

Major Gift Fundraising

Let's face it, major gift fundraising can feel a little daunting, overwhelming maybe, perhaps even a bit scary.

Especially if you're new to the major gift game, but even those who have been doing it for years can feel a little lost in managing a large pool of potential donors. Sometimes it can feel hard to know where to begin let alone how to get to the big ask. And of course, there's the time pressures you might be under to bring gifts in, the other fundraising programmes you need to run, that strategy you need to write and actually finding the right prospects in the first place can feel a challenge.

But it needn't be a daunting outlook at all and the impact that a major gift programme can have on your school can be truly phenomenal. Done well it can be incredibly rewarding for both the donor and the fundraiser as you build a meaningful long term relationship together that brings about real change to your school.

Here are some ideas to help fundraisers feel more confident and boost their major gift activity.

Time – give yourself some!

All research shows it does take time to secure a major gift – two years on average. Giving a major gift requires the donor to have a strong and trusted relationship with you/the school, they need to fully understand your school's needs and the impact of their gift. None of these things come quickly, they require dedicated time from the fundraiser over a number of months/years to build this important relationship. Build these timescales in to your fundraising plan and communicate this clearly with your school's leadership so that they understand the process and support you and the strategy.

Be strategic

Review your prospect pool and highlight a top 25, (or 20 or 50 depending on how much time you have to dedicate). This group should include those you already have a close relationship with who could be close to giving a major gift and those with the potential to make the most significant donations. This is where you will focus your time – initiating and building relationships with each of these individuals. Make strategic and considered cultivation plans for each of them and consider where your leadership will play a role. Don't waiver from this list.

Use your database

Your database is always a fundraiser's best friend when it comes to developing a campaign plan, focusing work and being efficient and effective. The Schools' Alumni Relations and Fundraising Benchmarking Survey 2016 shows that development offices who raise the higher sums of money invest more time in database work and prospect research. Keeping your database up to date as you work with donors and prospects will pay dividends when you need to report on your activity, making it quick and easy to do so – a real time saver.

Money is not the only goal

A tricky but important one to get across to your leadership and board. Whilst monetary goals are obviously important, it is never the only goal by which to measure yourself and when it is, it often leads to pressure on the development office to deliver impossible tasks which can filter down to pressure on donors. Receiving a gift is neither the start of the journey, nor is it the end. A lot of work has gone in to cultivating that prospect, possibly two years' worth of effort, which should absolutely be measured and accounted for as well. Not forgetting the importance of stewardship and continued relationship management that comes following a gift. Using a moves management process to track the progress of the relationship through all stages before, during and after receiving a gift is so important in helping you report on all aspects of this activity.

Practice

Maybe not an obvious one but practice your pitch, practice your opening questions to meetings and dealing with difficult queries. Whilst you don't want to come across as overly rehearsed, being prepared will help you feel more confident in dealing with those challenging questions that can crop up. Practising your pitch and your ask is a great way to really distil the message internally and again allow you to present it with confidence and impact.

Get going and ask!

Donor's provide a myriad of reasons for why they give – but the biggest one that always comes up – **they give because they were asked**. No ask = no gift. And I suspect that the ask is often the scariest thing for many to contemplate.

It is very easy to become bogged down in the detail of planning, refining details and doing research. But the best way to test if your campaign message is right, to see if the projects are appealing and to get to know what interests and motivates your donors is to simply get out there, meet them and ask. At worst they can only politely decline a request to meet or maybe ignore you, at best you kick start a fantastic and long term relationship with a major donor who makes a genuine difference to your campaign. Donor's love to give, they want to give to good causes and effect change and you cannot give them the opportunity to do so unless you get out there and ask.

If you want to learn more about the art of major giving including practising your pitch, learning tangible ways to cultivate your prospects and how best to track your relationships and monitor progress then sign up to the workshop – [Major gifts for schools – sharpening your skills and measuring success, Thursday 30th November 10am -4pm, Caledonian Club London.](#)

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