

What's the Secret to Asking for Bequests?

Can a small organization obtain meaningful legacy gifts?

Q We're a small, fairly new nonprofit organization, just beginning to raise the funds we need to implement our mission. I've been told that we should be asking donors to leave money to our organization in their wills, but how do we do so? We don't have an attorney or anyone familiar with planned giving on staff, and we don't have the funds to hire someone to promote planned gifts. So how do we get started? Please help!

A If you're serious about your organization's future, it's essential to start asking for bequests. It's cheap and easy; it requires one extra letter a year, at a minimum. And best of all, you don't have to acquire any new donors; your best bequest prospects are already in your database. They're those who've already given, especially those who make larger than average gifts.

It's a serious mistake, I believe, to categorize charitable bequests as "planned gifts." It lumps humble bequests – which mostly originate from middle-class households, research shows – in with a bunch of sophisticated financial products that only the wealthy and their advisors care about or understand.

Nor are planned giving officers the right people to sell bequests, in my view. They're technical experts, sometimes lawyers, qualified to explain the arcane tax and income advantages of CRUTs, CRATs, CLATs, and Ghoul CLTs. When someone makes an inquiry, planned giving officers respond with info. Which means they're reactive, not proactive.

Then who should market bequests? The annual fund people! They're in regular touch with the middle of the giving pyramid, the stratum from whence most bequests emerge.

A bequest program can be as simple as including a P.S. in all your communications, something like: "Have you remembered to include our organization in your will? Meet with your lawyer or financial advisor to arrange it. It's quick, easy, and will create a huge amount of good in the world."

It's a truism of all marketing: You sell benefits, not features. Showing someone how to establish a true and lasting legacy is a benefit. "Planned gifts" is a feature. **S**

Tom Ahern (a2bmail@aol.com), fundraising expert at moceanic (moceanic.com) is the author of 20 Questions: The Donor Communications Test (aherncomm.com)



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Raising Money without Many Funds

Even a small, new organization can make great strides in raising funds with the right tools. Begin here (NonprofitWorld.org):

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

Five Simple Ideas for Developing Fundraising Results (Vol. 29, No. 3)

Can Your Website Help You Gain Legacy Gifts? (Vol. 41, No. 3)

Cracking The Diverse-Income Code (Vol. 35, No. 1)

How to Measure Fundraising Success (Vol. 31, No. 2)

Why Focus on Bequests? The Facts Tell the Story (Vol. 36, No. 4)

Is Your Legacy Society Dreary Or Dynamic? (Vol. 40, No. 1)