

Five Secrets of Successful Donor Cultivation

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How should a charity go about finding new major donors? What about keeping current donors interested and involved? Should the CEO be on the lookout for social entrepreneurs – and, what should happen next after he or she shakes hands with them at the Cinnamon club?

The short answer to all these questions is: **donor cultivation**. Only cultivation sets the stage for successful future ‘asks’. But, let me warn you from the start that cultivation is not an easy task – it is a long term process that requires hard work, discipline and integrity.

Hard work + discipline + integrity = donor cultivation

Donor cultivation, as in strengthening the relationships with current supporters and finding new ones, is a key component of a successful fundraising strategy. It is also a key objective of all printed and online communications, donor meetings, or events.

If you are looking to increase the effectiveness of your charity’s fundraising activities, here are some secrets of donor cultivation to help you raise more money for your cause:

1. Donor cultivation is a shared responsibility.

I know many frustrated fundraisers who are shouldering the responsibility of raising funds alone. What they fail to get across to their managers, or what their managers tend to ignore, is that donor cultivation is *a shared responsibility* involving the CEO, trustees, key volunteers and, even major donors who are willing to become ambassadors for the cause.

A fundraiser can not be at five places at the same time, or might not even get a hearing from a prospective major donor. Yet, a trustee or current major donor

might be a friend or business colleague of that prospective donor and be better placed to start building a relationship with them on behalf of the charity.

If you are a sole fundraiser or a member of a small fundraising team, I want to encourage you today to think about involving your CEO, trustees and current major donors in fundraising in becoming ambassadors for your cause.

A dynamic team of staff and volunteers focused on donor cultivation can invite their friends to your charity's events, invite the CEO or other senior leaders a chance to speak at their church, set up coffee or lunchtime meetings with a prospective major donor and much more.

2. Donor cultivation is a strategic and long term activity.

Have you done a fundraising dinner recently? How many people attended? How many people gave? And, more importantly: what was the follow up with those who came and did not give? Or, with those who were not able to attend but who love your work?

Often we focus our efforts in running the fundraising events and fail to follow-up afterwards. Don't waste a good fundraising event by failing to have a wide range of follow-up activities based on a donor cultivation plan.

What does a good fundraising event follow-up entail?

It entails sending thank you notes to all those who attended and donated or made a pledge on the night. It also entails sending thank you notes and a request to think about their contribution to those who attended and did not give. You might even tell them that you will get in touch with them in a few weeks time to find out what their decision is.

Furthermore, it entails sending a letter and a copy of the presentation to donors who were unable to attend. This package might also include an invitation to give and other specific follow-up activities depending on the depth of their relationship with the charity, their past giving, and so on.

Donor cultivation planning can be general and specific. *General cultivation* is all about cultivating segments of supporters via events, mailings, presentations. While, *specific cultivation* is all about building relationships with individuals (*prospects or current major donors, legacy donors etc*) via highly personalised communications, phone calls, e-mails and face to-face meetings.

3. Effective cultivation involves team work and coordination.

When was the last time a staff member or volunteer who speaks in churches sent you valuable information about current or prospective donors they might have met? Did one of your trustees let the CEO know that the wife of a major donor is dying of cancer? If he or she did, has the CEO told you yet?

These might sound like rhetorical questions but, answers to such questions are very important to effective follow-up and future donor cultivation. In order to get these answers and use them – you as a fundraiser or development director - need to set up a system for gathering this kind of information from trustees, volunteers, other senior team leaders, etc.

If you are not going to do this yourself, it is vital that you appoint a person to become the coordinator of ‘cultivation information’. You might want to create a few basic forms and use them regularly. Raise the issue of donor cultivation at team meetings and get people to think about their role in this process.

4. Donor cultivation happens through a variety of channels.

So far the emphasis has been on cultivating major donors, or prospects, but donor cultivation is not limited to these groups. Every time you communicate with any donors or potential donors you are either cultivating them or pushing them away.

Think about your charity’s newsletters, thank you letters, appeals, e-mails or the content of your website.

- Are you getting across the messages you would like your supporters to receive through these media channels?
- Are you communicating results, or just focusing on your needs?
- Are you incorporating in your communications donor’s reasons for being part of your work, or just talking about your work at the exclusion of the donor?
- How balanced is the information in terms of programme impact, volunteer involvement, supporter participation and recognition etc?

From a donor cultivation perspective key aims of all your communications should be: to make sure that everyone who reads, watches or hears them has an increased knowledge about your work, feels appreciated and is given a chance to get involved.

5. Effective cultivation always leads to a fundraising ‘ask.’

I know several fundraisers and charity CEO’s who like donor cultivation. They enjoy having coffee or lunch with potential major donors, praying for them or, sharing with them about the charity’s projects. But, they seem to avoid the inevitable task of: *asking for a gift*.

The same is true of written charity communications too. Nicely designed newsletters, or letters that tell the donor all about the wonderful work the charity is doing and fail to ask for a gift.

The purpose of cultivation is to give current and potential donors opportunities to support the charity's work. The process of building relationships with donors, though face-to-face meetings, events, direct mail, or online, is to help you and them discern whether there is alignment between their vision (*what they want to do to impact the world*) and your charity's vision and activities.

Once we realise that there is an alignment then our task is to invite them to partner with us through their giving. If not, then we should encourage these potential donors to support other charities whose work aligns with their vision and aspirations.

If you are already involved in cultivation activities take some time this week to examine what you are doing. How long have you been cultivating these supporters or prospects? What are the results? What kind of 'ask' should you make to turn the cultivated prospects into donors? When will you do it?

To sum up, donor cultivation is a continuous process and a strategic tool that does not have predictable or quick returns. It is the lifeblood of every successful fundraising programme and a great way to get all kinds of donors involved in your cause.