

Top 10 "Major Donor" Lessons from Christian Nonprofits

By Mike Buwalda

In a recent survey of Christian nonprofits, I asked, "What is the most important thing you learned about major donors last year?" I was absolutely amazed by the honest sharing of joys and frustrations. Below, you'll find 10 ministry-tested lessons for effective major donor ministry:

1. Build Personal Relationships Apart from Money

There were many comments about developing genuine friendships with donors. Keep in touch in a variety of ways, not just when you want to talk about your ministry or its financial needs. Strong relationships produce loyal donors.

2. Appreciate Them

Thank your major donors many times and in many ways. Send a personal note (*without* your ministry logo) or invite them to lunch. Call or visit them just to say thanks. Ask for their opinions and show an interest in their interests.

3. Understand Why They Give

God has given some people a heart for your ministry. Some will give to your overall vision rather than specific needs. Some are motivated by the results of your ministry. Others respond to a sense that ministry is happening, evidenced by stories of life change.

4. Uncover Emerging Major Donors

Most big givers began as small givers. Many ministries report that a very effective use of time is to identify and cultivate potential major donors from your current base of supporters. This can happen through personal conversations and database research.

5. Involve Them

Many donors became major donors because they felt a sense of personal ownership in the ministry. They were invited to speak, attend events, join the board, write letters to friends, meet with the ministry leadership, give a tour of their business, or participate directly on the frontline of the ministry.

6. Understand Your Role

Your job is to provide a way for individuals to express what God has already put in their hearts. You are a minister in the good times and the bad. You are an educator, helping people understand that their assets belong to God no matter what the stock market is doing. You are a resource, aware of potentially helpful financial services and major tax updates.

7. Hold Effective Meetings

You need to be faithful in initiating regular face-to-face meetings, which is not always easy because people are busy. Include a spouse if possible to make meetings even more productive and to help build the personal relationship. Arrange for the top leadership of your ministry to meet with your top donors.

8. Ask!

Ministries have found that even the most compelling projects don't sell themselves. If you don't ask, you won't receive. It's critical that your need and the program to address that need are crystal clear. Some ministries advise asking for a specific amount. Others prefer to present a specific need and let the donor decide the dollar amount.

9. Report Regularly

Many major donors require higher levels of accountability from the ministries to which they give. They appreciate learning about the specific results of their gift and are motivated to give again when they know how their gift is used.

10. Tailor Your Communications

Not all major donors want to be treated as major donors. Some give on a schedule (no matter how many appeals you send them) and others prefer to give large, undesignated gifts rather than to specific projects or after urgent appeals.

Mike Buwalda is the president of Money for Ministry (www.MoneyforMinistry.com) and wrote this article in cooperation with the Christian Stewardship Association (now Christian Leadership Alliance www.ChristianLeadershipAlliance.com)