

5 Steps to Major Gift Success

Posted on [June 1, 2011](#) by [admin](#)

I can't believe we're nearly halfway through 2011. Where the heck did the first half of the year go!?!

Approaching the month of June means you've got just about six months to close as many major gifts as you can to ensure the financial security of your organization. If you follow these five steps, you've got a great chance at closing even more major gifts!

Target the right prospects

Unless your nonprofit has only a few hundred donors, chances are you don't know every donor that supports your organization. So how do you know who your best major gift prospects are?

There are several ways to identify your best prospects. Remember, you're looking for donors who meet three distinct criteria: Linkage, Interest and Ability.

Linkage = They have a connection to your organization. **Interest** = They believe in what you're doing and want to be engaged with you. **Ability** = They have disposable income or assets from which to make a significant gift.

You can get at this information in a few ways. The easiest is to look at behavior data you have in your donor database. What you want to look for here is donors who have made frequent gifts, and who have a pattern for making gifts of increasing value. These two pieces of information can give you a good start in identifying donors who show an increasing interest in your cause. A pattern of increased giving could also be an indicator of greater ability to give.

Identifying linkage is a little more difficult. Obviously a current donor has a connection to you in the form of the giving relationship. But more importantly, you want to look for those specific links that aren't necessarily apparent in the giving record. Is there a particular program that the donor likes to support? Are there relationship connections – either to staff, board members or other volunteers? These data points will help you expand the donor profile and also identify potential solicitors as well.

In addition to mining the data you have at hand, if you're serious about a major gift program, you'll also want to consider a wealth screening. The wealth screening process will give you additional data about your donors that you can use to improve your targeting and to inform your ask strategy.

The wealth screening process will give you information like real estate value, asset information (stocks, 401k's, etc.), whether or not the person sits on the board of a public company or is a private business owner, etc. For an additional charge, you can also append birth date to your donor records. Adding this data point will help you prioritize planned gift efforts as well.

I'm a fan of Blackbaud's [process](#) over other similar tools because of the additional value they provide by modeling and ranking your entire file. Where other organizations essentially just apply the wealth data and rank based on that information, BB goes the extra mile and models your data (including your internal gift history data) to provide you with a more rich profile of each donor.

Develop the strongest case you can

Writing a case statement isn't entirely unlike writing a direct mail solicitation. You've got to have a strong hook to capture (and keep) the reader's attention. And you have to clearly and succinctly showcase the need for support and opportunity for the donor to participate.

The [case statement process](#) can sometimes (unfortunately) result in a highly sanitized, bland, internally-focused document that neither captures the interest of potential donors nor inspires their involvement. Sometimes this stems from the incorrect assumption that major donors are somehow different from other donors who give smaller dollar gifts. For some reason, nonprofits tend to assume that major donors make decisions strictly based on the financial implications of a particular request. This couldn't be more wrong!

Yes, major gift donors will scrutinize your solicitation request, your financials, organizational leadership, and many other aspects of your nonprofit's business much more critically than a donor who is making a \$25 contribution. You have to expect that when you're asking someone to make such a significant contribution. And being that these donors can afford to give at these higher levels, they also will expect this level of access and candor.

However, philanthropic decisions (regardless of gift size) are not made based on sanitized mathematic equations. First, you must engage the heart, and only then can you convince the brain. If your case statement doesn't engage, motivate and inspire, you won't connect with these donors. And if you don't connect with them emotionally, you have very little chance of ever connecting with their check books.

Customize your approach, solicitation and stewardship strategies for each prospect

In fundraising, there is no one size fits all solution. This is especially true in major gift solicitation. In direct mail you can pretty successfully manage fundraising at the segment level. That is, you can base your decisions and solicitation efforts based on the behavior of groups (or segments) of your donor base.

That's not an option in major gifts. It is entirely an individualized effort. From how you approach the donor, to the materials prepared for each prospect, to the solicitation amount/case, to the stewardship efforts.

Engage the right people in the process

When we talk about engaging the right people, most frequently you'll think of the solicitors in the process. And that's true. It's critical that you have the right people involved in the process.

You want someone with a strong personal connection to the donor, and potentially others like your CEO, Board Chair, etc.

But don't stop there. Make sure you're involving the right people on the donor's end of the equation as well. Many times this will just be the donor and her spouse. Other times (and this is increasingly more frequent, from what I can tell), you might end up including adult children of the donor, and financial or legal advisors. Being open to including others in the process will make your donor (and her advisors – formal or informal) much more comfortable.

Ask!

It doesn't matter how great your prospects are, how strong your case statement is, how detailed your solicitation plan is, or how connected your solicitor is. If you don't actually get to the ask, you'll never bring in the check.

Unfortunately, this is where a lot of fundraisers fall short. Face it, it's really easy to prepare for a big ask, but it's really hard to actually ask for the money!

This fear of asking, I believe, happens most frequently when the process is rushed. After all, if you have a strong relationship with your donor, you understand the donor's desires, interests and financial situation, the actual [ask](#) should be a natural step in the process.