

Guest Article

Researching Major Donors: A Critical First Step to Success

by Suzi Wilkins Berl

Hours in the foundation center in your city? A brainstorming session with the Board to draw up that "hit list" of potential donors? A river trip to which potential major donors are invited? In truth, there is no single, sure fire way to find major donors- those supporters critical to the financial well-being of all nonprofit organizations. Bottom line-it takes a focused effort and a willingness to develop a directed campaign to locate, secure and hold those major donors. Rarely do those folks fall from the sky; rather, it's a deliberative process.

Despite the federal government's assurance that the economy is improving, there seems to be less discretionary money to go around. Most groups nationwide are seeing a decrease in their membership numbers. Attracting and holding major donors can benefit not only your bottom line, but can also provide your general membership a psychological boost: if the "deep pockets" are stepping up to the plate, then the rest of the members are more likely to support a "winning cause." The trick is to identify which members have the potential to give more, and then to convince them to do so. Charity begins at home.

Whether or not you can claim movie stars as members, working your own list is the easiest way to secure major donors. Your members know the organization and are already committed to your cause. Approaching them is infinitely easier than convincing a stranger that yours is the best thing since sliced bread. Board and Advisory Committee members are often the best vehicle to identify "regular" members who currently contribute below their capacity. (If your Board does not have this ability, then you may want to rethink your Board's composition-but that's another article!)

Schedule time at a committee meeting, Board meeting, etc. to review the membership list. A thorough review of that list is critical. Six to twelve people will know an incredible amount about an identified individual, all of which will help develop a donor profile.

While this process may seem somehow "gossip-y," it's a tried and true method used across the country for annual fund and capital campaigns alike. Knowing personal, background information about a person can often make or break the solicitation. Has the person just contributed a substantial gift to his or her college, for example, and may be "tapped out" for the next few months?

Knowing how much to ask for is critical, too. Check the annual reports of other charities to which your target has contributed to determine an appropriate giving level. (There's nothing that will kill a solicitation faster than asking someone for \$5,000, when \$500 would be a reach to them!) Research, research, research.

Written material will supplement your Board's oral information on the potential major donor. A visit to your local library or, better yet, foundation center, can provide a wealth of information: boards she sits on; major stock holdings in a corporation; children, relatives, etc. Together, all information helps to develop a personal profile for the major donor.

Armed with this information, you'll be much more likely to hit pay dirt!

Suzi Wilkins lives in Asheville, NC, where she provides consulting services to nonprofits, including River Network.