

# THREE SIMPLE QUESTIONS THAT GET DONORS TO GIVE

Master this approach and you'll save time, increase income, and create long-lasting donor bonds.

By Ellen Bristol

**Y**ou know it's important to listen more than you talk when you're out there cultivating donors. But are you listening for the right information? Do you know what questions will give you the answers you want to hear? Asking the right questions the right way changes the donor-cultivation game in big ways, to the advantage of both parties.

## THE THREE SIMPLE QUESTIONS

Whoever your prospects are, there are three questions you should always ask them. These questions will provide you with dozens of conversation starters and deliver probing insights. They'll help prospects reveal their deep needs, concerns, and expectations so you know how – and *whether* – to cultivate them.

**1. The Success Question**, to elicit the donor's positive motivators

This question is fundamental: "What do you want to achieve?" Like all three questions, these few short words can keep your prospect talking for hours. Here are some variations of this question:

**What inspires** you to give to charity? What causes or missions are most likely to draw your attention? Why?

**What do you want your gifts** to accomplish?

**Why** is that important to you?

**If the nonprofit that you support** were to be completely successful, what would that do for you? Why would that be important to you?

## Exercises to Test the Three Questions

For each of the three simple questions, do the following:

**List answers** you think your funders (donors, grantors, corporate partners) would give you if you asked this question.

**What would the prospect** actually say?

**How could you use what's been said** to qualify the person as a good or bad prospect?

**If you don't know the answers**, first guess; then go find out.

“Are you listening for the right information?”

As you can see, the success question alone will open up enormous amounts of back-and-forth discussions with your prospect; and it will also work with a current customer. In fact, there's no limit to the times you can use some variation of the success question.

If you're interviewing a current donor, it's legitimate to ask specific questions about your organization, such as, "What inspires you to give to us year after year?" and "Why is our organization so important to you?" Current donors are the best possible source for learning what will motivate future donors.

**2. The Avoid Question**, to elicit the donor's negative motivators

The second question – "What do you want to avoid?" – elicits the flip-side of the first question, giving more perspective into motivation. It offers many variations:

**When you think of charities you have supported** (or currently support), what issues do you want those charities to resolve?

**What is it about these issues** that bothers or concerns you so much? How do your feelings of concern affect your charitable decisions?

**What's at stake** if your preferred charities aren't able to achieve their missions?

**What do you think or fear might happen** if these issues aren't resolved?

**Why is that important** to you?

**NOTE:** Some people respond better to the success question, while some open up and exhibit more trust with the avoid question. Asking both questions produces more complete insights and engages trust more deeply and quickly. The avoid question is highly unexpected, demonstrating your meaningful grasp of and respect for the prospect's reasons for charitable giving. Use both approaches.

“Do you know what answers you want to hear?”

## THE FOUR-STEP QUESTIONING SYSTEM

The following four steps will help you use the three questions to best advantage. As you read through the four steps, think of a specific prospect. Use that prospective funder as your “case study.” Write down how you would execute each step, with that funder in mind.

### STEP 1: PLAN FOR QUESTIONING.

Before you ask any questions, figure out what you’re trying to accomplish. Ask yourself:

**Who am I questioning?** Make sure you’re talking to the right person – the decision maker.

**What does this funder want?** The answer will depend on the type of funder. For instance:

- **Corporations** want to market their services and be seen as good corporate citizens.
- **Grant-making foundations** want to invest in organizations that will prosper.
- **Individual donors** are motivated by a wide range of issues, everything from a passionate commitment to your cause to a desire to hobnob with the rich and famous. The only way to find out? *Ask them.*

**What answers am I looking for?** Knowing the answers you want to hear, before you hear them, will improve your fundraising confidence and shorten your cycle times. If you don’t get the answers you want, cut your losses, and move on.

### STEP 2: ASK.

Go ahead and ask your three questions. Be direct without being confrontational. Prospects already know you’re there to see if they’re likely to give you a charitable gift. There’s no need to pussy-foot around.

### STEP 3: LISTEN AND EVALUATE.

Pay attention and listen actively. As you listen, ask yourself a few questions, such as the following.

**What did you hear** (the facts, the things the prospect actually said)?

**What does that tell you** (the meaning behind the facts)?

**Can you fulfill** their expectations?

**Are their expectations and yours in alignment?** In other words, can you provide the service, support, recognition,

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### 3. The Right Charity Question, to elicit donor expectations

With this question, you ask, “What helps you decide which charities to support?” Its purpose is to find out how the prospect makes the decision to give. Some variations:

**How do you choose** the charities you want to support? What would you have to see or hear from a nonprofit in order for you to make a significant commitment?

**What would a charity need to show you**, after you’ve made your gift, to convince you that you had made a wise investment?

**When selecting a charity**, what is uppermost in your mind?

**Have you ever decided not to invest in a charity**, or even withdrawn your support from one? Why did that happen?

**When you think about other charities** that you have supported or currently support, what do you like best about them? Why is that important to you?

**What about charities that disappointed you** or that you would be reluctant to invest in? How and why did they disappoint you?

## WHY THESE QUESTIONS WORK

The three simple questions elevate the fundraiser to the level of peer with the prospective funder. These questions make it easy to open the conversation and begin relationships. And they tell you what your donors think and feel – in your donors’ language.

These three questions change the conversation to one of respectful interest centered on donors and their reasons for giving, whether those reasons are personal advancement, reputation-building, desire to redress wrongs, or any other sentiment that provokes charitable giving. Questions like these create an atmosphere that gives both parties permission to say, “We’re not really right for one another,” and still part on good terms. And that answer is a desirable one indeed, considering the cost of your scarce and precious time.

visibility, or whatever seems to be most important to this donor prospect?

**What actions or responses** would be appropriate at this time, based on your answers to these questions?

#### STEP 4: RESPOND.

This is where you really begin to gain trust. As you take the fourth step, keep your focus on the donor and not on your own needs.

**Summarize** what you heard. “If I understand you correctly, you said this and that, and so on. Did I get that right?”

**Ask for clarification** if necessary. “In other words, . . . Am I correct? Oh, I misunderstood, could you clarify for me?”

**Commit to a response.** “OK, I think I’ve got it. You would like to know something about such and such, how we produce these outcomes/those statistics, what other major funders support us, etc. etc. . . . Let me tell you . . . / I’ll get back to you . . . / I’ll provide you with that . . .” Then, keep your promises!

#### OMG – THEY SAID YES! NOW WHAT?

Sometimes these simple questions succeed beyond expectations and the prospect leaps ahead to offer financial support. When that happens, how should you respond?

“The right questions tell you how – and whether – to cultivate donors.”

## Creative Fundraising Idea

### HELP PEOPLE OWN THE DAY

With the Own-a-Day fundraising strategy, you can gain new income by naming a day after someone. It’s simple: All you’ll need to do is place that person’s name on your organization’s channels (website, e-mails, Facebook page, Twitter account, etc.) throughout that day. Get the word out that people and businesses can use the Own-a-Day opportunity to honor someone or celebrate a birthday, anniversary, or other special day. It’s up to you to decide what to charge based on the profit you’d like to earn and what you think people will pay.


The James V. Brown Library in Williamsport, Pennsylvania, has successfully implemented this concept, selling 120 days a year for an annual revenue of over \$12,000. For details, plus other fundraising ideas, see *New Revenue Sources for Libraries & Nonprofits* (American Library Association, ala.org).

“Current donors are the best possible source for learning what will motivate future donors.”

First, take a deep breath. Falling down and kissing the prospect’s loafers is probably not a good reaction.

Now, test for clarification. It’s all right to say something like, “Are you saying you’d like to support us?” If the answer is yes, first say thanks and then start working on the details – how much, when, for what. Make sure that you understand their expectations and that they understand your gift acceptance policies, payment methods, stewardship, and recognition practices.

#### REMEMBER: FUNDRAISING IS EVERYONE’S JOB

Fundraising results belong to the organization as a whole and thus require organizational strategies. Get everybody into the act – board, paid staff, volunteers. The benefits are worth it. 



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### Building the Funding Relationship

For more, see these and many other fundraising articles at [NonprofitWorld.org](http://NonprofitWorld.org):

**Deeper Donor Relationships = Increased Contributions** (Vol. 26, No. 4)

**Nonprofits & Funders: Two Sides of the Same Coin?** (Vol. 24, No. 4)

**Turning the Direct Ask into Gold** (Vol. 30, No. 1)

**How to Foster a Positive Funding Relationship** (Vol. 32, No. 4)

**For Long-Term Stability, Look to Corporations** (Vol. 32, No. 4)

**Transform Your Impact: Funding That Gets Results** (Vol. 32, No. 1)

Also see Learning Institute programs on-line: Resource Development and O for Opportunity: Exploring New Revenue Opportunities for Nonprofits ([NonprofitWorld.org/LearningInstitute](http://NonprofitWorld.org/LearningInstitute)).