

CHECKLIST

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4 Ways to Ask Major Donors for Big Gifts

By Maria Di Mento

Asking a wealthy donor for a large gift is rarely easy. But no matter how you approach a big-gift solicitation, the most important factor is preparation. Fundraisers should take the time to cultivate a relationship with the donor and to fully prep the person making the request, so the gift solicitation is not coming out of the blue, says Aristide Collins, a former George Washington University fundraising chief who now serves as the institution's vice president and secretary. What you say should always depends on the donor and the circumstance. "There's not one generic language you would use in talking to major donors about a big gift," says Collins.

"It's more about cultivation than the words, and there is no abracadabra," says Scott Justvig, who leads development and communications at the Salvation Army's Metropolitan Division in Chicago. "If you think there is, you're in the wrong business." That cultivation should be robust enough to inform a fundraiser or nonprofit leader about what motivates a donor to give, he says. No matter the donor or the nonprofit, fundraising experts stress the same process in all cases: Do the research on a wealthy donor beforehand, Learn what groups and causes they've supported in the past, what they care about, what motivates their giving. Then take the time to build the relationship.

It helps to be adept at reading people and gauging their reactions, says Laura Frye, major gifts officer at the Boston Ballet, and it's important to approach such conversations with the donor in mind.

"I try to think about the donor and talk about how what our organization is doing is related to them, to what they care about, or how it impacts them," Frye says.

Here are some smart tips from experts about what to say and how to approach such conversations with major donors:

- 1. It's not always a request. In some cases, it's better to inform a donor and wait than to ask outright.** Frye sometimes tells a donor about a program she thinks that person might support. She might even mention how much the program costs the ballet company. "But then I don't ask for the

money for it right then. I'll wait until later. I'll talk about it and listen to how they respond and see if they are truly interested before I actually ask for a donation.

"In such cases, Frye might open the conversation with something like, "I know you're interested in this, and I want to talk to you more about it." Or, "Let me tell you what we have going on." She'll describe the program and explain how it benefits the ballet company or the students at its school. She will only ask for a gift when the donor seems receptive and comfortable. Pay attention to how the donor is reacting, Frye adds. If you sense any anxiety, follow up with, "I'm not going to ask you for money," — and don't. This will ease the tension and keep the focus on talking about programs. Sometimes Frye brings up a past conversation as a way to build up to asking for support for a particular program. For example: "I remember the last time, we talked about education. I really want to talk to you about this new scholarship program we're launching."

2. Take a donor-centric approach. Mark Stuart, president of the foundation of San Diego Zoo Global, suggests thinking about it this way: Asking donors to support a program actually offers them an opportunity to solve a problem in which they have a real interest. "I always look for what is the problem as they see it, and how can my organization be a conduit to their hopes, dreams, and aspirations," he says. One approach might be to say, "I would like to come and see you and talk about a special project that I know you have an interest in." If you are talking to a donor who has given big gifts in the past, Stuart recommends a three-part approach:

- **Thank** them for what they've given and acknowledge that it was a significant gift.
- **Remind** them how this new project jibes with their interests and concerns and why their support matters.
- **Invite** them to give. Think of the request as an invitation rather than a solicitation, Stuart says, and present it that way. He suggests asking, "Would you consider a gift of \$X million to bring this program to a greater audience?"

3. Provide a range for the gift. Justvig suggests a similar approach but recommends offering parameters that allow donors to choose how much they want to give. For example: "Would you consider a gift in the range of \$X million to \$X million?" "Give them a low amount and a high amount that is realistic and one that actually makes an impact," he says.

4. Highlight impact. Collins says pointing out the long-term results of a gift is a powerful tool. He suggests saying something like, "What do you want your legacy to be, and what do you want your impact to be on this organization?" That approach nudges the donor to think about how the gift will allow the nonprofit to do more and make a difference.