

Three Keys to Building Relationships in Life (and with Your Donors)

What's the best way to foster meaningful connections? These simple techniques hold the secret.

By Zach Shefska

Philanthropy tends to be fairly transactional (I give you some money, you send me a year-end appeal) and often not very relational (I give you some money, you ask me about my life story and connection to your mission). This could be (and most likely is) a contributing factor to dismal donor retention rates.

That's in part because genuine relationships are hard to develop. Dr. Robin Dunbar, an evolutionary psychologist at the University of Oxford and one of the foremost researchers on "friendship," is credited with the creation of "Dunbar's number." The number represents the approximate size of an individual's social circle. (It's a range between 100 and 200.) But, more interesting is Dunbar's research on close relationships. Fifteen, that's the number of close relationships – including family – a human being tends to have. That's not that many. Yet, when you think about your own social circle and start to count off the names, it sounds about right.

“Ground zero is listening.”

What impact does that have on our task to cultivate meaningful relationships with donors? A lot, actually. In part it suggests that donors may not have the capacity to maintain a “top 15” relationship with your organization. It also reinforces the notion that as fundraisers, we have to be extremely cognizant of our every interaction with a donor. Let's identify three ways we can do this in our lives and in our interactions with constituents.

1. Be a Strategic Listener

Ground zero of relationship building is listening. Strategic listening is simply using techniques to comprehend what someone is saying. Some of the “best” techniques are relatively easy to employ.

For example, there are “**before-listening**” strategies, in which you connect with relevant content and predict what you might learn while you're listening. A good example is researching donors before calling them. What information about them do you already know? If there's a note in the database that Jane loves baseball, be prepared to connect with her on that topic.

“Ask “Why” five times.”

There are also “**during-listening**” strategies, such as these:

Listen carefully to the answers people give to your questions. These answers will feed into future questions and help you identify a pattern and flow in your conversation.

Take notes. Sure, that's a bit tricky when you're face-to-face with someone, but don't be ashamed to write down critical pieces of information even if that means taking your eyes off your conversational partner. If you explain that you're taking a few notes because you don't want to forget crucial information, people will understand. In fact, they'll feel flattered that you think their comments are note-worthy. Seeing that you care about their views, they'll trust you more.

Re-listen and backtrack your conversation. Don't be afraid to ask the same question twice, or even three times, and don't hesitate to ask for clarification regarding an earlier point or comment.

Then of course, there are “**post-listening**” strategies. After listening to someone, distill the information you collected in the following ways:

Respond to the important points made by your conversational partner. Reinforce those points with which you're in agreement.

Summarize what has been said, and ask if you've misheard or omitted anything important.

Extend the conversation after you're back in your office by finding materials relevant to what you just discussed. Send some of these materials to your conversational partner with a note reiterating how much you enjoyed your conversation.

2. Why, Why, Why, Why, Why?

What does auto manufacturing have to do with developing relationships? More than you might think. Toyota Motor Corporation has a core principle we can apply in our lives: “Ask ‘why’ five times about every matter.” That's the trick (one of many) that allowed Toyota to become one of the most successful corporations in modern history. Toyota's application of the technique and steadfastness in implementing it speaks volumes to its power.

In one-to-one relationships, asking why (many times) produces the same results it does in the corporate world: You get to understand the root cause of a problem, and that is unbelievably powerful. The “five why’s” technique deepens your understanding, gives you important information, and encourages your conversational partner to open up to you.

3. Use Tech to Create Good Processes

When you work for an organization, you have to struggle to keep up with the sheer quantity of relationships you need to develop. Major-gift officers can attest to this being true (too many prospects in a portfolio is just part of the fun!). The only way to survive in such an environment is to create processes and procedures to support your cultivation efforts. That includes relying on technology to boost your efficiency.

Take, for example, your donor database. It’s a wonderful tool for building meaningful relationships. When you need to be refreshed on “What is Jim’s connection to our mission?” you should be able to check the database and get your answer. Your brain, albeit an amazing computer, isn’t the best at remembering things. That’s why you need processes and procedures to help. 

Zach Shefska (zshefska@fundraisingreportcard.com) oversees the Fundraising Report Card (fundraisingreportcard.com), a division of MarketSmart. The Report Card is a free tool that empowers fundraisers to make data-driven fundraising decisions.

Success Factors for Relationship Building

Forge productive relationships with pointers from these articles (NonprofitWorld.org):

How to Keep from Losing Donors: A Self-Assessment (Vol. 35, No. 1)

Tips for Choosing Relationship-Management Software (Vol. 28, No. 6)

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

Be a Better Leader by Being a Careful Listener (Vol. 37, No. 1)

Face to Face (Vol. 14, No. 1)

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

Top Can’t-Miss Resources for Nonprofits (Vol. 34, No. 3)

Two Surprising Ways to Broaden Your Reach Online (Vol. 32, No. 4)

Engage Donors with Social Media (Vol. 33, No. 3)

Also see Learning Institute programs on-line: Resource Development and O for Opportunity: Exploring New Revenue Opportunities for Nonprofits (snpo.org/li).



please get in touch...

We would love to hear your response to anything in **Nonprofit World**, your comments about any aspect of the nonprofit sector, and your concerns about your daily work. Please get in touch in any of the following ways:

Drop us a note at: Letters to the Editor, Nonprofit World, P.O. Box 44173, Madison, Wisconsin 53744-4173.

E-mail to: muehrcke@charter.net

Please include your name, organization, address, phone number, and e-mail address. If you’d like your comments to appear anonymously, please let us know. We look forward to hearing from you!



WHAT’S UP ONLINE?

Would you like to discuss some of the issues addressed in **Nonprofit World** with other nonprofit professionals? Do you have questions to ask or expertise of your own to share?

Society for Nonprofits is actively engaged on LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter. Find us on your favorite social media platform by visiting **social.snpo.org**

If you have any questions, contact Jason Chmura at jchmura@NonprofitWorld.org