



Stewardship in Schools: 6 questions to ask yourself

Moss Cooper and Marc Whitmore from More Partnership examine why looking after your donors matters, and how we can all do it better.

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Stewardship, or donor relations to some, has for a long time been a Cinderella subject in schools fundraising. We spend so much time and effort securing the donation and are understandably relieved when the donor finally says yes. “Thank goodness,” we think to ourselves “We’ve got the gift. Time to relax.” We send a Christmas card, write a little note to say thank you, include the name in the donor report (bigger font size for a bigger gift, of course) and perhaps arrange a special dinner for the donor with the Chair of Governors and Head. Job done, right?

Hmmm. If we want to know why it’s important for our stewardship programmes to be better, we need look no further than our older cousins in higher education. Our 7-year analysis of regular 160k+ gifts to UK universities has shown that, if you ask for donations from 100 alumni that have never given before, you’ll persuade one or two to give for the first time. But if you ask alumni who gave their first gift last year, 24 will give again. If they’ve given two years in a row, that number rises to 45. And if they’ve given five years in a row, 78% will give you another gift. So looking after donors well really, really matters.

These stark figures show what’s possible if you give your donors a bit of love and long-term attention. And they show how good stewardship and good fundraising go hand in hand. So how can we all be better stewards of our donors? From our two decades of experience of fundraising with schools, universities, museums and institutions in the UK and across the world, we’ve compiled some areas to probe when you’re asking yourself how well your stewardship programme is doing:

1. How is your whole organisation involved?

Looking after people is important, so stewardship must involve your entire school, from the top down. You need to think carefully about the role teachers and governors can play. Think too about how to link it with your alumni programme, including opportunities for involvement in areas such as careers advice, mentoring and curriculum enrichment.

2. How are you making it relevant?

Stewardship is often characterised by deliverables, or things. A tie. A letter. A lunch. A present. But to what end? One of the main goals of good stewardship is to strengthen the bond the donor has with the institution: to help the donor deepen their understanding of your purpose and the way in



which their gift has advanced it. Meeting with the staff member responsible for awarding bursaries to hear about the challenges they are facing might just be more rewarding, and have more impact, than that fancy lunch you were planning ...

3. Are you getting the balance right?

Looking after a £25-a-month donor well is different to stewarding a £25k-a-year donor but we can all appreciate the benefit of a more simple life and, as donor numbers increase, systems and policies inevitably arise as a way to declutter and save time. But sometimes - rather than weighing the donor down with ever more reports, thank-you cards and lapel pins – it pays to ask yourself the question “what proportion of our time would we invest in a donor who gave us £50k?” Which leads us to our next point...

4. How are you making it personal?

Good stewardship is relevant and appropriate to the donor, your institution and the nature of the gift. At its best, it’s also creative: good fundraisers are adept at identifying those “saw this and thought of you” moments. Finding ways to make it feel authentic and personal is critical to strengthening the bond with your biggest supporters.

5. Is stewardship different when you’re not in a campaign?

It’s far easier to identify key moments to celebrate during a campaign. Building a sense of urgency comes naturally when you’ve publicly set a financial goal and timeframe. But how do you achieve that outside of the campaign framework? It’s undoubtedly tougher and it requires you to interpret your own institution creatively – its purpose, its history, its rhythms and the vision it has of its own future.

Undercutting each of these questions is a bigger issue: how seriously do we all really take stewardship? Arguably, not seriously enough. Yet as every piece of data shows us time and time again, your best prospects (and – for the Bursar – the cheapest to acquire) are those who’ve already given. So take some time out of your week and review just exactly how well you’re doing it: it’ll be time well spent.

For more on how best to make stewardship work in your institution, sign up to the session from Marc and Moss from 10am – 4pm on 4th October 2017 at The Caledonia Club (London).

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