

Major Gifts: Building an Effective, Systematic Program

Putting into place an ongoing program of major gift philanthropy | Do you feel like your major gifts program is spinning its wheels? Or, are you just beginning to develop your donor pool and need a proven process for cultivating larger gifts?

Through years of work advising clients on their major gifts programs and managing major gifts programs at institutions ourselves, we have seen the difference a systematic approach to major gifts development can have on an institution's fundraising Return On Investment.

Instituting a systematic major gifts program at your institution involves developing a process that creates a purposeful, organized, and ongoing program for identifying and cultivating relationships with donors that leads to solicitation of gifts. It also entails focusing your efforts on those prospects who are likely to make the most difference for your organization. Implementing a targeted approach towards those 10 or 20 percent of your donors most likely to give a large gift can help you be a better steward of your institution's resources and work more effectively and efficiently.

JGA has identified several key elements that can take your major gifts program to the next level.

- **Focused Approach:** Move your program from a scattered to a focused approach by concentrating your efforts on your top 10 or 20 percent of prospects -- or whatever is the right number for your institution. Go beyond gift size to look at other factors that might predict a prospect's commitment to your organization -- future giving potential, recency and frequency of gifts, and overall involvement with the organization.
- **Prospect Research:** Having a dedicated staff person assigned and trained in prospect research is a key advantage. A researcher can look at resources to validate instincts on a prospect's giving potential or bring to the forefront new potential donors with a connection to the organization or history of donating to similar institutions. If you cannot afford a full time prospect researcher, there are services available for outsourcing this function.
- **Relationship Management:** In systematic major gift programs, once top prospects are identified, a staff member is assigned responsibility for overseeing the relationship and planning an approach to help move the prospect through the continuum from cultivation to solicitation and stewardship. That does not mean this individual should be the prospect's only contact at your organization. Deep relationships within the organization should be developed, but one person needs to be responsible for serving as overseer of the relationship.
- **Review of Assignments:** A crucial part of moving to a systematic major gifts program is to regularly review prospect assignments and progress. This allows you to offer ongoing opportunities for input on prospect identification and qualification to staff, leadership, board members and volunteers. You are also able to make sure there is still a good fit between the assigned staff and the prospect as relationships grow, as well as, assigning new prospects. Staff members should have a clearly identified goal for their prospect management in terms of number of contacts. Those contacts should spread across the relationship

continuum, some being “get acquainted” visits while others are for purposes of cultivation, solicitation, and stewardship.

- **Plan of Action:** Contact with prospects should be purposeful. Relationship managers should have a well thought out plan for each of their meetings with a sense of what they hope to accomplish during each call. There should also be a long term strategy developed for each prospect.
- **Progress Reports:** Holding regular meetings of staff to report on outcomes of contacts and propose future steps helps build a sense of accountability in a major gifts program and demonstrates commitment to the process. Create metrics to track your key measurements, including the number of visits, types of visits (cultivation, solicitation, and stewardship), proposals presented, and dollars raised. These metrics should be tracked by staff member and the team as a whole to create accountability and measure overall progress to goal.
- **Full Cycle:** The relationship continuum should be continuous. Not all visits should be cultivation, nor should they be solicitation. It is a fluid circular process. After a gift, time should be spent on stewardship and further cultivation before building to additional solicitation.

Not every effective major gifts program will look the same. Each institution has its own culture and needs. It is important to tailor these elements to your own institution’s particular situation.

You may need to start with small steps to move your organization down the road to a more systematic program. However, the effort is worthwhile and putting a system into place now to identify, qualify cultivate, solicit and steward donors will pay dividends in the future.

To learn more, watch a 90-second video interview about Major Gift Programs at www.jgacounsel.com/resources