

Philanthropy: A Major Gift Never Arrives Alone

Philanthropie: un don important n'arrive jamais seul

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This is an AI-generated English translation of Daniel H. Lanteigne's original French-language column, provided for reference. Read the original in French on Les Affaires → <https://www.lesaffaires.com/opinions/philanthropie-un-don-important-narrive-jamais-seul/>

I don't know about you, but if I were never solicited, I would probably still give from time to time—when a story moves me, or when a cause touches me enough to spontaneously reach for my credit card.

But let's be honest: I would probably give less often, to fewer organizations and, above all, my gifts would probably be smaller. Not because I'd be any less generous, but simply because we rarely give to what never crosses our path.

Generosity doesn't turn into philanthropy on its own. Between a person who might feel like contributing and a gift capable of transforming an organization or a cause, there's a demanding, strategic, relationship-driven profession—one that's far more complex than people think.

When a \$5, \$10 or \$25 million gift is announced, we see a photo, a handshake, a press release, a plaque, and an impressive figure. And rightly so, the donor is celebrated. But that's often just the end of the story.

Behind that announcement, there is almost always patient, sometimes enormous, work spread over months or years. Not the work of a simple go-between passing along a request on one side and hoping for a cheque on the other. The fundraising professional builds something that didn't exist before.

Long Before the Ask

First, you have to identify people likely to feel a connection to the mission, understand their background, their interests, their philanthropic history, and their potential capacity to contribute. Above all, you have to distinguish someone who can give from someone who might genuinely want to. That nuance matters.

An experienced professional needs to know how to read signals, ask the right questions, and understand what motivates a person without reducing them to the size of their bank account. They also have to decide which relationships to develop, let mature, or let go of.

This takes judgment, method, intuition, and a solid understanding of human behaviour.

If you've ever received a solicitation that completely missed the mark on your interests, you know how true the opposite is as well. A good philanthropic relationship starts with understanding what truly matters to the person.

Earning the Right to Ask

A real relationship has to be built. You need to create opportunities to discover the organization, showcase its impact, listen to the prospective donor's reactions, and adjust the conversation over time.

Sometimes, the best professional decision is precisely not to ask. The project may not be ready, the relationship may not be strong enough, or the amount being considered may be poorly calibrated.

Knowing when not to solicit can be just as important as knowing how to ask. And when the moment finally arrives, the ask itself often represents just a few minutes within a relationship that required dozens of hours of preparation.

Much More Than a Nice Proposal

The fundraising professional also has to know their organization deeply enough to understand what it can actually promise.

That means working with the executive team, programs, finance, communications and sometimes the board of directors to turn complex needs into credible projects a donor can choose to associate themselves with.

And sometimes you have to say no—to an appealing project that would pull the organization away from its mission, to a condition that would create more problems than the gift would solve, or to a promise the organization won't be able to keep.

So the professional isn't just trying to bring money in. They're also protecting the organization, its mission, its reputation, and the quality of the relationship with the donor.

Sometimes the project needs to be revised, the amount adjusted, a payment schedule negotiated, recognition terms clarified, and accountability defined. All the while, someone has to keep everyone at the table, maintain trust, and sense when to move forward and when to slow down.

And After the Cheque

If you gave several thousand, or several million, dollars to an organization, I imagine you'd want to know what happened next.

The work continues after the signature. Commitments made have to be honoured, results reported on, the relationship maintained, and the donor helped to understand what their gesture actually made possible.

A good professional isn't just trying to secure a gift. They're building a relationship that can last for decades.

That's why we need to stop believing that fundraising is an easy job, where all it takes is asking those who can afford it. This profession has nothing to do with an organized "collection plate." It rests on real expertise, a keen read of human relationships, and an ability to turn a possibility into a commitment.

It draws on strategy, analysis, negotiation, communications, ethics and governance. You have to be able to speak with a wealthy individual in the morning, defend a project to a finance director in the afternoon, and advise a board of directors in the evening on how to approach its own network.

You have to love people without being naive, be persistent without becoming pushy, and ambitious without losing sight of the mission. And you have to accept a rather peculiar reality. When everything works, someone else will probably be the one in the photo.

The next time you read that a hospital, a university, a community organization or a cultural institution has received a spectacular gift, celebrate the donor. But also ask yourself who made that encounter possible, who built the relationship, found the right project, prepared the ask, managed the hesitations, and maintained trust all the way to the signature.

You'll probably never see their name in the headline. And yet that person may be one of the main reasons there's an article at all.

Philanthropy needs generosity, but it also needs professionals capable of turning that generosity into engagement, and that engagement into gifts.

And if, in reading this piece, you found yourself thinking that fundraising sounds far more strategic, demanding and human than you imagined, all the better. At the very least, I hope it gives this profession the respect it deserves. At best, I hope it makes some of you want to come practice it.

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