
Article

Romancing Your Donors—Major Gifts Require Strong Relationships

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Knowing *of* someone is not the same as *knowing* them. In today's society we are all about the latest technologies and ways to connect on the internet. Organizations are grappling with whether or not to Tweet, how to generate interest on Facebook and the best ways to use their websites to convey their mission and vision. These are all excellent tools to have in your communications toolbox. But to truly succeed in major gifts, you need to develop one-on-one relationships with your donors.

Your role in major gifts is to bring your organization to life for the people who are interested in or are already supporting your organization. You need to connect your donors to your organization in a way that inspires and motivates them. To do this, you need to get to *know* your donors well.

Who You Know

Building relationships may seem simplistic in light of the weight major gifts carry in the philanthropic spectrum. However, many in the non-profit sector—staff and volunteers alike—can overlook why bridging the gap between a gift and a philanthropic investment is all about who you know.

As an example I recently met with representatives for a new client. This organization, nestled in one of the Chicago suburbs' more affluent neighborhoods, has struggled in its near 45-year history to raise the funds needed to hire development staff. Despite this fact it has survived on a shoe string budget—a true testament to the passion and commitment of the people running the organization!

As the clients and I discussed next steps and whom to interview for an upcoming Developmental Study[®], the client's team began throwing out name after name. While compiling this list can be a challenge for most smaller organizations, this client's list was a virtual who's who of not just the area, but of Illinois and in some cases, beyond! Even more remarkable was that these people were not just names on a list. These were friends. People our client knew well in one capacity or another. They had just never asked them for a *major* gift.

Now, I should note that I share this experience not to be critical of our client. On the contrary, I offer it as an example of the rich possibilities that are often hiding right in front of us—possibilities that, with the right strategies, can create lasting partnerships with significant philanthropic outcomes.

Uncovering Who You Know

While most organizations do not enjoy the connections of our client mentioned above, they hopefully have a database from which to begin building greater connections between the organization and its donors and prospects. Annual fund donors, alumni, members, parents, volunteers are just some of the groups that make up a list from which an organization can pull prospects for major gifts.

To many, however, a database is just that—a long list of names without an indication of who the people are or if they are capable of a major gift. Here's what you *should* know:

- ˘ How the person came to be in your database. Hopefully, this provides a clue as to interests, especially if your organization offers multiple programs or serves different constituencies;
- ˘ How much money the person has given and over what length of time;
- ˘ The types of appeals to which the person has responded. This can shed light on interests as well as ways in which a donor prefers to connect with your organization;
- ˘ Where the person lives which offers insight into geographic affluence based on zip code; and
- ˘ Whom, if anyone, within or connected to the organization, the person knows.

There are other ways to learn about your donors and prospects as well. The internet, while seemingly intrusive at times, can be an open book with myriad information. Many local libraries now offer philanthropic databases with giving history and information. And, of course, your internal staff and volunteer leaders can often provide insight into who your donors are and what interests them most.

Who You Don't Know

It is important to build off of your existing database because a gift to your organization demonstrates an affinity towards your mission and vision. However, it is equally as important to have a grasp of who you do not know.

Identifying those people within your community, however you may define “community,” to determine the people not on your list is obviously a bit more challenging. Here are a few ways to prospect for new major gift donors:

- ∨ Tap your volunteer leaders—board members, women’s board members, auxiliaries, alumni committees and other ancillary committees—all have connections. Meet with these people one-on-one or as a group to discuss individuals with whom they may be connected through their various networks. Who do they think would be interested in your organization’s mission. NOTE—If all of the aforementioned people are not already donors, that is your first task!
- ∨ Read the papers and do Google searches on your community to track who the leaders are and where they are most involved.
- ∨ Examine annual reports, preferably from like-organizations, to find what interests people and at what levels they are giving.

Prospecting is difficult, so try not to get frustrated. Remember, staff members are not typically the ones with the connections to people of influence and affluence. If your reach is small, look to build your volunteer base as a way to start expanding your network.

Building the “Right” Relationships

A sustainable culture of philanthropy relies on personal, meaningful relationships with organizational constituents. It is the donors with whom an organization has the strongest relationships who will typically make the greatest lasting investments in an organization’s philanthropic endeavors.

How often do you hear in the dating scene, “when it’s right, it’s right?” Major donors are not looking for wine and roses, but their relationship with your organization requires the same nurturing and consideration to be fulfilling. Just like knowing a spouse well can make communication a little less rocky, getting to know your donors takes much of the guess work out of raising significant dollars. Why? By the time you are ready to ask for a major gift for your organization, your relationship will tell you:

- ∨ What interests and motivates your donor;
- ∨ What sized gift your donor is capable of making;
- ∨ The type of gift the donor wants to make;
- ∨ The best person to ask the donor for the gift;
- ∨ The best setting in which to ask for the gift; and
- ∨ When an ask is most appropriate.

How do you get to know your prospects well? To build strong relationships, cultivation strategies, including consistent, meaningful and personalized communication, are essential. Here are some additional ways to enrich your organization’s relationships with major gift prospects:

- ∨ First and foremost, overcome any fear or belief that donors do not want to be bothered. Unless they tell you otherwise, they *do* want to become better connected.
- ∨ Phone calls and personal visits are essential to developing a bond between individuals and your organization. On the phone you can ask them about previous gifts, thank them, learn about their hobbies, work, family and friends.
- ∨ Invite them to your organization, if appropriate, to see what you do and how you are making a difference in your community. You can ask volunteers and beneficiaries of your organization’s services to join you.

- ∨ Send them updates about your organization and program progress along with handwritten notes. Tie your correspondence back to your mission in creative ways. If you serve children, include drawings or stories about their accomplishments.
- ∨ Email news articles of interest.
- ∨ Remember birthdays and special occasions.
- ∨ Involve them in your organization by seeking advice, inviting them to serve on a board or committee or asking them to host an informational gathering or reception.

As you build strategies for each of your donors, be creative. There is something about each organization that makes it special. Know your case well and build your relationships on how each person ties into your organization's case in his/her own unique way.

And, above all, be patient. Goals and timelines for when you want your relationships to evolve to the point of making an ask are important. But, with due diligence, genuine interest and strong communication you will find that your list of prospects has become a list of invested, committed partners.

About the Author—Leslie Biggins Mollsen is Co-CEO of American City Bureau, Inc. (ACB). Ms. Mollsen, a major gifts expert, has served hundreds of non-profit clients throughout her career with a special focus on Catholic initiatives. Ms. Mollsen is also a frequent speaker at conferences and seminars nationwide on the topics of major gift development, capital campaigns and leadership development. She currently serves as a National Catholic Development Conference Corporate Board member. ACB, founded in 1913, is the nation's oldest fundraising firm specializing in capital campaign direction and major gift development. As a full-service firm ACB provides a vast array of fundraising services designed to help each non-profit client build a lasting culture of philanthropy. To learn more, visit www.acb-inc.com or contact ACB as success@acb-inc.com or 800.786.GOAL(4625).