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How to Thank Donors — and Bring Them Closer to Your Cause

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ISTOCK

Most fundraisers agree that raising money from existing donors is easier — and costs less — than recruiting new ones. Yet, on average, nonprofits lose more than 50 percent of their contributors from one year to the next, according to a recent study.

One of the main reasons people stop giving? The lack of a gift acknowledgment. In fact, just 40 percent of charities properly thank their supporters, research shows.

You don't need to invest a ton of time or money to show appreciation to those who give to your cause. But getting this right is a vital step to turning one-time contributors into loyal supporters and boosting your nonprofit's bottom line for the long term.

It's critical to make donors feel valued no matter how much or how little they give, experts say — "although you do need to acknowledge people who give \$1 million in a different way than someone who gives \$100," says Aristide Collins, a former George Washington University fundraising chief who now serves as the institution's vice president and secretary.

A Personal Touch

For example, fundraisers at the University of California at Davis focus on "systematically stewarding" the college's annual donors, who make up its biggest group of supporters, says Angela Joens, assistant vice chancellor for development outreach. These contributors could be UC's future midlevel or major donors, she says, so it's worth finding ways to give them personalized attention.

Twice a year, the university sends this group an email with a video that thanks them for giving and demonstrates what their dollars are helping make possible, such as a new program or faculty member. Those who give consistently year after year get personal recognition at big milestones, such as a letter signed by the chancellor at the 25-year mark or a thank-you call from the leader at 50 years.

Donors who give \$50,000 or more over a lifetime enter a Leadership Giving Society and are invited each year to attend a gratitude event on the campus, where they have opportunities to learn about the impact of their contributions by interacting with some of the programs or people they help support. "We show them everything that's amazing about this place and how charitable dollars are making it go from good to a great organization," Joens says.

Here are more tips from veteran fundraisers to help you thank your donors in ways they appreciate and get them more involved in your cause:

Get to know your donors. "The most important thing is to know who your donor base is and know what's appealing to them," Joens says. For instance, some supporters don't want to be recognized publicly for their gift or don't want others to know how much they gave. Learn about each donor's preferences, she says, and let that drive the way you recognize them.

Say thanks promptly and report back on what their gift is accomplishing. Acknowledge gifts as quickly as possible, Joens says — within a week at most, but sooner is better.

Within 90 days, find a way to show donors how you're using their dollars to make a difference, says Marc Pitman, founder of the Concord Leadership Group, which trains nonprofits on fundraising. By late February each year, he says, you also should create a report focused on thanking your supporters who gave in the previous year and making them feel great about their decision to support your nonprofit. If you have the resources, a high-quality printed report can be more engaging than a digital one, Pitman says, and may inspire them to give again.

Don't use gifts to thank major donors. They usually don't like them, Joens says. Before buying a flashy present, ask yourself: "Is it having an impact, making them feel cherished and loved, or would an hour luncheon with a scholarship recipient mean more to them and cost you less?"

Offer big contributors special access. "They want to be able to hear from and interact with the person whose ultimate vision they're supporting," Collins says. Make sure your top leaders know who each of your key donors is, he says, and create an environment in which these supporters know they can dial up your CEO, executive director, or board chair directly to discuss a problem or request a favor.

Tap into donors' passions. To figure out how to get special donors more involved, ask yourself, "What kind of experience can we give them that they couldn't get anywhere else?" Joens says. For example, UC once invited a donor who led an upscale winery to visit the campus and talk to students about how he built a luxury brand. "He was so on fire after that," Joens says, and he eventually became a trustee at the college.

The institution also invites some donors to its winery, where they can learn about wine making in a hands-on way — and take home a bottle. It's about understanding which type of involvement would most interest your donors, Joens says — just try it.

Use the telephone. Many organizations prefer to communicate with donors by email, but it's often easier — and more effective — to make a phone call, Joens says, especially if there is a problem with a supporter. "Don't hide and just hope they won't notice," she says. "Take ownership of it." Let them know they matter to your nonprofit and ask what you can do to resolve the issue.

Especially for major donors, Pitman says, consider calling just to say thanks, without asking for money, inviting them to an event, or making any other kind of solicitation. This unexpected gesture tends to stick with people, he says, and can also lead to greater giving.

Find creative ways to keep in touch. Recognize important dates, like supporters' birthdays or anniversaries of their spouses' deaths, Joens says. And let them hear from various contacts at your organization, Collins says, such as the creative director at a performing-arts venue or a dean or relevant faculty member at a university. "Keeping in touch costs you nothing but means everything," he says.

Streamline your stewardship efforts. Determine what kind of experience you want donors to have, regardless of their giving level, Pitman says, and automate what you can. For instance, set up triggers for emails to go out at certain times, such as a couple of weeks after someone makes a donation or takes an action. But make sure to personalize these communications, he says, and test them on yourself first.

Don't be afraid to try something new. These days donors are busier than ever, Joens says. Although your most loyal supporters will likely stick with you no matter what, she says, don't assume the same strategies you've long used to thank and cultivate supporters are still effective. "Evaluate your sacred cows," Joens says, and determine whether it's time to take a different approach.

This resource is part of:

TIPS FOR THANKING (AND KEEPING) DONORS

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