

Cultivation of the Prospect

Fund raising is much like another of the great American professions, farming. To reap a major gift for their cause, fund raisers require the virtues of a farmer: patience, devotion, and care. (OK, we'll admit upfront that, as any farmer can tell you, a little fertilizer doesn't hurt).

Crops require months and sometimes years of preparation before they're ready for harvest. So do major gifts.

Prospecting. Before we attempt to harvest a major gift, we must carefully select our prospect. Of course, these can be raw seeds, all new, first-time givers, but in all likelihood the prospect has been carefully cultivated in the greenhouse for years. Before we transplant the prospect into major gift territory, we should be certain that the school or organization has been attentive to the giver. The ideal prospect has been well cared for over a substantial period of time.

Planning. Behind the modern farmer is a vast array of scientific and technical advisors. Behind the solicitor of the major gift are consultants and a staff. Consultants can advise the solicitor on his approach to the prospect, on techniques, language and timing – but a good staff will make the difference. To the staff usually falls the responsibility of research, so that the solicitor will know everything possible about the lifestyle and giving pattern of the prospect.

Identification of the gift. We don't grow cotton in Maine or blueberries in Georgia, and even the best prospects are wasted when they're approached for the wrong gift. The nature of a major gift should flow naturally from the character and inclinations of the prospect.

Many times this identification is made by means of a pre-campaign feasibility study. The consultants will usually determine the exact state of interest in potential donors and build a master list of additional prospects. The interviews that result from such a study are generally an effective means of determining whether chief prospects are sufficiently cultivated for the major gift appeal.

An alternative technique at this stage is a series of staff-run screening sessions, in which prospects identify their interests and provide the names of other like-minded potential givers.

Participation. Once the prospect is selected, the seedling must be planted in major gift soil. Usually this means that the giver must become involved in the organization because, one involved, the giver begins to share more deeply in the organization's need for the major gift.

Typical examples of this involvement include school tours, small dinners, with college presidents, or trustees, invitations to sit on museum committees, or recruitment to leadership positions on finance committees. A major gift is a direct result of the

giver's participation in the organization's sense of urgent financial need.

Role models. No giver exists in a vacuum; the seeds of a major gift bear fruit only in a healthy climate of giving. An important step before soliciting the prospect is impressing board members and trustees with the importance of setting an example. How can we expect a prospect to give when the organization's oldest friends are parsimonious? The prospect must be convinced that the much-needed major gift is a cornerstone on which others are willing to build.

Solicitation. At a certain point, the solicitor, staff and consultants will feel that the prospect has ripened. It's time to ask for and to harvest the major gift.

Of course, the prospect may not, in fact, have ripened. Just as in farming, elements out of your control may impede your success. In the event that the first request is denied (or politely turned aside), don't give up. We simply return to an earlier point in the cycle and work carefully back to the harvest.

Recognition and follow-up. the major gift giver is a perennial asset, and extreme care must be taken in the period following the gift. Appropriate recognition and an action plan for the donor's continuing involvement must be promptly implemented. Consider:

- **Naming opportunities**
- **Listings in publications**
- **Invitations to special events**
- **Major donor clubs**
- **Ongoing committee involvement (e.g., visiting committees)**
- **Participation in long-range planning**
- **Special interest task forces**
- **Leadership in training volunteers**

As in farming, so in fund raising. There's no substitute for hard work and a little fertilizer.