
✦ Connecting Meaningfully with Donors

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Author: Chris McLeod, Columnist



Chris McLeod is Executive Director of The Greater Charlotte Cultural Trust, a supporting foundation of Foundation For The Carolinas. An attorney with fifteen years of fundraising experience, Chris works with the ASC and its 24 cultural partners and their donors to build endowments through planned giving. Chris also serves as Chair for Leave A Legacy-Charlotte Region, a public awareness campaign dedicated to promoting the idea that everyone is capable of leaving a charitable bequest.

The news coverage of a handful of gifts to charity these past few months has left me with that Christmas morning feeling. I am not talking about the butterflies you feel when you have stayed up half the night, drinking coffee, eating chocolate while trying to assemble toys for your kids. I'm talking about the thrill of witnessing people inspired to make a difference by making an unsolicited gift to charity – like Keith Brunnemer's unsolicited gift of \$75,000 to the Mental Health Association of Central Carolinas that he gave after reading about the agency's reduction in funding from the United Way. How about the extraordinary estate gift from retired CMS school teacher Nell Rose Bates who left over \$400,000 to her church, Selwyn Avenue Presbyterian, and \$1.2 million to support affordable housing at Foundation For The Carolinas?

Remember the "Rogue Santas" who rode around giving out \$100 bills to people down on their luck? Read between the lines and listen carefully, you'll understand what the donors are saying. Through these spontaneous and joyful acts of giving, donors are telling us that they are tired of our bake sale fundraising tactics, the raffle tickets and galas. Donors are demanding a closer connection with the impact of their gift. Without waiting to be asked, these donors created opportunities to make a difference in ways that are meaningful to them. If we are listening, we might ask the following questions:

Maybe something is wrong with the way we ask?

Many of our organizations host black-tie galas and silent auctions and sell raffle tickets. There is nothing inherently wrong with these events unless such events become the fundraising strategy. Event fundraising may have worked before Charlotte was home to The Panthers, The Bobcats, the Blumenthal Performing Arts Center and before there

was so much competition for leisure time. That may have changed now. We are also missing an opportunity to engage folks who don't care for these events. On those rare occasions when we do make personal visits with donors, it is almost always during a capital campaign. Think about it. We usually show up with "a shopping list of things we need". We often bring a VIP (Very Important Person) along who may have a business relationship with the prospective donor (read: leverage). We rarely venture off script and ask the donor what is meaningful to them about the work that we do.

Maybe we need to change the way communicate?

While it would hardly qualify as "innovative", it's considered best practice by many of the leading nonprofits. It is a conversation – a two-way dialogue that requires that we listen to our donors. Often referred to as major gift development, it is a lot less work than planning a gala for 500 people, but it requires seeing donors differently and a different staffing model. Many nonprofits are making dramatic reductions and cutting back their communications budgets during these challenging times. Few understand that they are dramatically reducing their connections with their donors. Be careful. Those newsletters and other mailings "communications" are how you connect with your donors – and communicate the impact of their gifts on your organization.

Maybe we need to change the way we cultivate?

A simple way to start cultivating a major gift is to visit your longtime donors who have been giving to your organization for 10 years or more and ask them what is meaningful to them about the work that you do. Then shut up and listen.

Maybe we are asking the wrong people?

Brunnemer and Bates are not names we recognize. What does this say about our current development efforts? Most of us are chasing the same 500 people all over town, in spite of a record influx of over 250,000 newcomers to Charlotte in the last 5 years. Don't confuse wealth with a willingness to give. There are scores of teachers, small business owners and other hard working folks who are hungry to make a difference. It is clear we need to do something different. I am reminded of a magnet on a colleague's door that reads "Always make new mistakes." Maybe it is time we try making some new mistakes.

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