



Cultivating Donors for Long-term Success: What You Do Today Affects the Funds You Raise Tomorrow

There's a common belief among non-profits and alumni associations that they can't afford to invest more in cultivating and communicating with their donors and prospective donors... that not spending money *at all* is better than spending (*investing* is a better term) money that may not yield an immediate or short-term return.

There are some common phrases to describe this mindset: pennywise, pound foolish... cutting off your nose to spite your face... not seeing the forest for the trees. However you say it, not realizing the impact of your short-term activity on your long-term fundraising goals can cost you literally millions of dollars, most likely when you need those millions the most.

The reality is this: in the long run, and even on the short term, organizations that invest more, gain more, in donors, dollars and overall participation from their community of supporters. A cultivation program, driven by a focus on the donor's point of view, results in donor-dollar growth in annual giving; members who are involved as volunteers; and generous giving to major fundraising projects.

Successful organizations follow simple steps and guidelines to make sure their programs are dynamic and growing, and recognize there will be incremental gains and adjustments to be made along the way.

Some Basic Rules of Thumb

#1 Focus on your donors—organizations that receive the most support are those who engage and involve their donors, those who perform services their donors care about, and those who provide benefits for belonging to their

community, including tangible benefits and intangible ones, like recognition and personal gratification (otherwise known as the warm fuzzies). Engaged donors will make the largest or most consistent gifts and, ultimately, will become your best champions and solicitors.

#2 Keep good data—collect everything you can and invest resources to keep it current, from addresses, phone numbers, and emails, to donation dates and amounts, who supported specific projects, who attended which events, and accurate lists of volunteers. Your data is the foundation of your organization... protect it and care for it like the valuable asset it is.

#3 Personalize your communication—maximize your database and establish meaningful relationships by sending letters and emails that are personalized to each individual. No one is moved by being addressed as a "Friend" or "Supporter" or "Concerned Community Member," especially if they've given you a financial gift, or worked for you as a volunteer. While it may be easier or "cheaper" for you, to a donor or prospect it's just impersonal.

#4 Tell your story—telling your story in words and photos is a great opportunity to engage your donors and prospective donors.

#5 Be frequent and consistent—through successes and setbacks alike, communicate often and regularly to become a part of your donors' lives all the time, *not* just when you need money.

#6 Provide opportunities for donors to be active participants—not just through events or as volunteers. While those activities are critical, donors also appreciate opportunities to contribute their ideas on your goals and vision for the future. Don't be surprised if you uncover that a donor has a passion tied to your cause that he or she will be willing to fund.

#7 Stick to it—Just like a diet or exercise program, adherence is key to long-term success. Sounds like a simple concept, but we all know that it's often the hardest part. Set incremental goals; be ambitious, but realistic; and make an effort to *really* understand the true metrics behind cultivation and what they mean to your annual fund and your future fundraising needs; then measure, evaluate and adjust accordingly. Don't quit at the first sign of perceived failure!

#8 Focus on your donors (no, this is not a typo, it's so important, it deserves top billing and a closing spot)—when your donors feel close to your cause they will give and give generously; strangers will not make extraordinary gifts.

Executing a successful cultivation program doesn't happen overnight, or by accident. But it also isn't rocket science. It's simply a series of activities and actions—consistent communication, events and personal outreach—that keep your donors at the center of everything you do.

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