

Cultivating Donors Makes Sense For Any Organization

Donor cultivation is simply another way of talking about building relationships with donors. It boils down to common sense and courtesy. You stay in touch with your friends and family, right? You call them. You send them a birthday, get well, or holiday card. You remember what they like and don't like. They're on your radar screen.

1. It's no different with donors, except that we fundraisers (typically called *major gift managers* or *donor relations managers*) get to build those relationships (mostly) during work hours. Sounds like a lot of fun to me.

However, the key lies in the organization's expectations, goals, and approach. Often—especially with smaller organizations—the directors outside of the development department expect results right away. The minute they hire someone focusing on major gifts, they think the dough is going to roll in the door.

Ah ... that's where we have to stop them and say, "Sorry, it will take a while to build that relationship. I can't ask just yet, because I don't know what is the best amount or project to ask for. If I ask too soon, it's going to turn the donor off."

Most organizations typically think of cultivation with big donors, but, of course, it starts in the beginning. With any new donor you bring in, you're trying to build some type of relationship, so that you can identify those donors who warrant and need personal attention from a major gift officer.

So, let's forget about the ultimate goal for a minute ("THE BIG GIFT") and focus on the relationship building and some of the ways to make that happen.

2. Thank them for everything. Thank them for a gift. Thank them for coming to an event. Thank them via phone. Thank them in person. Thank them in subsequent appeals (and do put in a reply envelope if you can).

3. Communicate with them. The big question is how often? It depends on the organization. If you have many reasons for giving, you can mail more often than others. Rule of thumb is at least four times a year to ensure that the address is still active.

4. Involve other people from the organization. Sometimes, a donor likes to meet with the CEO or a person in the field and can get much more enthused about the programs that way. So, find out what the donor would be interested in and make it happen. Make sure that the person coming with you has information about the donor. Make sure they take your lead on what to do next. You are the cultivation expert! Also, make sure they understand why they're coming with you. If they expect to come home with a big gift and you determine it's not time yet, they may be disappointed.

5. Be creative. There are a lot of organizations that are trying to get money from donors, so if you're not building that relationship, someone else will. Do something different. The development director of a rehab hospital recently talked about releasing white doves at the end of a dedication ceremony. It was spectacular and well worth the money. And, she has done other things that are slightly different, cost a bit but make a tremendous impact.

6. Trust your instincts. Donors are people. We are people. People tend to give to people and what you're doing in this process is feeling each other out. Can the donor trust you? Can the donor trust the organization?

6. Make sure people understand that cultivation takes time and effort, but the rewards will be sweet at the end.