

BACK TO BASICS: 10 WAYS TO ROMANCE YOUR DONORS

A friend of ours called one day to tell us she had exciting news to share. She had just made a pledge for her first \$5,000 contribution. She was so excited to have been able to make this commitment, happy about the organization she had chosen, and felt honored to be among the donors who were going to help the organization achieve its important vision.

When asked why she chose this particular organization among the several others in our community doing similar work, she said it was because

- they have been regularly communicating with and warmly cultivating her, making her feel appreciated and valued as a donor;
- she felt certain they would put her funds to best use;
- she was impressed with the strength of their financial position.

These three factors elevated the organization above the others in her eyes.

This got us thinking about how easy it is to lose sight of the most basic, “tried and true” ways to promote loyalty among donors. In your frenzy to incorporate the newest interactive technologies and most sophisticated software into your fund development program, you may leave little time for building real relationships with donors.

Here are ten reminders of what partnering with supporters is really all about. We have left spaces after each item for you to make notes about your current practices in each area.

1. **Welcome your new donors.** When someone sends you a first gift, acknowledge that you are aware the person is a new donor, and welcome him or her to the organization. This may be done with just a special letter, or may include a welcome packet that includes a newsletter, annual report, invitation to an upcoming event or a tour, etc. Consider holding new donor orientation events a couple of times a year, where board members and staff can mix and mingle with your new supporters.
2. **Thank promptly and often.** Unfortunately, this writer can site many instances of never receiving a thank you from an organization to which she has made a first donation. In one case, she was a board member! Needless to say, she no longer is involved with these nonprofits. Be sure you thank your donors in writing (not by email) within 48 hours of receipt of the gift (whether a first time donor or not). If you plan to publish donor names on the website, in newsletters, annual reports or elsewhere, request the donor’s permission. Of course, be sure to spell the donor’s name correctly! (This writer began to receive thank you letters with her name misspelled from an organization where she had been a supporter for years. She faxed a sample back with a note to please correct the spelling, and never received a response or note of correction. This is disrespectful.) If appropriate, from time to time have a client write to donors expressing gratitude for their support.

BACK TO BASICS: 10 WAYS TO ROMANCE YOUR DONORS

3. **Ask their opinion.** Through targeted hard copy or web-based surveys, focus groups, phone calls, pull-outs in newsletters, ask your donors for feedback with regard to your future plans, your ideas for new programs or ways to recognize donors, or whatever your most pressing issues are. Your donors care about you, and will appreciate being asked from time to time to help you think things through.
4. **Use their donations as intended.** If the gift is restricted, be sure your gift accounting reflects this, and use it for the purpose for which it was intended and for which you accepted it. *Note: be sure your gift acceptance policies are up to date, to protect you from accepting inappropriate or problematic gifts.*
5. **Tell donors how their gift was used.** From the thank you, to printed or emailed executive updates, to stories in your newsletter, let donors know the impact their gift has had. Being good stewards, being accountable in this regard helps build trust with your donors and brings them closer to your organization and its mission.
6. **Assure that your organization is fiscally sound.** For the most part, people don't give to "needy" organizations; they give to winners, to those organizations that have proven they use their financial resources wisely and effectively. Our friend we spoke of earlier chose the organization that was in the best, not the worst financial position, because she knew her gift would be used effectively to impact those the organization served.
7. **Communicate a vision that is compelling and exciting.** Donors are attracted to an appealing future that is achievable. By joining with others of like mind, donors can accomplish things they could never do alone, help their community (or the world) in ways they find moving and inspiring. Be sure that your vision addresses the greater issue about which your mission is concerned, that your vision is greater than your organization itself.
8. **Invite the donor to serve on a committee, task force, the board.** Not all donors will be appropriate for or interested in serving on committees, task forces or the board of directors, or in providing hands-on help, such as at an animal shelter, soup kitchen, etc . But for those who are, this is an excellent way to bring the donor closer to the organization and promote a sense of "ownership." Donors who are also volunteers tend to remain involved for the long term.
9. **Acknowledge cumulative giving.** This writer has been supporting at least a dozen environmental and social service groups for 20 years or more, giving every year, and NOT ONE has ever acknowledged her cumulative giving or called her to ask for a visit. What a mistake! Because her annual gifts have been \$100 or less, and because the organization has apparently not focused on repeat, loyal givers of any amount, she has not popped up as a potential major

BACK TO BASICS: 10 WAYS TO ROMANCE YOUR DONORS

donor. How wrong they are! The first one who finally figures out she is a good prospect for a major and/or planned gift, and thanks her for her cumulative giving to the organization, will hit the jackpot.

10. **Connect your donors with other donors.** Donors enjoy having their good sense in giving to a particular organization validated by mixing with others who have done the same. Along with inviting donors to your fund raising special events, you may want to also include less formal (and free) get-togethers such as a breakfast with the CEO; meetings where clients speak about how the organization changed their lives; facility tours; thank you events, etc.

Penelope Burk, who reports on extensive donor research in her excellent book *Donor-Centered Fundraising* (published by Cygnus Applied Research, Inc.) says the following:

“The vast majority of donors said that although recognition is appreciated, what they really wanted was more meaningful information and, if they got it, they would continue to give and they would make increasingly generous contributions. This is what they said they needed:

- Prompt, personalized acknowledgement of their gifts
- Confirmation that their gifts have been set to work as intended
- Measurable results on their gifts at work prior to being asked for another contribution”

We hope these 10 activities will help you begin today to assure donor loyalty long into the future!