



# What Are Donors Looking For Before They Give?

## The Dozen Desires of the Thoughtful Donor

By Larry Matthews

**“W**hat’s the most satisfying gift you ever made?”

I asked the question while interviewing a person who has made many donations to numerous Christian schools, ministries and mission organizations. Several of those gifts have involved very large sums of money. My host was generous with his time and insights, and so I asked.

Learning insights about giving is actually part of my job. My colleagues and I have interviewed many hundreds of people, exploring the likelihood that current supporters of our clients might endorse and support some proposed initiative. The interviews are confidential—we don’t report what individuals say—but their comments strongly influence the advice we give.

Some topics come up repeatedly in these interviews, even though issues vary, theological convictions span the Christian spectrum, and the visions

range from the timid to the seemingly impossible. Donors from coast to coast want the same dozen things from the ministries, schools and mission organizations they support. We often debate which are most important, but here at least are what my colleagues and I have identified as the dozen desires of the thoughtful donor.

**1.) Clarity**—“*Show me why you exist and what your work will accomplish.*”

Mission and vision are paramount. During one study several long-time donors told us, “I don’t know what they do anymore. . . . I don’t have any idea what their vision is.” Their financial support is on the verge of evaporating, whether either party recognizes it now.

**2.) Passion**—“*Show me something to care about.*”

Everyone responds to passion. It’s contagious, it’s convincing and it energizes people. A passion for Christ, for

mission and for this specific ministry is vital. If the person displaying the passion is credible, people are drawn to the cause and are much more open to joining in.

**3.) Goals**—“*Describe concrete results of your work and our gifts.*”

Most donors increasingly want to support efforts to reach goals that can be measured. Christians still show some willingness to fund noble striving for which no immediate outcome can be measured or even described, but only if the trust between donors and the organization is exceptionally strong. More and more, however, people ask Christian ministries to describe the discernible, measurable outcomes of the activity.

**4.) Accountability**—“*Please don’t make me ask you to report.*”

Accountability is the heartbeat of lasting donor relationships. Simply put, asking for accountability is asking for transparency: “Tell me what

## Tips From Those Who Ask

### Seven Christian leaders reflect on Larry Matthews' article

you'll do with my gift; use my gift the way you said you would; tell me the results; and give me the information and tools to evaluate that result." Concerns over accountability are behind the puzzlement of many organizations who struggle in their efforts to endow their operating budgets. Donors tell us, "Why would I give to an endowment? That's money now for unspecified purposes later—there's no accountability." (Endowments for academic chairs may be something of an exception. They are still challenging, but the practice is well established and the activity being funded is clearly defined.)

**5.) Leadership**—"Show us how you are helping to set the pace for everyone in your field."

If your organization demonstrates leadership in its field your supporters will believe they are getting greater impact from their gift and making a contribution to the whole field.

**6.) Strategy**—"Show me a credible plan."

Donors want to know administrators are thinking strategically about needs and issues and are able to make critical adjustments as circumstances warrant. Good analysis and planning, carefully communicated, create confidence and bolster enthusiasm.

**7.) Authenticity**—"Tell me the truth about the work you do."

Thoughtful donors expect that what you promote is real and reflects the true priorities and convictions of the organization and its leadership. The willingness of donors to grapple with complex issues and dynamics is often underestimated. If they sense you are truly opening the doors to them, they'll rise to the task.

**8.) Relationship**—"Show me that I am known."

We interviewed a person who had supported our client very generously for more than a decade and had served as chair of the board for much

#### SIMPLY THE PRICE OF ENTRY

High-quality ministry and high-quality donor relations don't guarantee that a ministry will have the funds it needs. In fact these are simply the minimum price of entry.

The bigger issue facing charities is that donors are increasingly more affected by clutter and competition for their support, which makes them prone to support the latest appeal to get their attention and rouse their passion. As a result, far too much time and resources are spent on marketing and fundraising. This, in turn, detracts from programming and sometimes even good donor relations.

The challenge is to communicate meaningfully to donors the lasting value and impact of our ministry and the impact of their consistent support. ■

—Laurie Cook is CEO of World Relief Canada in Markham, Ont.

#### NOT EVERYTHING CAN BE MEASURED

As Christians we seek to be the best possible stewards of the gifts we have to give. Even so, our gift must be about advancing God's kingdom work and not about being treated well as donors. An organization that struggles with employing the "best" of fundraising principles may still be the place where the Lord would have us place our support.

Furthermore, not everything of importance can be expressed in concrete, quantifiable terms. In our Convention of Atlantic Baptist Churches we support pastors in their own times of need, assist pastors and churches during transition or conflict, help individuals explore their call and suitability for pastoral ministry, and collaborate with churches intent on redeveloping their ministries. These and numerous other involvements are integral for an effective shared ministry, yet on the surface they can easily appear to be merely maintenance of the organizational machinery.

Every organization can offer "leading edge" initiatives with great and immediate donor appeal and quantifiable results. But it requires a solid foundation to be able to do so consistently, and those foundational and ongoing

needs also deserve support. ■

—Greg Jones is director of stewardship for the Convention of Atlantic Baptist Churches in Saint John, N.B.

#### FROM SORROW TO JOY

"Your office posted my donation to the wrong account." Mrs. M. sounded crabby. On my computer screen was a history of her regular deposits to a memorial bursary. I was new [to donor relations at Concordia University College], and struggled to engage her in conversation.

Yet through visiting Mrs. M I learned about her son, who had attended Concordia. She had lost him and both daughters to the same degenerative genetic disease. Yet she had not established bursaries to celebrate the lives of her daughters.

When Mrs. M's husband of many decades died, she felt overwhelming pain. She told me, "I just want the Lord to take me." I was at a loss for a minute, but then said what I thought: "Mrs. M, the Lord still has work for you to do. So you have to get on with your life and celebrate your marriage and your children." She looked shocked. Then came a radiant smile. "You're right," she replied.

Mrs. M went on to establish two more bursaries to recognize her daughters. Celebrating the lives of her children by helping other young people made Mrs. M feel and see the difference she was making. Her sorrow has yielded joy. And she and I continue with a relationship that is valuable to both of us. ■

—Donna von Hauff is vice-president of advancement at Concordia University College of Alberta in Edmonton, Alta.

#### FUNDRAISING INCLUDES TRUST AND JOY

Both the donor and the organization need a trusting relationship. Often this trust is invested in a person. Donors who share our vision often give because they are asked by a person whose judgment they trust implicitly. Such trust is precious and fragile, and must be handled with humility.

Yet there also seems to be an inverse relationship between trust and the measurability of the organization's

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## Tips from Fundraisers

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goals. This is sobering for someone training Christian scholars at the PhD level—our “measurables” may be 20 years away. I encourage donors not to be preoccupied with measurables, but to assess goals in relation to the organization’s mission, and to remember that fundamentally we are each called to faithfulness, not measurable success.

People often comment that fundraising must be by far the hardest part of my task. Yet it can also be the most joyful part, depending on the donor. When a donor treats giving as ministry and proffers a gift of any amount, openheartedly and joyfully, my own energy and commitment to the mission are rejuvenated. In this way the gift has double the impact. ■

—Harry Fernhout is president of the Institute for Christian Studies in Toronto, Ont.

### CAREFUL COMMUNICATION

Here are four more topics that fundraisers will want to think about as they do their work.

**Impact & Sustainability:** Explain the extent that the program will have in making a long-term change in the program participants. Show that you have a strategy to grow and develop the program so that once the seed money runs out, you can continue to run the program.

**Innovation & Dissemination:** Funders have been funding the same social and economic problems for decades, and they’re tired of helping charity after charity in fighting the same issues. Funders are not only interested in the creation of new approaches to solving old problems—they also want to know that you have a plan to share your successful model with others.

**Good Company:** Funders want to know who else is giving and whom you’re partnering with. They support organizations that can leverage resources and that will collaborate with other groups to carry out programs for greater kingdom impact.

**Postmodern mind-set:** People have come to realize that they can’t change the world. Don’t make claims that you can. With this mind-set, funders look for very specific causes with measurable results that they can give their money to. Moreover, they want to be active instruments of change. Oppor-

tunities for hands-on participation are attractive to today’s funders. ■

—Cecilia Wu is the director of development for the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada in Markham, Ont.

### PASSION FOR DONORS TOO

The most crucial part of fundraising for ministry is the relationship between passion and vision.

Vision shapes the future. It is our job as Christian leaders to create and articulate that vision, and the dynamic power of passion in shaping vision cannot be overstated. Passion is vision’s power, strong enough to withstand all the challenges that need to be faced and conquered in shaping the future.

Yet donors do not just want to see people “display” a passion; they want to feel about the ministry as we do. They want to invest in a need or cause that they are passionate about! Bring passionate people together—including leadership, program staff, volunteers and donors—and they will indeed fulfill the vision. Connecting passionate donors and ministries creates an incredibly powerful partnership. ■

—Marg Gibb is president of Women Alive in Brantford, Ont.

### WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE “CHRISTIAN”?

Christian philanthropy is distinct from “secular” fundraising in its understanding of the sacred nature of the enterprise. Jesus made it clear that material wealth has the capacity to elicit service in a way that competes with our service for God (Matthew 5:24). Paul argued that it is possible to put your hope in money and not in God (2 Timothy 6:17). However, the Scriptures are bold in their claim that sacrificial financial giving is something that pleases God, is rooted in the abundance of grace, bears significant results and ultimately results in worship of God (2 Corinthians 9:6-15).

Christian organizations that understand the spiritual dynamic lurking behind money will craft their marketing, present their needs, solicit their donors and thank their partners in ways that are consistent with the fundamental nature of the Christian gospel. I would hope that such a posture would attract like-minded Christian donors who conceptualize their philanthropic activity as a form of worship. ■

—Rod Wilson is president of Regent College in Vancouver, B.C.

of that time. The individual showed us appeal letters from the organization addressed “Dear friend.” He asked: “Who am I to these people?” To him, the generic appeal letter simply negated what he thought was a two-way relationship.

**9.) Stewardship—**“*Be reasonable about costs.*”

Definitions of what is “reasonable” vary, but everyone looks for evidence that the organization is efficiently managing its operations so that the costs of fundraising, communications and administration are acceptable. Intelligent donors (most people) don’t expect things to be done for free, nor do they expect ministry staff to live in poverty or work without resources. At the same time, none will accept a cavalier attitude towards expenses.

**10.) Respect—**“*I accept that you should ask me. You should accept that I may say ‘No.’*”

Respect is central to a genuine relationship between a supporter and an organization. People’s circumstances change. So do their priorities. Yet many donors think that organizations act presumptuously towards them, as though support in the past creates an obligation for support in the future. If they are confident that a “no” will be received in good faith and respected as a responsible choice, donors will be wide open to a new request or proposal, or an appeal for emergencies, or simply to renew past support.

**11.) Significance—**“*Show me how to do something important.*”

Nothing motivates people more than the desire to make a difference in the world. Dozens of fundraising texts tell us that “People give to people” and that “People give to mission and vision.” Behind those truisms is the deep desire to be part of changing things for the better. A direct connection between the donor and people being helped is very valuable.

**12.) Joy—**“*I need something to*

*celebrate in my heart, not just affirm in my head.”*

I deliberately use “joy” here instead of “pleasure.” Donors experience “joy” when they can connect their gift with an individual and know they are making a difference—and when making that difference feels like fulfilling their personal calling. In those moments, giving is elevated from a Christian duty to a joyful experience. Most organizations cannot provide that experience all the time. But giving donors opportunities for such occasions is a true gift to the donor that greatly enhances their sense of being in a mutual relationship.

That’s our list. Maybe there are more than a dozen desires and donors are affected by other factors and have a variety of motives. But by and large, it’s not gifts and premiums, and it’s not even recognition and applause that attract people—what appeals to them are a dozen qualities that help them be sure they are being good stewards and making that crucial difference in the world.

Meanwhile, back in the comfortable living room of my genial host. “What’s the most satisfying gift you ever made?”

The briefest pause, then he told me about a gifted young man unable to afford the advanced education that would make the most of his gifts. “I paid for his education,” my host said. I know of the person in question, who has made an enormous contribution in his profession and has himself been a very generous supporter of Christian ministries and charities.

I saw the light in the eyes of the man whose gift made it possible. Now, 20 years and hundreds of donations later, the satisfaction remains—because many of the dozen desires were fulfilled through that single event. ■

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