



I Just Called to Say I Love You: Board Members as Stewards

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By Nanette Fridman and Jennifer Weinstock

We all want our board members to be focused on development – to do those solicitations! So it's not surprising that solicitation training is the most requested board training. However, we can't stop there if we want our donors to renew their gifts next year. We need our board to be trained on and focusing on stewardship as well.

Stewardship is all about maintaining and evolving long-term relationships with donors by taking the time to recognize, thank and educate them. Effective stewardship ensures that donors know their gift is appreciated, valued and impactful, and is about engaging the donor so that he or she feels even more positive about the organization than when they made their gift. And who better to participate in this work than your board members?

Donors who only hear from organizations with financial requests disengage quickly. The goals of stewardship are: (1) repeat giving, (2) giving in increasing amounts, (3) deepening the donors commitment to the organization, for example, from gala attendee to annual campaign donor or from annual campaign donor to endowment and (4) asking the donor to engage in organizational leadership.

What is your organization's donor retention rate? What percentage of 2014 donors made repeat gifts in 2015? What percentage of your 2014 donation dollars were raised again in 2015? If you need a push to focus on stewardship, take a look at your statistics. Make sure all board members understand that fundraising data is much more than the total dollars raised per year. They need to become familiar with the many ways to evaluate the effectiveness of your development program.

Stewardship is the primary weapon against donor attrition. It is easier and more cost effective to retain your current donors than find new donors. With donor gift retention rates at 47% (meaning 53% donor attrition) according to the Fundraising Effectiveness Project of the Association of Fundraising Professionals and the Center of Nonprofits and Philanthropy at the Urban Institute, every organization should be focused on stewardship as the way to retain donors as a top priority.

The chief executive and development professionals are the primary stewards, but they can't do it alone! To put a board stewardship effort in place:

- Assign each board member a list of donors with whom they will be responsible for being in touch throughout the year and showing them donor love.
- Next the development professional should work with the board members to come up with seven touches or moves they can use. The "moves" can be emails or mail of articles, songs, videos, reports, art, cards or personal notes; meetings with organizational insiders for input, briefings and updates; invitations to events; or opportunities to experience the programs or services and see the mission in action. The larger the donor, the more customization their stewardship will require.
- Once the development professional and steward create the moves, they should calendar them.
- As with all development activities, it is crucial that all contact with donors be reported to a central person who tracks the details in an electronic database.

Stewardship can also be very simple. Sometimes a quick phone call to let a donor know how much you appreciate their support or a note to update them on a new program is all you need. Many organizations don't make time for stewardship because it just seems like another "to do" on the list. Keep your stewardship strategies simple, personal and highly relational and make them easy for your board members to do by giving them a stewardship calendar/grid to use and a ping at the beginning of each month.

Engaging your donors year round in a personalized, authentic way around existing communications, events and programs promises to increase retention and deepen donors' connections to your organization, its mission and people.

Train your board in solicitation but don't forget to give them a stewardship portfolio as well. While some may shy from solicitation, everyone can steward.

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