



Articles
This article shares a practical framework for securing major gifts for your organisation.

Successful major donor fundraising: the 7 Steps of Solicitation

Taking a systematic approach to solicitation can help major donor fundraisers maximise income from High Net Worth Individuals (HNWIs) while ensuring time and money is not being wasted. There are many different models. This download outlines =mc's 7-step approach. It has helped many clients secure 6- and 7-figure gifts, including Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund, Canal and River Trust and Science Museum.

The 7 steps of Solicitation are:

Step	Description
1	Identify
2	Research
3	Plan
4	Cultivate – Involve
5	Ask
6	Close
7	Thank and steward

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A team game

Working through the 7 steps requires involvement from a number of people within the organisation. While the early steps are likely to be the responsibility of the fundraising team you will almost certainly need to involve the CEO, frontline staff, board members and perhaps even other major donors for the later stages, from making introductions, to making the ask itself, to supporting the stewardship.

Given the number of people potentially involved, it's important you keep track of each 'move' in the process – what's been done, what's the next action needed and who's responsible for doing this.

It's not about you, it's about them

At its heart, the 7 Step model is about building a relationship and bringing your cause closer to the donor. While Board members (or Finance Directors) might pressure you to fast-track to Step 5, investing sufficient time and effort in the earlier steps is vital if you're going to be successful. These steps are *sequential* – it's no good missing out a step (or steps) in a desire to get to the money more quickly.

Key to solicitation is understanding a donor's *hygiene factors* and *motivators*.

Hygiene factors are the things a major donor expects to be in place. They won't motivate the donor to give, but if they are missing they will cause alarm. Examples of common hygiene factors include:

- They have charitable status
- They can demonstrate good governance, with a strong board of trustees
- Their finances are in order – accounts are filed on time and there's a suitable level of reserves
- They understand how the donor can make their gift in a tax efficient way

As long as the hygiene factors are in place, you can focus on unlocking a donor’s interest in your organisation’s work. While every donor will be motivated by different things, most types of motivation will fall under one of four main types:

Motivation Type	Explanation
Philanthropy	Donors with a desire to make a difference or change the world for the better. They often have a vision for the future and a conviction that they should use their resources to do good. This is sometimes driven by religious conviction. Philanthropic donors are particularly interested in understanding the impact their gift will have.
Causal	Donors with a strong personal connection to a cause based on either positive or negative experiences. They are motivated by an affinity to your work may and may provide your largest gifts, sometimes at a disproportionate to their wealth.
Transactional	Donors with an interest in the benefits they will receive in return for their support. Typically, corporates will be motivated by mutual benefit and expect some commercial advantage. Another example might be a theatre or art gallery offering a tiered set of benefits to mid- and high-level ‘friends’ or ‘patrons’.
Social	Donors motivated by the social dimension of giving. This might include wanting to be part of a particular group, meet specific individuals or join a ‘club’ (in a loose or actual sense). In the major donor context, you should identify a peer or suitably influential person to ask a social donor for a gift.

Step 1: Identify

The purpose Step 1 is to build a long-list of *prospects* – potential donors who could provide the necessary level of funding for your work. You want to gather the names of as many individuals you can who match at least one of three key criteria:

- **Capacity** – the financial resources to give at the required level
- **Propensity** – a demonstrable interest in supporting your cause at the required level
- **Connection** – a personal connection to your organisation, or one that could be forged through shared contacts

Prospects can be identified from a variety of internal and external sources. It's usually best to start with people you know. Not all of them need to be donors but they must be committed to your work. For arts and culture organisations this could include:

- Existing ticket buyers or visitors
- Current supporters, including major donors, corporate partners and members of existing donor giving clubs
- Subscribers to your mailing list
- Commercial and professional service delivery partners and other specialist stakeholders
- Contacts of senior staff
- Trustees and those known to them

Outside your organisation you may also want to consider:

- Trustees and major donors of other arts/culture organisations
- Donors to other local or community organisations
- Supporters of the local Community Foundation

To help you with Step 1 you may wish to commission specialist prospect research. This can include wealth screening your database, identifying supporters of similar/comparator organisations and identifying those with the capacity and propensity to give.

Step 2: Evaluate

Having created a long-list, the purpose of Step 2 is to research your prospects to identify the people that score most strongly against all three of the key criteria. How much might the individual be able to give, why are they likely to give, and who can help connect you? Answer these questions and you have the bones of a plan that meets *their* needs and motivations so you get the gift *you* need.

But while careful research is important as the basis for an effective donor solicitation plan, be wary of 'analysis paralysis.' You need to know when you have enough information to make a plan and get started. Keep in mind the purpose of the research and keep checking you're working towards this.

You can obtain information on prospects from both external and internal sources. External sources can provide details of giving behaviour, interests, family connections and other basic information.

Potential external sources include:

- Google searches
- Online registers and directories – including financial and business directories
- Annual reports and publications of similar/comparator charities
- Corporate annual reports
- Magazines and newspapers, including interviews that provide more in-depth information about interests and motivators

Internally, you should consider a ‘donor mapping’ exercise to circulate to senior staff and trustees.

Prospect name	Previous gifts	Potential gift level	Interests and motivations	Who has a direct relationship?	Who could make an introduction?
Mr Phil Anthropist	What have they given to your organisation? Who else have they donated to?	What size gift does your research suggest they could make? Do you board/SMT agree?	What do you know about their interests and motivations? What can others add to this?	Who knows this person directly? What is their relationship?	Who outside your organisation could make an introduction?

From this you should be able to identify your top 5 to 10 prospects to focus on.

Step 3: Plan

The purpose of Step 3 is to set out how you are going to engage each of your priority prospects deeply enough with your work to get to the point where you can make an ask. You know how much the donor might give, and what for. You now need to plan out the ‘moves’ to cultivate and involve them, using both formal and informal interactions. You also need to identify who from your organisation is best placed to take the lead.

In order to bring the donor closer, identify a list of projects you think will interest them. Have a number of options to give you greater flexibility as your relationship develops. Typically your projects will be reflected in a case for support and a series of propositions.

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The case should answer five key questions:

- What is the **need** for your project or campaign?
- What **evidence** do you have that the need is **urgent**?
- Why is your organisation **best placed** to respond to this need?
- What are the **positive benefits** of securing the funding?
- What are the negative consequences if you fail?

Propositions are different ways of packaging and framing your case depending on the donor's interest and their capacity to give. For example, a new dinosaur museum in a rural area could generate a number of propositions to match different donor interests and aims:

- **Palaeontology** – for this donor you might focus on how their support will help install dinosaur skeletons and replicas – visitors will be inspired by coming face-to-face with a dinosaur.
- **Education** – for this donor you might focus on how their support will help provide educational resources throughout the museum to support the learning of visiting schools and local young people.
- **Scientific research** – for this donor interested you might focus on how their support will enable you to install a laboratory which can also be used to help train local scientists.
- **Local economy** – for this donor you might focus on how their gift will boost tourism, encouraging more visitors to the area which, in turn, will generate more income for local businesses.

Having considered the donor interests you also need to work out a gift ladder for each proposition. This helps you articulate what different levels of gifts will enable you to achieve. What could you do with £10,000? With £1,000,000? What will the donor get in return? Again, all this forward thinking gives you maximum flexibility to respond most appropriately as you learn more about the donor.

Step 4: Cultivate and Involve

To reiterate, the 7-step process is about building a relationship with the donor. The purpose of Step 4 is to bring the donor even closer to the cause so they end up properly committed to your work and want to help.

Understandably, this step often takes the longest of all – 6 to 18 months is not unusual, depending on the size of the prospective gift. Working to such a timeline, it can be hard, but is very important to remain focused on the intended outcome to prevent any 'drift' from purpose. Continue to update the plan, ensure that every move has an intended outcome and monitor that they are being met to be certain that you're moving forward.

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There are a number of ways you can involve potential donors at this stage through:

- Formal cultivation events to learn about the organisation's future plans
- Informal 'coffee' meetings
- Opportunities to meet key staff, beneficiaries and donors
- Visiting projects, attending rehearsals, or going behind-the-scenes

Stage 4 is not only for the donor to learn about the organisation. It's also your opportunity to confirm your research from Step 3 and build on your understanding of their interests, motivations and capacity to give. Testing and revising this will ensure your ask, when it comes, is well-informed and appropriately targeted.

Above all, you are seeking to establish a personal connection between the potential donor and the organisation. The primary aim at the end of Stage 4 is that they will have a real enthusiasm for your organisation's work and an accurate understanding of how and why their financial support will have the biggest impact.

And alongside this, remember not all prospects will want to become donors and many will disengage themselves during this stage. You need continuously to evaluate the relationship and be realistic as to whether someone is keen but short of time, or politely telling you they are really not interested. Keep updating your prospect list, bringing in new top prospects to focus on as others drop out.

Step 5: Ask

By Step 5 you should have a close relationship with the donor, a strong understanding of their interests and motivations and be reasonably confident of their capacity to give. You now need to make an explicit request for support. In addition to ensuring you are asking for the right amount and for the right project you also need to consider whether it's:

- The right person – are they the right decision maker for the gift?
- The right time – is this the right time for them?
- The right asker – have you got the right person to make the ask?

Getting the right person is crucial. The strongest ask is:

- **Face-to-face** – as opposed to on the phone, by email or by letter
- **Peer-to-peer** – the person making the ask is on the same social and/or professional level as the donor
- **Donor-to-donor** – the person making has committed to making a gift

Different people can make the ask, with advantages and disadvantages for each:

Asker	Advantages	Disadvantages
Chair/Trustee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Represents a professional peer • Shows how important the donor is to the organisation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Might not have as strong an understanding of the project • Might not feel comfortable asking
Another Donor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A strong ask]They can talk about their motivations and experience of giving 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Their motivations/interests might be different to the prospect's • Might put off somebody looking to play a starring role
CEO/Senior staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Represents a professional peer • Shows how important the donor is to the organisation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less exciting for the donor
Celebrity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Could bring credibility to the campaign 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Might not be able to respond to objections or questions
Fundraiser	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Will be able to answer questions or objections the donor might have • Will be able to follow-up directly and plan next steps 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unlikely to be peer-to-peer • Unlikely to have given at a similar level

You might want to have two people present for the ask – with the Chair, celebrity or other donor making the ask, and a fundraiser or senior staff member there to answer objections and help plan next steps.

If you have followed all the earlier steps, you should be reasonably confident of success. However, beware the prospect who agrees too readily. If they say 'yes' straight away when you ask for a specific amount, the chances are that you have pitched your ask too low. You want to secure a stretch gift – a gift that requires thought and perhaps some planning. It's unlikely you'll get an instant agreement if you have pitched the level correctly.

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It's also worth bearing in mind that 'No' isn't necessarily as final as it might at first appear.

At =mc we have defined nine different types of 'No.'

Type of 'No'	Description	Your response
No, not for this	You asked for the wrong project	What area of work would you be interested in?
No, not you	You got the wrong person to ask	Who would be more appropriate?
No, not me	You asked the wrong person	Who should we ask? Who else should we involve?
No, not unless	There are conditions to the gift	What are your conditions?
No, not in this way	You asked for the wrong type of gift – they might want to give in a different way	Is there another way of providing support that is easier or more convenient?
No, not now	You asked at the wrong time	When would be more appropriate?
No, too much	You asked for the wrong amount	"What level would be more appropriate?
No, too little	You asked for the wrong amount	What had you in mind?
No, go away	The only 'No' that really means 'No'	Thank you for your time

Step 6: Close

If you've asked at the right level it's unlikely you'll get an immediate 'Yes.' Instead, they'll want to consider the request. So the purpose of Step 6 is to work with the donor to get to a written agreement. This should record:

- How much the proposed donation will be
- When the donation will be made
- How it will be made – one-off payment, number of instalments, via shares, etc.
- Any benefits the donor will receive

Closing is an important formal stage in securing the gift. This is often a role for the Chief Executive – or another member of the senior team.

Step 7: Steward

The process doesn't stop when you receive the donation — there is still important work to be done. The purpose of Step 7 is to thank and acknowledge the important contribution the donor has made to your work, while laying the ground for future gifts, ensuring the donor becomes a long-term supporter of your organisation.

High quality thanking and stewarding is essential for maintaining long-term relationships with key donors. It is impossible to understate its importance in major donor fundraising, especially for transactional and socially motivated donors.

There are three important components of stewardship:

Receiving

The first 'thank you' must be made quickly — within 24 hours — and by the right person. A formal letter, or letters, should follow from appropriate people — the Chief Executive, Chair of the Board and/or the person with a personal connection to the donor. It's the fundraiser's responsibility to ensure that good thanking is done — even when it is carried out by others.

Recognising

Creative and personalised approaches often have the greatest impact. If you have progressed through the solicitation process, you will have a good understanding of the donor's motivations. This should help you develop a stewardship plan that relates to their interests and motivations. This could include:

- Invitations to events or receptions
- The chance to see first-hand their gift being put to use
- Receiving emails or updates from key members of staff or beneficiaries/participants

Publicly recognising a donor's support is a great way of thanking them for their gift, while also signalling to other potential donors that you need support. This could include:

- Naming rights
- Listing donors on your website, programme and/or annual report
- Press activity relating to their gift

All forms of public recognition should be checked with the donor concerned.

Beyond that, you may have agreed certain benefits during the cultivation process. These need to be delivered as promised.

Reporting

Transformative gifts should obviously have a significant impact on both the donor and the organisation. It is important that you communicate with the donor what their support has enabled you to achieve, so that they can be sure of the benefits of their gift and can celebrate the impact it has had with you.

Good Luck!

How can we help you?

For further information on how **=mc** can help transform your fundraising, call us on +44(0)20 7978 1516 or email **David Burgess**, Consultant at d.burgess@managementcentre.co.uk

For further insights related to this article, see the following free downloads:

- [The Influential Fundraiser](#)
- [The Power of Private Donors](#)
- [Principles of Influence](#)

You may also want to read [The Influential Fundraiser](#) (New York Times' Top-5 non-profit book), written by **=mc** Directors Clare Segal and Bernard Ross.

=mc also run a range of public training programmes often attended by fundraising professionals.

- [Influencing & Negotiating for Results](#)
- [Transformational Presentation Skills](#)
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