

On-Going Recognition

Planned Giving Mentor

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I still remember a conversation with a fellow planned giving officer early in my development career. After musing about whether to attend the funeral of a long-time major donor to his institution, he decided not to go on the grounds that “his giving is over so there is no reason the charity needs to show any further appreciation.” At the time, this reasoning, sound as it appeared at one level, struck me as flawed. As I have since talked with countless other planned giving officers and had occasion to ask a similar question of myself on far too many occasions, I find that reasoning even more off-base.

What does it mean to provide on-going recognition to our donors? And why should we do it? Is there any time when the logic that says: “The donor finally made a major gift, so I should now move on to the next prospect and do not need to spend any more time on the one who already gave”?

I believe there are three major reasons for providing on-going recognition to our major donors, including the ultimate recognition of showing up if we can at their memorial service. First, it is just the right thing to do. Our donors give because they believe it to be the right thing to do, because they believe in the mission of the organizations to which they donate. Our gratitude should be similarly motivated. In saying that, however, I want to emphasize that gratitude should be *appropriate* to each donor. Some donors appreciate public recognition; some are embarrassed by a public show of thanks. Some are pleased by a celebratory lunch with the president; some would just as soon have tea in the privacy of their home. Some would like to meet the people whose lives are changed by the donor’s gifts; some would rather hear stories about and see photographs of the people the organization serves. Our focus in providing recognition is to make sure that the donor “hears” gratitude in what we say and do. And different donors hear expressions of thanks in their own ways.

The second reason for providing on-going recognition is to reinforce to the donor that the gift continues to benefit the organization over time.. Increasingly, donors expect a tangible and definitive “return on their investment” in a charitable enterprise. That is, they expect their gifts to **make a difference** in the ability of the charity to fulfill its mission. It is not enough simply to believe in a cause and trust that the administrators of the charity will act as wise stewards of their gifts. They want to know the results. And they want to know that their gifts contribute to the organization’s mission in a way that is important to them and that that contribution lasts. Continuing recognition, perhaps by continuing to invite the donors back for annual celebrations, perhaps by including them in special recognition societies, perhaps by a regular lunch or dinner at the charity’s expense, all give the representatives of the charity on-going opportunities to tell the donors how much their gifts have meant.

Finally, on-going recognition allows the donor to become involved in the dynamic life of the charity. Charities change and grow. Missions morph—or at least the ways missions are put into practice morph with changing times. Through continuing contact and continuing stories about the impact of the donors’ gifts, charities can reinforce how much the life of the charity is changed as a result. The donor feels that she or he has changed the direction of the charity for the better.

Back to the reasoning of my early planned giving acquaintance: was he right that there was no practical reason for attending his donor’s funeral? Even viewed in the crassest of financial terms, my answer would still be “no.” Donors rarely move in isolation. Friends and family attend memorials, and often friends and family are either directly tied to the same charities as the person being memorialized or are in a position to make gifts to those charities in memory of their friend or family member. And they certainly will notice the presence (or absence) of a charity at the memorial service.

One of the cardinal tenets of good fundraising is that the best donor is a previous donor. Individuals who have already “invested” in a charity have a stake in the continuing financial well-being of that charity. They are much more likely to respond to a new request for support, therefore, than someone new to the process. And what better way to cultivate the next gift than by continuing to recognize—always in appropriate ways—the gifts already made.