

What's in a Name?

Many of us have to deal with the subject of naming opportunities, especially when we are involved with capital campaigns for new or renovated buildings. Offering opportunities for people to put their names on a building, a room, or a plaque often helps to spur prospective donors to higher levels of giving.

Why do people want to associate their names with institutions? For some people, such naming fulfills a desire for public recognition or ensures that future generations of their families remember their significant contributions. For others, there is a sense of immortality, which comes from engraving their name on a permanent structure. Still other people want to associate their names with a place to which they are thankful, such as a hospital, or that they loved, such as a school or college.

Each case has its own interesting motivations. For example, several years ago, during a campaign to renovate my alma mater's library, I named a study carrel after my daughter who would have been the third generation in our family to attend this well-known women's college. Since I had my yearbook in her crib, there was no doubt in my mind that she would make the college her first choice and look askance at any alternative. Picturing her curled up in a study carrel with her name on it sent me into paroxysms of delight. As it turned out, she followed her brother to Yale. My college wasn't even on the list of fallbacks. So much for my own first and possibly last naming opportunity.

In our work as capital campaign consultants, Goodale Associates has run into some complicated yet interesting naming opportunity cases. For one of our school campaigns, we were faced with the decision by the school to tear down a building, which had been named by a donor who was still alive. Very sensitive conversations had to be held with said donor to convince him that the name would be transferred to a brand new, architecturally exciting building and that the value of the original gift would be calculated according to today's dollar to determine the space relegated to the new naming opportunity.

Although some people feel embarrassed about having their name on anything, others love it. In a recent capital campaign, we were faced with two donors who were vying with each other to see who could put their name on the new building. One of these donors intended to contribute his own funds and those of his family to total the lead gift but, after eleven months of discussion, had not yet produced the gift. The other donor wanted to "earn" the naming opportunity by raising the monies from people who would otherwise be solicited by the campaign's steering committee. The organization was put in a terrible position. The building was available for a substantial price and the campaign badly needed the amount of the gift in order to achieve the campaign total. Wouldn't it be better to bend the rules and let one donor raise the funds if the other donor did not come in on time?

To complicate matters even further, a major philanthropist became involved with

the organization through receiving an award for his contributions to the field served by the organization. Through this involvement, he learned about the building naming opportunity and started to consider a gift of the required amount. Although the non-profit saw this prospect as an exciting possibility, there were many people on the Board who felt that the building should go to one of the other two prospects, both Board members who had contributed enormous amounts of time to the campaign as well as substantial prior gifts.

What could we do? The organization badly needed the funds, and, since the conclusion of the campaign was fast approaching, we decided on a first come, first serve solution. The prospect who wanted to raise instead of give the monies was told that would suffice, but only if we had pledge cards in hand which achieved the total of the required gift.

The moral of this story is that although there should be some standards and parameters for naming opportunities, a Board of trustees has to be flexible. After all, naming really is a form of donor recognition which is used by an organization or school to leverage a larger gift.

How does the amount needed to name something compare to the cost of the building? It would be great to have the two match and, in the case of some small construction projects, this can work. However, in most cases, the gift relates more to the campaign goal than to the cost of the building and is matched against the scale of needed larger gifts.

Another question which always arises with regard to naming is what kind of final price can be negotiated. We have been involved in many such negotiations over the years. Some colleges and organizations use 51% as the acceptable minimum of the asking price. We believe that you have to treat each situation on a case by case basis remembering that, whatever you do, you are considering the success of the campaign but that, also, you cannot break rules for one donor that you are unwilling to break for another. For example, once we had opened up the possibility of raising rather than giving the gift in the case described above, we were taking the chance that others might demand, and necessarily receive the same treatment. In the case of this campaign, however, the rules had to be altered to achieve the goal.

With naming opportunities, you have to be very careful that you don't double count. For example, in yet another building campaign we had a donor who wanted to go to his friends to name all the rooms in the building. By "selling" off all of the rooms, he thought that he would deserve the naming of the entire building as well. If we had agreed to this, of course, we would have lost the extra million dollars that we needed for the separate and distinct naming of the building. In this case, we would be bending the rules too far and the compromise would not help us achieve the goal.

Many people do not like to name a structure or room after themselves but use this as an opportunity to memorialize someone that they love. This person,, say

a parent of the donor, is not necessarily directly tied to the school or non-profit, but this is a way for the donor to link an institution with a person he wants to remember.

In other cases, a college or non-profit wants to memorialize someone who has been an important figure in the institution. For example, we see many buildings named after former college presidents. The problem with such naming opportunities is that they should be used, if possible, to stimulate a group of people such as the faculty and alumni to give more substantially than they would have otherwise, or the organization loses the opportunity to have a single donor name the structure. If there are enough other forms of recognition this is usually not a problem.

Finally, there are some situations in which you have naming opportunities but no place to actually put the name. This happened to us in a renovation and preservation campaign for a stately English home. We had the most glorious opportunities from the music room to the grand salon but, because of preservation rules and ethics, we could not post any names on the walls or even signs on the floor. We were able to circumvent this problem by arranging for an Honor Book containing sketches of the rooms and antiques placed in the front hall with the name of the donor beside each sketch.

What's in a name? Probably a really significant gift if we, as professionals, are extremely alert to the sensitivities of the donors and institutions we are dealing with.