

This article is part of the following categories: [Fundraising Strategies & Planning](#)

Consider a few key questions, then check out our chart to determine what kind of fundraiser will best meet your current needs.

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With all the different ways to raise money for your parent group—product sales, special events, collections, and much more—how do you find the fundraiser that fits your needs best?

There's no single type of fundraiser that works for all groups and all situations. Traditionally, product sales have been the most popular choice, and for good reason. A product sale with a professional sales rep can be easy to run and profitable—whether you have a wealth of volunteers or just one person doing it all.



However, parent groups typically run a mix of fundraisers. A standard fund-raising plan might consist of one to three major fundraisers and a few smaller efforts. The types of fundraisers are usually varied—product sales, an event or two, collection programs like box tops and labels, and possibly a grocery store loyalty program.

Planning out your fundraising means considering your needs, your assets (especially volunteer power), and what your school community is likely to support. To determine what will work best for your group at any given time, start by considering these questions.

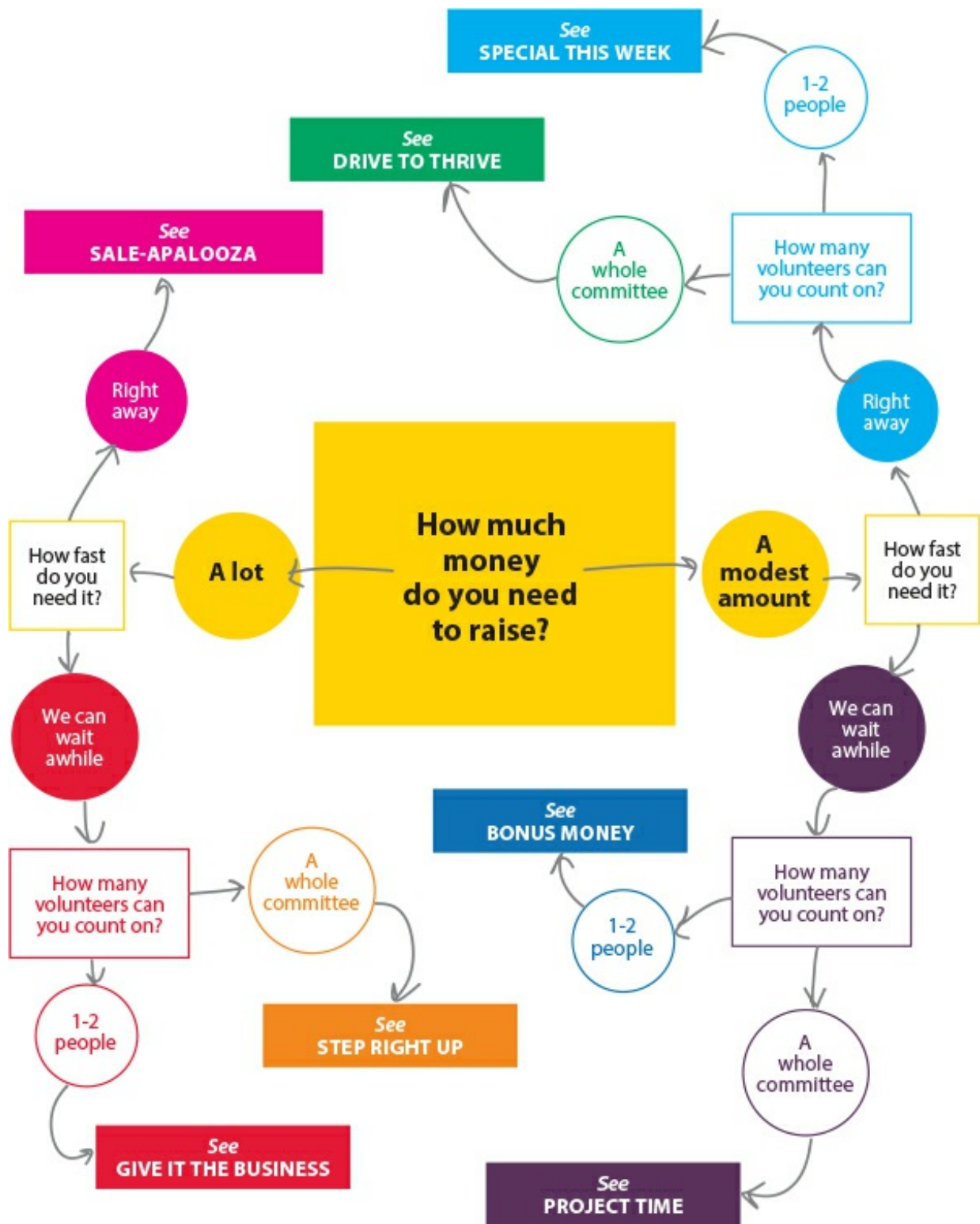
1. How much money do you need to raise? Always start a fundraiser with a dollar goal in mind and a plan for how you intend to spend the proceeds. Your PTO should set an action plan for the year that is aligned with your group's mission, and a budget to execute that plan. Understanding how much money you need to raise is the first thing you need to know to evaluate your fundraising options. While budgets are never exact, starting with a plan helps you track where you stand throughout the year. That way, there's less chance of suddenly running short of funds—or of spending more time than necessary raising money, and less time doing other important work.

2. How soon do you need the money? If you need the money within a month or two, you'll want to select a fundraiser that can be executed quickly. If you can afford to get the money over time or invest a few

months of planning before you see the profit, then you have more options. Simple product sales can usually be pulled together in a short time, while many other types of fundraisers take extended planning time or amass profits over time—like collecting labels and box tops, participating in a grocery store loyalty program, or running a scrip effort.

3. How much volunteer support can you expect? You know your group best. If you believe you can round up a full committee of eager volunteers, you may be able to pull off a more complex fundraiser. On the other hand, if you can only recruit one or two volunteers, you'll want to commit to a project that can be successful with just a little help. Fun runs, for example, can raise a lot of money and get the whole school excited. However, they involve lots of details and can require an army of volunteers to pull off if you organize the event yourself.

Here is a look at various fundraising choices. Use the chart below to determine which description fits for your particular situation, then read about the fundraising options that fit your needs.



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## Sale-apalooza

When you need a significant amount in a relatively short time, a product sale works best. The expertise provided by a professional fundraising company can fill in the gap for groups with low volunteerism. And groups with plenty of volunteers benefit because the more that people feel connected to your school and group, the more likely they are to participate. Product sales work well when a group needs a lot of money in a short span of time because there are clear start and end dates. You start the project knowing exactly

when your profits will be realized. Product sales also tend to be fairly predictable from year to year, especially if you stick with the same company over time. This consistency helps your PTO set a realistic profit goal. Selecting a catalog with a variety of desirable products at every price point generally means there's something for everyone to purchase in support of your group. What's more, you can encourage students to get involved through the incentive programs usually built into this type of catalog sale.

You might also choose a single-product sale. Groups can and do make a lot of money selling popular products like wrapping paper, candy, cookie dough, and many others. It helps to survey your school community to see what parents would support. And whether you're selling a single item or selling from a catalog, be sure to ask for samples to check quality.

[Sales Fundraisers: The Basics](#)

[Catalog Sales: Profitable, Easy To Run](#)

## **Give It the Business**

One of the toughest fundraising situations occurs when a group needs a lot of money, but the need is not urgent. This situation might arise if your PTO has a long-term goal to sponsor a capital project such as a playground upgrade or technology purchase. The profit outcome is unreliable, and the lack of a firm deadline can make it difficult for a small team to maintain momentum.

You can run dedicated fundraisers to support your project, such as a product sale or an event, and that actually can be a way to keep your community focused on the project. But a key source of funds for a major project can be grantwriting and corporate sponsorship. Both depend on specialized skills and relationships. You can raise a lot of money this way, but you will have to be persistent and patient. Your best opportunities for corporate sponsors are in your local area or from larger education-minded companies in your state. Grants are usually awarded by topic area, so you'll need to research likely sources based on your specific project. [Lowe's Toolbox for Education](#) is one good source of grants for parent groups and schools.

[Finding and Winning Grants](#)

## **Step Right Up**

When you have a lot of volunteers and don't need money urgently, you have a lot of options. The more people who feel a sense of connection to your school and your group, the more successful any fundraiser will be—whether it's a product sale, an event, a collection project, or something else. One great option is a communitywide, tradition-building fundraising event. Carnivals, auctions, fun runs, and jogathons all fit into this category. Complex events like these require months of planning and a whole host of volunteers.

One thing to consider: There is usually an element of financial risk with a large fundraising event. If your PTO's annual carnival is rained out, you could actually lose money in the end. Big events also consume your most organized volunteers, perhaps monopolizing them for the better part of your school year. Be sure you can afford to dedicate the necessary resources before committing to an event.

However, the advantages of a large fundraising event might be enough to offset the risk. Executed properly, this kind of event can raise a substantial amount of money. Also, a well-run event can be one of the most memorable and rewarding of PTO projects. Big events often turn into long-standing traditions that develop a following all their own. If you're daunted by the organizational task, there are companies that can help you organize fun runs, carnivals, and other event fundraisers, or even set up the entire event for you.

## Special This Week

A product sale is the easiest way to raise money quickly. A single-line product sale typically is easier to organize than a full-line catalog sale. Since you need only a modest amount of money, you have a wide range of product choices. The key is to choose a product your school community will support (a survey might help), at a good price point. Be sure to check samples for quality. Single-product sales can be appropriate to support a designated purpose. For example, you might run a wreath sale specifically to raise funds for holiday gifts for needy families.

The major risk of a single-line product sale is selecting the wrong item to sell. Carefully consider your community's wants and needs. If your school has embarked on an environmental awareness program, for example, you might consider selling green products. Look for a fundraising company that will provide guidance throughout the sale, thus allowing you to run it with just one or two volunteers.

[Build Support for Your Product Fundraiser](#)

## Drive To Thrive

With three-plus volunteers, you have the resources to coordinate a low-stress, do-it-yourself, schoolwide fundraising project such as a coin drive, can drive, blue jeans day, or bake sale. This type of project won't raise a lot of money, but it's fun and simple. It can be made even more fun (and profitable) by setting up a friendly competition between classes or grades. PTO volunteers plan, publicize, and organize the fundraiser. Volunteers also take the load off the teachers by handling all aspects of collecting proceeds and logging students' participation—depending on the specific type of project. While the amount raised will be modest, the project can have a quick turnaround so you don't overburden your community or your volunteers. If you reach your financial goal, you can be finished in a week or two. If not, your group still has the time and energy to conduct another fundraiser.

[PTO Turns Cans Into Cash](#)

[Bake Sales Step by Step](#)

## Bonus Money

Passive fundraisers such as label collections and shopper loyalty programs are a good solution when you need to raise a modest amount of money, but the need is not urgent. One or two volunteers can easily oversee such programs, and you can extend participation to supporters outside your immediate school community. The challenge of the passive fundraiser is getting people to participate consistently. Communication is key: Success depends on training your school's parents to cut the labels or register their shopper's card. It's possible to earn a significant amount, but the money dribbles in over time, so these projects are best suited to support the PTO's long-term needs. It is also difficult to predict how much money you might earn each month. Consider the proceeds from a passive fundraiser as bonus money, and you'll never be disappointed by the results.

[Clip-and-Save Fundraisers Go Digital](#)

[Rev Up Your Clip-and-Save Fundraiser](#)

## Project Time

Project-based fundraisers include sales of spiritwear, yearbooks, school photographs, scrip, student directories, and weekly specialty food concessions. Projects like these are long term, running over the

course of several weeks (spiritwear) to the whole year (food sales). Some are fairly easy to administer (photos), while others require strong organizational skills and financial controls (scrip). Since the work is spread out over time and different projects require different skills, volunteers should be matched to a project that they like. It's far easier for a volunteer to stay enthusiastic when she considers the work fun. Generally, it can be difficult to predict profits the first time you run a project-based sale. But if you repeat the same sale from year to year, you will be able to more reliably predict net profits and factor that into your annual budget. Some types of projects can grow into significant moneymakers.

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