



STRATEGIES TO ENGAGE YOUR DONORS NOW



**Looking for concrete
ways to engage your
givers right now?**

**These five practical
strategies will help
your church connect
with and inspire
your donors.**

FOCUS ON YOUR MISSION

Would you ever turn down a major gift to your church?

Most of us probably can't think of too many times we'd say no to a significant investment in our ministries. But it's an important question to think about as we look at how to best engage donors.

I've watched ministries chase the shiny next "new" thing that ultimately becomes a costly distraction from their true calling. I've seen ministries accept sizable gifts that came with strings...restricted to a new facility, staff member, or program that wasn't part of the primary mission. I've also observed the tail-wagging the dog: churches and ministries who lean far too heavily on one donor family to provide the bulk of financial resources, which resulted in undue influence on the mission.

The first and arguably the most critical strategy to engage givers is to have a firm focus on your mission and vision.

THIS DOES TWO THINGS:



it prevents everything I've outlined above because you and your staff will view donors and donations through the lens of your mission, and



it creates a clear message for your staff and volunteers to carry across the entire ministry.

Do you have a succinct mission or vision statement? Can everyone on your staff articulate it, no matter their role? When every member of your church staff can articulate the mission and their role in it, there's simply no more powerful accelerant for giving.

I like how Donald Miller of Storybrand hones in on this concept of mission.

HE POSES IT IN THREE QUESTIONS: _____

- 1 Who are you trying to help?
 - 2 What do you do that makes the world a better place? And
 - 3 What do you want me to do to get involved?
-

Of course, the church in its broadest sense, has a clear-cut mission, striving to meet God's call and what He asks of us as followers. But consider Miller's questions in this context: Whatever your denomination, location, or history, your church has a unique niche and specific role in advancing God's kingdom. There are concrete reasons your members call this their church home. If you haven't gone through a recent process of honing that mission or vision statement, commit to doing that as part of your plan to grow your giving program.

Church members who have a clear concept of the church's goals and mission are excited to support it and to tell others about it. This affirmation of purpose fuels donor passion and gives donors confidence that their investment is well stewarded.

Some congregations host town hall meetings or small group opportunities to talk about the coming year's ministry goals. Engage your members in sharing what draws them to your church and what they think would draw others. Even the simple exercise of having members put sticky notes with these types of ideas on the wall can give you a sense of how your members translate your mission into action. This engagement of members around shared mission and vision is especially important in the seasons when your church is exploring or launching a capital campaign.

Engaging donors begins with inviting them into your Kingdom work.

Churches and ministries that do this well and ignite donor passions have a concise, clear mission that guides their ministry work. A mission focus gives you permission to say "thank you, but not now..." when gifts or opportunities that are not aligned threaten to distract or sidetrack you.

ACKNOWLEDGE PAST FAITHFULNESS

There's an adage in the philanthropic world that donor acquisition is tough but donor retention is easy.

There's actually nothing further from the truth. While it can be difficult and costly to attract new givers, it's actually far more challenging work to retain those donors over a long period of time.

I served as executive pastor in each of two very large churches over the span of about 15 years. On any given Sunday, we would have as many as 300 visitors in our services. The worship was wonderful, and the technical presentation was superb.

People came to see what I privately called ‘the show.’ But many did not stay for the show. They stayed if and only if they found community in the church.

On Monday morning the names of our church visitors landed on my desk, and my quest was to assimilate them into the life of the church. In sheer marketing terms, we had mounted a huge effort to get them in the door. But now came the more arduous, long-term challenge of weaving them into the fabric of the church. It needed to be done not simply for the sake of ‘growing the church,’ but for the sake of growing the people whom God had brought to us.

We developed a strategy of ‘high touch’ — making a number of different types of personal contacts with the newcomer within the first three weeks after their initial visit, in hopes of making at least one lasting connection. That work didn’t stop there.

Remember that in working with givers for the long haul, you have to devote yourself not just to the goal of acquiring financial support, but to the relationship after the gift is given. A donor may give a first gift as the result of an appeal to his compassion, or because of the urgency of the appeal. But a donor will only continue to give as the result of the relationship and the ministry or community your church provides. To stay in relationship, and to keep finding new ways to express the vision of the ministry within the context of that donor relationship, takes thought and prayer and time and effort.

**IN ANY DONOR RELATIONSHIP, YOU
NEED TO CONSTANTLY ASK YOURSELF:** _____



Where do the interests of the ministry's work intersect with the interests of the donor?



Where can the mission of the church connect to the passions of the donor?

God certainly has brought you together for a productive reason. Stay in the relationship and intentionally continue to explore what God's call for that relationship might be.

WHAT DOES THIS LOOK LIKE? ---

- ◇ **Begin by assessing your donor records to identify your most faithful givers.** Keep in mind that this isn't the amount of the gift or cumulative giving, but the loyalty and consistency of their giving. Givers who've faithfully supported your church monthly or annually for a number of years at any level need and deserve your attention.
- ◇ **Develop a plan for outreach to those faithful givers.** In a large or multi-campus church, this might involve assigning executive-level staff and clergy to meet with a certain number of givers each month or quarter.
- ◇ **Acknowledge and ask.** Use that outreach - calls or meetings - to thank them for their faithfulness to the church. But use it as an opportunity to explore what called them here, what keeps them here, and what their passions and dreams are for their role in advancing your mission. Just that act of asking is pastoral and will go a long way in keeping long-time donors engaged and knowing they are valued.

Retaining your givers takes prayer and hard work, but there is no better way to build your giving program than to shower love and focus attention on those who already support you faithfully. Stay in the relationship and they'll "stay for the show" long-term.

MAKE THE RIGHT ASK

Pastors and church leaders often ask when and how they should appropriately make a financial request of a member.

How exactly should you actually go about presenting the church's case to a member and asking for the donation?

**AFTER YEARS OF WORKING WITH MAJOR DONORS,
I BELIEVE STRONGLY IN A FOUR-PHASE APPROACH
TO DONOR RELATIONSHIPS:**



Acknowledgment



Building trust



Presenting the
case for support



The ask

The sequence is important. Most significantly, these phases keep the donor’s needs, interests, and values in view at all times.

The foundation of a relationship with a donor, like the foundation of a relationship with any friend, is what we call “acknowledgment.” Acknowledgment is the crucial foundation on which any eventual request for funds must be built. One might say I must “earn the right” to present the case for support. If I have acknowledged the donor adequately for his or her faithfulness to our ministry, I can eventually present the case for support with confidence that I won’t be violating the values of the donor, or unintentionally devaluing the donor.

The natural progression from acknowledgment of a donor or prospect leads you into the trust-building process. The importance of this step cannot be overstated. No less than 80 percent of the time I spend with a donor will involve the trust-establishment process. If there is a single core to ministry-based fundraising, this is it. We don’t hound, pressure, manipulate, or “emotionally inspire” a contribution from someone; we build trust so that a contribution becomes the natural outflow of the relationship.

The recognition of a donor's trust is a strong signal that they are ready to receive a presentation of the case for deeper support of the ministry. Many pastors or ministry leaders want a strict formula for this, but the nature of the presentation must grow out of your understanding of the individual donor's learning style. You need to communicate effectively regardless of an individual donor's specific 'wiring.' How does this individual instinctively prefer to receive information? Some donors prefer to receive digitized videos via email. Some prefer to have a casual conversation over lunch. Some prefer to be buried in audit numbers and information. The message must come through in a medium that makes sense to the donor.

When making a presentation to a donor to solicit a gift, keep it simple. This is about the project, campaign, or aspect of the ministry that requires funding. What is the strategy, program, or concept — unique to your church or ministry — which meets a specific pressing need? It is essential that you make clear why this is the place for the donor to invest. Show the donor how they can be a partner in achieving the strategy or mission.

After you have acknowledged and affirmed your donor, built trust, and presented your case for support, it is time for the ask!

**HERE IS AN EXAMPLE OF LANGUAGE TO USE WHEN
IT SEEMS LIKE THE RIGHT TIME TO TRANSITION
FROM PRESENTATION TO ASK:** _____

'Susan, based on the information I've shared with you here, do you have any concerns about this project? Any questions I could answer? No? Would this be a good time to share with you what we're going to need financially? This is a \$55,000 project. We're looking for three donors of \$10,000 or more. Would you be willing to take one of those positions, to be one of those partners?'

**IF YOU'RE UNSURE ABOUT THE SPECIFIC DOLLAR AMOUNT
A DONOR MIGHT CONSIDER — LET THE DONOR SEE THE
TOTAL NEED, AND LET THE DONOR SET THE BAR: _____**

'Here's the project, here's what we're trying to do. It's going to cost \$250,000. We will need a donor to give \$50,000, and four donors to give \$25,000. I'll need ten donors to give \$10,000 each. I know you have a passion for this. Where would you see yourself in this project?'

The donor will probably set their bar by mentioning an amount.

If the donor asks for time to consider the ask, talk to his or her spouse, or pray about it, always affirm their response and timeline. Follow up at an agreed-upon time, and keep the communication open. You are in the relationship for the long haul, and the donor needs your ministry more than you need their investment. Finally, express your gratitude regardless of the outcome.

STAY PRESENT

One key mistake pastors and churches often make is not staying present with donors.

What do we mean by that?

Sometimes as ministry leaders, we feel enormous pressure about “the next big idea.” It’s understandable: our churches have significant needs, capital campaigns are on the horizon, and we convince ourselves that our members want something flashy or snazzy from us regularly.

Capital campaigns and the next ‘big idea’ visions are important and necessary. But when we are habitually launching a new brand, an updated logo or tagline for a ministry, or talking about our 10-year vision, donors can quickly lose enthusiasm for what their loyal tithes mean to us. We need to stay present and transparent about what their giving makes possible each week or month.

The most effective way to inspire a donor is to expose that donor to authentic changes happening in people’s lives as a result of the church’s work. This isn’t complicated - just hands-on reality of what your church is doing each day.

PASTORS:

Your staff has to be part of staying present with donors. They need to be able to share their own personal impact stories from the trenches. Especially in a large or multi-campus church, key ministry staff members and even volunteers who work with donors have to be involved with the daily operations of the ministry so deeply that they have their own genuine stories to tell.

When I worked in development for a Christian youth camp, I took visiting donors and prospects to the large rock where I had committed my life to Christ at the age of 18. I explained that down through the years, hundreds of teens have done exactly what I did in exactly the same spot. Many of those visitors were inspired to help build new buildings at that camp. Visiting parents gave several thousand dollars in a single summer.

A development field rep-in-training accompanied me on some of these tours. As she began interacting with groups of donors herself, I heard her telling the same story. After a time I encouraged her to tell her own stories, from her heart. The problem was, she had never been involved in the camp experience. So I stopped her in her tracks. “I don’t want you bringing any more donors out here till you’ve been in a cabin for a week working with a bunch of kids,” I told her.

The rep howled. “That’s not my thing!” she insisted. “I can’t do that!” “Well,” I replied, “you’ve got to.”

She argued and argued. I held firm. I scheduled her as a cabin counselor. On the appointed day, she called in sick. The next day when she showed up for work, I put her in the car and headed for camp — over her objections. I visited the camp the next day, and she was miserable. At the end of the week, I returned for a parents’ meeting. This staffer was transformed. She had spent the week with five girls. Their hearts and lives had been intertwined. She was laughing and weeping, overjoyed.

“I sat on your rock!” she cried. “I led a kid to Christ!” That staff member went on to raise thousands of dollars to enable students to have the camp experience — and she had her own stories to tell.

PASTORS: _____

Encourage your staff in those hands-on experiences so they can share with your members and gives the work your ministry is doing. For your loyal donors, that is how to best stay present and inspire them.

TELL DONORS YOU'RE PRESSING FORWARD EVEN IN DIFFICULT TIMES

Every church is going to hit a rough patch.

(If 2020 to present was that for yours, you know you're not alone!)

But all our ministries will have crisis moments. Hurtful personnel changes or upheaval. Financial and budget issues that were unplanned and out of our control. Divisions in the congregation around future direction. The unexpected end of a key partnership.

Sometimes those crises within our churches or denominations even garner us bad press or headlines.

For your loyal and long-term givers, your transparent communication to them during difficult times will keep them engaged and help retain them as your advocates.

The first key is not to wait until that inevitable difficult time is in front of you.

**HERE ARE SOME STEPS TO TAKE TO ENSURE YOU'RE
READY TO TELL DONORS HOW YOU'RE PRESSING
FORWARD WHEN TIMES GET TOUGH:** _____

1

Have a clear plan. Carve out time at your staff retreat or other strategic planning to build - or revisit- your crisis communications plans as a church. Everyone on your team, especially in a large or multi-campus setting, should know the basics of what their role is and isn't during a true public relations or media issue.

2

Treat your loyal givers as insiders. Your long-term donors believe in your mission and want to be in this for the long haul. Give them the tools to be your advocate in good times and bad. This often means segmented "insider" communication from your head pastor or campus pastors to those groups of donors that keep them updated on the challenges you're facing and how they can help. There is nothing more effective than a group of members who are well versed in your church's impact and how you're handling a challenge to help diffuse negativity and change the community conversation.

3

Be transparent. When those challenges hit, let donors know how you're facing them, give them input on your course of direction when you can, and involve them in helping you solve the issues.

4

Don't hide what's happening: your donors want to help and sometimes they need to hear that you REALLY need them. Through this past year, we've seen churches and ministries who communicated well about their continued work and their needs through the pandemic continue to survive, and often to thrive. Your credibility as a pastor or ministry leader will hinge on your ability to effectively communicate - and seek input - how you are pressing forward to your donors.

Proverbs 17:3 reminds us that God uses our trials to refine us. If we try to keep the reality of those challenges from our closest supporters, we're missing a chance to see God at work. We're also missing an opportunity to provide that sacred space for donors to be called to meet a need - be it financial, spiritual, or communal.

Pastors and ministry leaders have to encourage this kind of openness with donors who have made significant, consistent, and loyal investments in our ministries. Sometimes in very large and established congregations, especially, we see pastors hesitate to do this because it feels like a failure to acknowledge when something is wrong or when we have a need. But God has placed these givers in our community for a reason, and we need to place trust in them in our most vulnerable times.

The greatest impact among loyal givers will be in their long-term retention by your church. If you are persuasive and passionate, a new giver will typically give that first gift. But the difference between the donor who gives a one-time gift and the donor who engages for the long-term really boils down to personal relationships — and the systems that drive, connect, organize, and maintain those relationships.

When it comes to a crisis, plan for how to handle that critical group of donors and practice engaging them with authenticity and honesty now.

I've found that these five strategies can help churches and ministries consistently keep donors engaged over long periods of time. Revisit them often and recognize where you are...and when you need to tap into one of the strategies to keep your focus on your givers and their needs. Always remember: Your donors need you and your ministry more than you need their funds.

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