

ARE YOU READY FOR AN 8-FIGURE GIFT?

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They did it again. I just read about Harvard receiving another eight-figure gift on top of a nine figure gift last year, adding to its billions in endowment. Here you are, a development officer for a venerable institution, contemplating undertaking a major campaign, and you're wondering what is it about Harvard and its ilk that enables them to attract such large gifts as a matter of course -- even though they don't "need" the money -- and organizations like yours that have to struggle for those rare five and six figure gifts?

As a consultant to many organizations, large and small, higher education to healthcare to human services, I encounter this wonderment from my clients regularly. So I have begun asking the question to the people who make large gifts to "those" institutions to find out why they get the big gifts and not the human service organization, or hospital or museum with which they participate as a board member.

Perhaps there is secret pastry these wealthy institutions feed to their board, staff and donors that we can get a hold of and serve to our people so we can raise the gift bar. Donors, our board members and senior staff will begin thinking of our organization as being in a league that should naturally attract five, six and seven-figure



gifts. Unfortunately, it is not magic pastry that you seek, rather, it is some old fashion development work. But unlike the short-term effect of magic pastry, the following recipe will not wear off and will become part of the fabric of your organization and mission if you have or can find the right ingredients.

My interviews, research and 26 years in development have helped me to create an enduring recipe for development success. It has a firm foundation on which rests several delicate layers of organizationally sound principals that can bring your institution into the fund raising league it deserves to be in.

The Foundation - volunteer and management leadership: People who have a lot of money available for philanthropy typically have earned it or preserved it through astute scrutiny of investment opportunities. A key factor investors evaluate is the quality and track-record of the people who are in charge and leading the organization. It is important for the CEO/President to be a leader with a big, long-term vision, who can both inspire and convey a sense of passion and urgency. The membership of your board must inspire confidence and the likelihood for future accomplishment. A philanthropic investor wants to protect and maximize his or her investment and will consider the quality of your organization's leadership as relationships are being built.

Age and Stability: This same philanthropic investor who is looking for stability in volunteers and personnel is also looking for stability throughout the organization. Has the institution been around for a generation or two, and does it have some endearing traditions and a strong brand in the community? Do you have a reputation for strong financial management and do you have a large enough cash reserve to weather a financial downturn? Do you have the maturity to be able to implement a new program effectively and deliver on its objectives? If I include you in my estate plan, will you be around when I die? Can your organization provide me and my family with recognition that will leave a legacy for my kids to remember (and replicate) and from which to learn the joys of philanthropy?

Mission Clarity and Timelessness: The mission of your organization is key to growing relationships with your donors. These are busy people and are not as well versed with your organization's mission as you; so many of its complexities will be lost on them. When someone makes a large gift to an institution, they like to be able to articulate to their friends and colleagues (and spouse) what they are supporting and why. Therefore, the timelessness

of your mission and the simpler your mission is to grasp and describe... the better. The timelessness of your mission means the need will always be there and it is emotionally understood and appreciated by the uninitiated. Food banks fight hunger. Children's hospitals save children. Museums preserve cultural heritage. Universities prepare our future leaders. Research organizations cure disease.

Direct Impact: It is common knowledge that today's donors, large and small, want their philanthropy to be used efficiently and to result in direct, high quality program services in support of your organization's mission. Communicating this will forge an emotional connection between your donor and your organization that will prevail when compared to other organizations that do not do this. You need to be able to show how gifts have resulted in furthering the mission, as well as the challenges you face(d) in doing so. Make the donor your partner in successes and challenges, through peer-level advisory committees and personal meetings. It is your honesty with those challenges that can result in larger gifts. How many families have been fed? How many children went home in good health? How many visitors have visited the exhibit? Have your alumni contributed to society? How much closer are we to a cure?

Facilities-Based: Making an organization's case more tangible is often a challenge. One way to accomplish this is by having a facility to show off, to tour or to build that will advance the mission. Enabling a donor to "kick the tires" provides a sense of stability, legitimacy and longevity that are vital feelings for a major donor to have when considering a pace-setting gift. If your organization is not facilities-based, your programs typically do take place at a site that can be shown to your donors.

Strong Development Program: Leadership at the highest level of the organization is the critical element for success for any

organizational undertaking, and increasingly, the high-end fund raising leadership is staff driven. Development staff members are forming their own relationships with donors and often become the face for the institution. The responsibilities of the development office and officer are increasing and playing a more pivotal role in securing larger and larger gifts.

In order to identify, attract and maintain a relationship with donors, and move them upward in their generosity to your organization, your development operation must include likable staff and a commitment to excellence in preparation, research, cultivation, presentation, gift strategy, leadership involvement and donor stewardship. Pace-setting donors should expect nothing less and you should deliver more than is expected.

How do you get there?

Change will be incremental and presents a "chicken and egg" dilemma. How do you attract the volunteer leadership you need to attract the volunteer leadership you need? How do you attract the pace-setting gifts you need to attract the pace-setting gifts you want and need? How do you make that leap?

Consider a leadership recruitment strategy using the notion of "marginal utility". Meet with your current and prospective leaders and begin a discussion about the subject of this article... why Harvard and not us? This will get them talking and thinking about the issue and get them beyond the surface of your organization's many attributes. The discussion can migrate to the relatively larger effect a six or seven figure gift would have on your organization compared to a much larger institution they may or may not be supporting. When done respectfully, you can note how his or her leadership will bring the same relatively higher value to your organization because his or her leadership will stand out and attract followers. This leadership, over time, will serve to raise the bar and bring great progress to your mission and fund raising efforts... a tasty pastry indeed. ■