

THE FIRST MONDAY REPORT

Thoughts on Fund Raising for Campus Ministry

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Maintaining Donor Relationships

Recently an elderly bachelor farmer in Medford, Oregon, left an \$11.35 million estate, including a 68 acre farm, to develop a sports park for young people.¹ It's not a particularly unusual story these days. Books such as *The Millionaire Next Door* have highlighted what many institutions and non-profit organizations have come to experience—an obscure person with little apparent income or community contact has left a large estate to continue a mission that no one would have connected them with. Let's return to Oregon for a bit and look at the background of this exceptional donor.

Wesley Howard spent nearly his whole life on his family's 68 acre farm. After his father died in 1972, he continued to live alone in the dilapidated Victorian farm house that had few modern conveniences and no indoor plumbing. He did his own cooking—usually ham hocks and beans that simmered all day on the back of a wood-burning stove. When his estate was auctioned off, several new appliances were sold, still in the unopened box. He hung out his laundry to dry and did his own cleaning. He never threw anything away; the house contained newspapers and magazines dating back fifty years. His pantry contained cartons of lard, canned vegetables and other staples, perhaps echoing the anxiety of having grown up during the Depression.

Some accounts of his life pictured him as a loner who fired a shotgun filled with rock salt at kids who came to steal his peaches and watermelons or throw golf balls through his windows. But others saw a different side to Wesley Howard. He served for two decades on the local Citizens Planning Advisory Committee because he was concerned about land-use and development issues that the city of Medford faced. Rosalyn Rhinehart, who served on the Committee with him said, "Wes was a very intelligent, well-informed person. He was not a hermit; he did not withdraw into his shell." Some knew of Wes's interest in baseball, his other passion alongside city issues.

So it is appropriate, and highly in keeping with Wes's life interests, that his estate will go to fund the Howard Memorial Sports Park, which will include playing fields for Little League and Babe Ruth League baseball. Soccer fields and basketball and volleyball courts will also be included. His attorney said, "He wanted to have his family name on the land, thinking especially of his parents, and leave it for the benefit of the youths of the Rogue Valley." Even the children and grandchildren of the kids he once chased off his property with rock salt.

¹ *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*, February 19, 2004, p. 24.

Not many of us will be fortunate enough to have an experience with such a donor. However, I share this touching story with you for a couple of reasons. One, it should be a lesson in knowing our donor's hearts. From a distance Wesley Howard appeared to be a grouchy recluse who was a loner with little disposable income. Up close he was found to be somewhat different. He had civic interest and pride, he loved baseball and he had considerable resources. Who would have known that, unless they took time to get to know him? So the point is this: get to know your donors, their interests and passions. Try to see the world through their eyes; find out what's in their hearts.

Second, take your time as you build a relationship with a potential donor. You can't very well ask a stranger for a gift; you have to ask a donor as a friend, as a person who has come to know your ministry well and who trusts that you will use their gift wisely. Also, think about how those relationships can be built by someone *other* than you. Board members and other leaders of your ministry can play crucial roles in building relationships. They are hundreds of places you can never be. How can they help to create lines of information and interest with your donors?

Third, think beyond your current data base of alums to consider who might be a member of the community who would be excited about your mission. Think about connecting links. In Wes's case the connections are with land-use, baseball and youth. Who do you know who is concerned about young adults, education and the church, including perhaps one of your special projects or mission trips? How can you and your leadership connect the links?

Several years ago in one of the campus ministries I served, we received a check for \$5,000 from someone I didn't know and had never met. It came as one of the annual fund gifts and took us completely by surprise. The past board chair, who did know the donor, went with me to pay her a visit soon after. We discovered that the gift was meant to serve as memorial for her husband and eldest son, who had both died in the past year. She had graduated from the university where I served and had been active in the Lutheran Student Association. But she was just a name on a list up until that visit. Our relationship with her deepened as we took time to get to know her and the reason for her gift. Several years later, she gave another gift of \$25,000 to the endowment. But as I think back on that experience, it wasn't the size of the gifts as much as it was the relationship with the donor that makes the story significant.

How do you go about maintaining and expanding your relationships with your donors? Typically, we send out rather general solicitation letters to everyone on our data base inviting them to send us a gift. We send the same letter to everyone usually, disregarding the amount of previous gifts or the number of years they have been contributing. And in return for their donation, they usually get a form thank you letter and an occasional newsletter. We may even do this a couple of times a year, thinking that frequency of contact builds relationships. At some level that's OK; we simply don't have time or resources to do more. But at another level, we need to pay more attention to our faithful, consistent donors. These are the folks who want to champion our ministries and want us to succeed. They love us; they care about the health and vitality of our ministries. We need to get to know them.

Kim Klein writes in the *Grassroots Fundraising Journal*² that there are four main reasons why organizations don't do a better job building relationships with major donors.

1. The organization is unclear about what it means to build relationships with donors. She defines the relationship we are seeking as "collegial," meaning the kind you would have with work associates who you like and respect, but who you don't necessarily socialize with. Words that characterize this collegial relationship are cordial, warm, neighborly, friendly, respectful, thoughtful, and so on. It does not mean that you know the names and birthdays of their children. A collegial relationship focuses more on your shared interest in your organization than on inter-personal friendship. You are interested in increasing loyalty and affection for your mission, not in building life-long, close friends. When you leave, you want the relationship to stay with the ministry, not transfer with you to a new location. Klein says that the most important things to know about a donor are: the dates and amounts of the donor's gifts, why they gave, who knows the donor, how the donor got involved in the first place, and the most recent contact anyone has had with them.
2. The group's systems are not set up to help them do their job. Obviously the first order of business is to get workable software and build a functional data base. However, like buying exercise equipment, good software won't help you if you don't use it. Someone in the organization needs to be adequately trained to use whatever software you have. And they need to spend time on a regular basis upgrading the information on the data base, especially changes in address. If the software allows notes, be sure that the information recorded can be easily interpreted by the next person. "Went to UMOT with JEF for Offspring Mtg" won't be intelligible. Most systems break down because no one keeps up with them.
3. Contact with donors, while on the to-do list, keeps getting put off until after...(proposal is done, newsletter is out, hiring is complete, board meeting is over). Klein says, "Segmenting (donors) is a key tool in facilitating your efforts to build appropriate relationships." She suggests that there be three broad segments: (a) size of gift, (b) longevity of giving, and (c) frequency of giving. The best donors are those who cross two or more of these categories. Someone who gives \$100 several times a year and does this regularly is a better prospect for a major gift than someone who has given \$1,000 only once. By using segmenting you can decide who to be in touch with occasionally *without* asking for money. Generally, she says, you need to build "collegial" relationships with major donors two to three times a year, apart from the times you ask them for money. The point is this, be intentional about donor contacts and don't let other, less important, items in your schedule keep you from it. If your software has the capability of sending you reminder notes about appointments, set up a calendar plan that lets you know when donor contacts should be made and nudges you to keep to the plan.

Segmenting also allows you to determine the appropriate kind of contact. For local donors you might invite them to a holiday celebration or special event on campus. You might share an invitation by phone or set up lunch meetings. For non-locals you might send a personal note on a newsletter or send a special holiday letter. Certain donors will be interested in specific parts of your ministry, such as building renovation or a mission

² *Grassroots Fundraising Journal*, March/April, 2004, pp. 7-11.

trip. Think it through. How can email be helpful? Who would appreciate a phone call? Who needs a lunch meeting to keep involved? Who needs personal mail, and how personal does it need to be?

4. People do not think enough about how the donor feels. Those of us who work for the organization think a lot about it, how it works, and what its needs are, etc. What we need to do, Klein says, is look at our organization through the eyes of our donors. We need to see ourselves as others see us. We need to look at the world through their eyes. Only then can we begin to think about how and what to communicate to them. Will a general letter do the trick? Probably not. Is a phone call enough? Maybe. If we are asking a donor to make a major investment in our ministries, is a personal visit required. Certainly—but how many?

Ultimately, Klein says, organizations have to decide how important their donors are. And if they are important, they must be so all year long, not just when you need money. Donors are people with needs and interests, not ATM machines. They want information, recognition, and involvement. They deserve attention and affirmation. How you maintain donor relationships and acknowledge their loyalty will be evident in the way they support your ministry today and in the years to come.