



Listen Your Way to Major Gifts: Power Questions Your Donors Will Love

Use these donor-centered questions to gain major gifts.

By Gail Perry

Here's a natural, friendly, and successful approach to major-gift fundraising. It's a way to develop warm, easy relationships with your major-gift prospects – relationships where they feel heard and understood, relationships that build trust and credibility.

Why Ask Questions?

When you ask donor-centered questions, you let donors lead the way. They feel entirely in control. They don't feel "presented to" or pushed. As a result, they're much more likely to give generous donations from the heart, and they'll be with you for the long term.

This is a conversation to have with people who are already donating to your organization (although many of the questions will work with any prospective donor). With these questions, you're accomplishing two important things:

You're deciding whether to ask current donors to give a bigger gift – to become major donors. With this approach, you're continually "qualifying" donors in terms of their interests. Should you continue to invest time with them? Or should you turn to another donor prospect?

At the same time, these conversational questions will inspire your donors, build their interest, and open the asking conversation.

Which Questions Should You Ask?

Here are 10 questions that will make the most of your time with major-gift prospects:

1. What inspired your gift?

We do a lot of explaining and sharing information with our donors. But we don't ask donors to talk to us enough.

Think of yourself as a detective. Your donor has contributed to your nonprofit for a specific reason. It's up to you to find out why.

It may be something in her past. It may be a friend who is influencing her interest. It may be that your message caught her interest. It could be something deep in her heart, part of her personal moral values.

When you discover why your major-gift prospect made a gift, you can create a deeper stewardship experience for her. You can acknowledge and thank her in a personal way that speaks to her uniquely.

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2. I'd love to know your story.

Your donor has an amazing story to tell about why she cares. She's probably dying to share her story. But no one is asking.

This question helps you find out if your donor is a wildly passionate True Believer in your cause.

Just how interested or enthusiastic is she – or not? This question helps you qualify your donor and determine if you should spend more time with her – or focus your efforts on someone else.

3. Then what happened?

You really do want to know as much as you can about your donors. Encourage them to keep talking by asking this question. Remember, you honor your donors by listening to them.

No one listens any more. You are making a gift to your donor of your presence – by holding the space for her to share details about her story.

4. What are your impressions of our organization?

Asking people for their “impressions” gives them a wide open door to share whatever is at the top of their minds. What do they really think about your nonprofit, your colleagues, and your own work? Are they satisfied with their interactions with you? Just how committed are they? Asking this question is like opening a box of chocolates – you never know what you're going to get!

You may be surprised by their answers. Only by finding out what's on their minds will you be able to move forward in trusting relationships that might culminate in major gifts. You'll also get clues on how to design personalized experiences that will engage them and make them happy.



“Think of yourself as a detective.”

5. How did you come to be so generous?

This question is from the very smart Kent Stroman's book, *Mastering the Art of Conversational Fundraising*. It's a great question because it will tell you about your prospects' priorities. What organizations are they giving to? What are their commitments? Who else may be influencing their giving decisions?

If you want to design a successful ask, you need all this information. Again, you don't want to assume that people are “A” level prospects when they're really “C” or “D” levels because they're committed to other causes.

Most major-gift prospects are happy to share their philanthropic vision with you and they appreciate being asked. It creates openness and trust when you discuss these issues. They'll be flattered that you consider them “generous” – and will want to live up to that characterization by displaying their altruism.

6. Ask for advice and input with questions such as these:

- **How can we fund** this project for the community?
- **Who should be** at the table?
- **Who would be good donors** to support this effort?
- **Who can open the door** and make an introduction?
- **Do you think a certain donor** in our community would be interested?

These questions engage people in the strategy part of your fundraising effort. When they start offering advice and assistance, they feel like insiders. In a way, they join your team. Their interest grows as they strategize with you. Plus, their advice is likely to be very helpful.

7. Could you see yourself becoming more involved in our organization?

People may ask what you mean by this question, and you can mention all the areas of potential involvement, such as volunteering, serving on a committee, or becoming more financially involved. They'll tell you what they're interested in doing – but only if you ask.

8. If you made a major gift, what would you like to accomplish?

When you have engaged, interested donors who have the capacity to give, it's perfectly fine to ask them this question outright. You are, in fact, a fundraiser. And your role is to “facilitate” your donors' interest in giving to your organization. It's your job. Of course you should be having discussions like this with your donors.

“You honor your donors by listening to them.”

Make no mistake, your donors probably have very clear notions of what they want to accomplish. They’ve probably been pondering this question all along.

9. What part of our work interests you most?

Now it’s time to get specific. Exactly what part of your work is your donor most passionate about? Is it the kids? Is it the whole family? Is it your service network or finances? You never know until you ask.

Many fundraisers make the mistake of assuming their donor’s area of interest – and then they’re surprised when the donor says no to an ask.

Once you find out people’s interests, you can help them learn more and more about their favorite areas. They’ll enjoy what they’re learning as they get more and more involved.


When you find out people’s passions and interests, you can design personalized experiences that will delight them and bring them joy. Then it’s easy to ask the tenth, all-important question.

10. Would you like to know more about how you could impact this project?

This is the “permission to ask” query. All your earlier questions lead up to this one. It’s an important question, because it clearly opens the ask conversation.

Always “ask for permission to ask.” That lets donors lead the way. If they’re ready to have this discussion, they’ll let you know. And presto! You’re discussing how much they want to donate.

Typically, a donor will say, “Sure, I’d like to know how I could make an impact.” And you can have some suggestions at hand. Be ready to provide gift suggestions at three different levels. For example, “Well, you could help 100 more kids with a gift of \$xxx, or you could help us expand our reach into a new city with a gift of \$yyy, or you could endow our program area and make sure this work is continued for good, with a gift of \$zzz.”

Then sit quietly and let the donor consider these options. You’ve developed an open, trusting relationship by carefully listening. Once the idea of a gift is on the table, keep listening to your donor’s ideas, and answer any questions. You’ll know what the next steps need to be. Pretty soon you will have closed the gift. You’ll have a happy donor and new funding for your mission. 

Gail Perry Group inspires nonprofits around the world with cutting-edge fundraising strategies and new tools to make fundraising more successful and more fun. Find smart strategies to help you raise tons of money at gailperrygroup.com.



Know the Facts about Fundraising Today

Many nonprofit leaders and board members don’t realize how fundraising has changed. Their fundraising goals and tactics are mired in the last century.

Here are the facts:

- 1. Today’s donors** have no attention span.
- 2. Small gifts** are dropping away.
- 3. Mega gifts** are increasing.
- 4. Boards often stand in the way** of fundraising success.
- 5. Fundraising teams** are chasing too many different strategies.

Watch for “Top 10 Things to Understand about How Fundraising Really Works Today” in the next issue of *Nonprofit World*. We’ll help you get everyone in your organization on the same page about what fundraising is and isn’t. Our guide will provide you with a coherent set of strategies that everyone can agree on.

Continue Your Major-Gift Journey

Learn more about asking for gifts and relating to donors with these articles from NonprofitWorld.org:

- What to Do When Your Potential Donor Says No** (Vol. 36, No. 3)
- Turning the Direct Ask into Gold** (Vol. 30, No. 1)
- Debunking the Myth of Bill Gates: Finding Major Donors** (Vol. 16, No. 2)
- How to Foster a Positive Funding Relationship** (Vol. 32, No. 4)
- What’s the Best Way to Recognize a Major Donor?** (Vol. 31, No. 2)
- How to Impress the Wired Wealthy** (Vol. 30, No. 3)
- The Perfect Gift for a Major Donor** (Vol. 36, No. 1)
- The Word You Hear Most Often in Fundraising** (Vol. 28, No. 4)
- Top 10 Trends: How Major Donors Are Changing & What to Do about It** (Vol. 31, No. 4)
- Be a Better Leader by Being a Careful Listener** (Vol. 37, No. 1)
- Your Board Can Help You Gain Major Gifts** (Vol. 39, No. 2)