

Are You Using These Drivers of Fundraising Success?

Rank your organization on the strength of these fundraising drivers.

By Karen Eber Davis

What's a fundraising-success driver? It's a habitual activity that inspires donor engagement. In many ways, drivers are like the transportation options and highways around Disney World. They provide quick ways for donors and supporters to arrive, linger, and get to the good stuff at your nonprofit.

Rate the Strength of These Five Drivers

Rank yourself from 1 (weak) to 10 (strong) on these five fundraising drivers at your nonprofit. How well does your organization accomplish the following?

1. Attract people who have an interest in your cause and the means to fund it.

Donors move, drift away, and die over time. To stay even, you must expand your prospect list by at least 10% yearly. If your goal is to grow your contributions, you need even more newcomers.

How much did your contact list grow last year? What activities gathered new people? Does this driver need to be built, replaced, or refurbished?

2. Engage newcomers.

Once you catch their attention, you want people to form a web of connections with your nonprofit. This process begins with a hello and ends, years from now, with a bequest. From the donors' point of view, this driver offers valuable opportunities to get involved and not just "drive by" your nonprofit.

For example, getting newcomers to attend an event is step one of your engagement process. At the event, they'll learn about your organization and decide to support it. After these attendees make a gift, you send a personal thank-you note with a brochure. Then a staff member sends an e-mail inviting them to an open house, and a while later a volunteer leaves a voicemail reminder. At the open house, they become further engaged as they learn of more ways they can get involved with your cause. Perhaps you arrange for them to meet organizational leaders, see a program in action, or tour your facilities. With additional encouragement, the newcomer becomes a board member and later leaves a bequest.

Throughout all these steps, don't forget to lavish supporters with appreciation. There are countless

stories about donors who feel unthanked, unacknowledged, unappreciated, and overlooked. Make sure you avoid that pitfall by taking every opportunity to say thank you.

What is your process for transforming strangers into donors who eventually leave bequests? Where are there gaps in your engagement process? How successful are you at each step?

3. Provide value that makes people want to give.

This driver recognizes that, on the surface, people want to be left alone. Underneath, they seek to make a difference. It's a bit like going out for a regular run, walk, or bike ride. For the first bit, your body complains, "I don't want to do this." After a while, that voice quiets, and you find satisfaction in moving.

Similarly, donors don't want to be asked for money. Yet they want to change lives, give back, help someone in need, and make the world a better place. Measure this driver by evaluating the number and focus of opportunities offered to donors and prospects.

For example, the Kravis Center for the Performing Arts treats its major donors to a catered lunch with the executive director and board chair – a straightforward offer of value. The payoff? High renewal rates, loyalty, and an increased likelihood of these donors leaving bequests.

You *might* offer luncheons or new events as part of this driver, but that might be silly with your schedule. You'll be delighted to learn that you probably already offer or can quickly provide opportunities that inform, inspire, and uplift donors. For example, suppose you read a new research article with results that support the approach you use. In your update to donors, you send a paragraph about this research, provide a link to it, and explain why you found the research significant. When you set up a call with the researchers as part of your professional education, you invite interested donors to join you.

The key to making this driver work? Make these donor engagements a regular activity.

Many nonprofit leaders worry about donor burnout. Adding more donors is the first cure. Another is switching your perspective and refining what you offer to "your regulars." If they don't know about the kinds of value you offer, you're not sharing enough.



“Expand your prospect list by at least 10% yearly.”

“On the surface, people want to be left alone.”

When you offer opportunities, do you focus on providing value to donors? How will you make this driver one of your organization's habits?

4. Share results so people know how contributions changed lives.

The fourth fundraising driver is the chance for donors to know the results of their philanthropy. Activities around this driver mix gratitude and recognition with proof. Proof can include testimonials in your newsletter, statistical evidence, photos, and video outcomes.

Sharing what happened with donations serves many purposes, including:

You affirm donors (even if they remain anonymous).

You clarify what otherwise might not be obvious: Donations magnify other financial contributions, since they buy the extras that make the difference.

You motivate prospective donors.

You attract new donors (when you combine this step with marketing and publicity).

What does your organization do to share your results with donors? Do you offer donors opportunities to see their philanthropy in action? Do you reserve your biggest public thanks to the donors who invested when the results were a dream? Do all donors feel you've used their gifts as they hoped you would?

5. Give people a chance to make friends.

Inter-donor relationships are your fifth driver. Relationships between donors bind people to your nonprofit and encourage them to remain.

Donor friendships introduce peer pressure and friendly competition. Both increase gifts.

One Habitat affiliate benefited from a “beat the other neighborhoods’ Habitat fundraising campaign.” Two donors who lived in different neighborhoods organized and drove these competitions.

This inter-donor driver reduces your labor. For example, friends call friends to make sure they bought tickets for your event. The inviting donors can't wait to tell you that their friends (and your prospects!) will attend your event.

How else do donor connections drive fundraising results? Quality friendships provide donors with additional value. They reduce donor churn by creating multiple contacts. So, when your beloved development director departs, donors remain because of their relationships with others.

How will you be more intentional about encouraging donor friendships? How will you make this a habit so that your donor's connections flourish? How are you encouraging donors, volunteers, and newcomers to meet and get to know others? The good news is that some of this happens naturally by putting people in the same room (or in the same Zoom breakout room).

Move into Action

How did you rank your organization on these drivers? Don't be discouraged if several drivers need work. Building fundraising drivers isn't an easy or quick task. Success comes from planning, execution, testing, and tweaking. Pick one of these drivers to strengthen in the next 30 days. 

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Inspire People to Give

To be powerful, your donor-stewardship toolkit must transform people into educated, committed, and thoughtful donors. Read about ways to enhance donors' lives while inspiring them to give (NonprofitWorld.org):

The Five Most Dangerous Fundraising Fallacies (Vol. 32, No. 2)

What's the "Right" Amount of Communication with Donors? (Vol. 36, No. 4)

How to Obtain More Bequests (Vol. 23, No. 2)

Five Things that Aren't Fundraising (Vol. 38, No. 2)

Use Data to Cultivate Long-Term Donor Engagement (Vol. 38, No. 4)

Harnessing the Internet to Raise Funds (Vol. 31, No. 2)

The Best Way to Tell Your Organization's Story? Capture It on Video (Vol. 35, No. 4)

E-Mail Mistakes that Could Be Damaging Your Fundraising (Vol. 36, No. 2)

This Is How It Feels when You Don't Acknowledge a Donor (Vol. 37, No. 3)

Three Keys to Building Relationships in Life (and with Your Donors) (Vol. 38, No. 1)

Newsletter Strategies that Will Open Donors' Hearts & Wallets (Vol. 36, No. 4)

What Are the Three Most Boring Words in Fundraising Appeals? (Vol. 36, No. 2)