Creating a Simple Major Gifts Program

Step 1 - Identification

Screen your existing list of prospects to determine who might be a viable MG prospect. (To keep it simple, make your best guess based on wealth indicators like job title, second home, past giving, purchase price of home, wealthy zip code, etc.). You may need to do a little bit of research (Google, Wealth Engine, etc.) to narrow down your list to about 25 people who have at least $10K in capacity (can make a single gift commitment of $10K or more).

Step 2 – Track

For easy reporting, assign a code to each prospect. Initially, you might want to code everyone with a single code that indicates they are a MG prospect. As your program expands, eventually you will want to code prospects by a capacity rating. You can use a number or letter to represent each level from $10K - $1M+.

Step 3 – Moves Management

Once you have identified and coded your MG prospects, you need to develop moves management strategies for each person – at least 3 moves to start. Moves are the ways in which you will cultivate your prospect so that eventually they will be ready for a gift solicitation. (Refer to the accompanying Major Gifts Basics presentation for a list of sample “moves”. ) Some things to consider:

- How many “moves” or “touches” should this person get in the next 12 months?
- What should those moves be?
- Who should be involved and at what stage of the cultivation process? For example, your Executive Director or Board member might not need to be a part of each move/meeting.
- When should each move occur?
- If the prospect is ready for a major gift solicitation, what is the expected date of the ask, what is the amount of the ask, and what specific funding priority (if any)
will you be asking them to support, who will be a part of the meeting and what role will each person play?

**Step 4 - Implementing**

Once your moves have been plotted, it is time to take action! Make time each week to accomplish your moves for each donor (phone calls, visits, letters, emails, inviting them to an event) and create a system for tracking your activity, ideally in the prospect’s record in the database. Tracking information should include:

- What move was made, by whom, and when
- A contact report if the move was a phone call or meeting
- Next steps for the prospect

Many fundraising software programs have “ticklers” to remind you about upcoming scheduled moves. A simple Excel spreadsheet can also work well for keeping you organized if you keep notes, moves, and next steps in the document and review it weekly. This should only be used to help you stay organized, not to track prospect data, which should be done in your database.

**Step 5 Solicitation**

When a prospect has reached the point where they are knowledgeable, interested and enthusiastic about your organization’s priorities, it is time to begin thinking about a solicitation. It typically TAKES 12-18 MONTHS of cultivation before someone makes a major gift! Here are some things to plan:

- Who will be involved with the solicitation? What role will each participant play (who will make the ask, who will provide what information, etc.)?
- When and where will you have the meeting?
- What will you ask the prospect to support and how much?
- Will you bring a proposal with you to leave after the meeting? (This is not always necessary, but can be helpful depending on the prospect and/or project being funded).
- What are your follow-up steps if the donor needs time to think about your request?

**Step 7 Closing**

Asking a prospect to make a gift and getting a verbal commitment does not mean your job is done. A gift is not closed until you have gotten a direct commitment from the prospect about the following:
• Amount of gift
• Payment – installments/pledges or one lump sum
• When will gift be made
• Designation of gift
• Gift recognition
  o how should the gift be acknowledged
  o is there a naming opportunity involved
  o do they want to remain anonymous
  o is the donor willing to be listed in publications?
• Signed gift commitment letter if they are making a pledge

Step 8 Follow-Up and Stewardship

Often, we spend all of our time chasing the gift and not enough time stewarding it. Here are some habits that will ensure you do a good job stewarding your donors so that they will make gifts to your organization in the future:

• Each time you have a meeting with a prospect, send them a thank you note.
• Send gift acknowledgements within a week of receiving a gift. Personalize the thank you letter if the gift is $1000 or more or if the donor is a MG prospect. Use your board to make thank you calls to high-level donors.
• If the prospect has asked for specific information, send it in a timely manner.
• If you have had a gift discussion with a prospect, make sure you set a date for a follow up meeting or call before you leave the meeting!
• At least once a year, communicate with the donor about how their gift is being used to make a difference and thank them again for their support.

Final Notes

Major gift fundraising is part art, part science, and takes practice to become proficient. At its very core, major gift fundraising is about developing relationships and connecting your organization’s mission and priorities to those of the donor. Like any good relationship, you must begin by developing a positive rapport with your prospect, which will allow you to learn about their communication style. You may then tailor your approach accordingly. Some donors like a lot of information and numbers while others are more interested in the people and relationships they will form with your organization. Some need to be “stroked” by the top brass of an organization before making a gift while others just want to get down to business. Remember that each meeting should be focused on LISTENING to the donor for the majority of the meeting. That is how you will learn about them and understand their values, interests and motivations. A good rule of thumb is to allow the donor to do 70% of the talking.
The finer details of preparing a donor for a major gift solicitation, making the ask, and closing the gift can be developed through practice and by working with a professional who can provide training and/or coaching. If you’d like more information on how Sage Advancement Group can help you develop, refine and execute an effective major gifts program, please call 603-362-4227 or email info@sagedvancement.com for a complimentary consultation.