

THE FIRST MONDAY REPORT

Thoughts on Fund Raising for Campus Ministry

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“Re-thinking Our Thanks”

This is the season for giving gifts and being thankful. The culture envelopes us in this hope and this expectation. We learn from childhood on that we give gifts and offer thanks in response to God who gave us the most blessed of gifts in the Incarnation.

It is also the season of ingathering for many of us who depend on our annual appeals to provide for next year’s program sustainability. We wait at the mailbox as eagerly as small children wait for gifts under the tree. And in many respects, we ought to be as delighted and appreciative of every gift received through the mail, regardless of its size and significance. Someone who cares about our ministry took time to send us a contribution to be supportive of our work and keep us going for another year. Why, it’s as though Aunt Martha herself stopped by to leave a token of love at our doorsteps.

Sound a bit corny? Well, maybe. However, if you’ve heard me talk about donor appreciation, you have heard me refer to Aunt Martha and Uncle Harry as archetypes of donors and the attendant responses they both expect and deserve. So in this season of receiving gifts and expressing thanks, let’s think again about some of the basics.

The first observation that comes to mind is that donors really do expect a response to their gift. We may think that writing the check is its own reward, and in some ways it is. On the other hand, if gifts are given sacrificially or frequently, at some point you will need to find a way to say “thank you” that is heartfelt and appropriate.

The second observation is that many donors don’t want you to spend a lot of money on “tchotchkes”—things like plaques, pen sets, and framed certificates that are more clutter than an expression of gratitude. What most people want is a phone call, a personal note, a visit, a card with a picture enclosed—things that Aunt Martha would value. If she gives you a car, she would like a ride in it with you, not a replica of the steering wheel for her wall or a calendar with 12 poses of you standing beside it. She wants to know that you enjoy it and that it’s useful to you. How can you help her to know that?

Third, you might consider different thank you responses for different people or groups of people. The general rule often is: the larger the gift, the larger the thank you. What you might think about, however, is frequency instead of size. Perhaps your larger, more consistent donors are contacted more often or in a variety of ways.

Fourth, your response to a gift should always be prompt, regardless of the size. The Billy Graham Crusade has been successful over the years because that have a mandate that every donor is thanked with 24 hours of the receipt of a gift. Some by letter, some by phone call, some by personal visit. Email is very impersonal, so is a listing in your next newsletter that may not appear until three months from now.

Finally, once you have put a person's gift to work for the ministry, see if you can find a way to show them how it was used. Send them a photo of a spring break trip. Send them a copy of a Bible study you produced. Invite them to worship with you when you use the new paraments and chapel chairs. If there is an article in a newspaper, make a copy and send it to them. This is donor stewardship at its best. We take care of the donor and we take care of the gift. The two are inseparable, even after the gift is given.

Penelope Burk is President of Cygnus Applied Research. This company is known for its groundbreaking research in donor relations.¹ A recent article by Burk, titled "Rethinking the Way You Recognize Your Donors,"² offers some advise based on her research into donor appreciation. In the article she tackles some of our tried and true ways of expressing appreciation.

She states that in her research 74% of non-profits surveyed publish or display donor names in newsletters or on walls. These organizations believe that this kind of "honor roll" display encourages donors to give even larger gifts and to remain loyal over time. Wrong, she says. When donors themselves are asked, 71% said that published lists of names in annual reports or newsletters had no impact on their loyalty or future gifts. Instead, they treasured simpler things, such as beautiful thank you letters or impromptu phone calls from staff and leadership.

Forty-four percent said that a great thank you letter alone had the power to invite their next gift. Eight-five percent said that they would give again if leadership called them. That's an amazing statistic that we should make operational!

When people were asked in the research about lists of donors, they reminded the surveyors that such practices came into being, not because the donors wanted it, but because the fundraisers thought it would be effective. Over time it became a core assumption.

This ongoing practice is fraught with fear and frustration. The misspelling of names or unintentionally forgetting names can drive up any fundraiser's blood pressure. If there is one name misspelled on a list of one thousand, that one person is going to call, and they

¹ More information is available at www.donorcentered.com

² *Contributions*, Nov-Dec, 2005, pp 1, 20-21.

will be steamed. Also, the cost of producing long lists in a report or engraving fancy plaques costs money. For example, the University of South Florida discontinued the practice of publishing lists when they found out it cost them \$17,000 per year, let alone the staff costs to do so. Obviously that would be a smaller tab for our shops, but you get the point.

As for donor walls, which are probably intended to impress current non-donors with the ability of others to give large gifts, more often the result is that they walk away feeling bad that their smaller donation might not make much of a difference to the organization. Interestingly, in the Study those in the “platinum” levels were most uncomfortable with their status, reminding us that “they give at that level simply because they can.” The question is: how can we let those who support us know that every gift is cherished and used for good ministry?

I hope this finds you opening many wonderful, thoughtful gifts from those who love your ministry and support what you do. I hope, too, that you find an appropriate way to express your gratitude. Aunt Martha and Uncle Harry are waiting to hear from you.

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