Providing Recognition for Major Donors

Recognition is an expression of gratitude. When people are generous towards our organizations it is appropriate to communicate gratitude. Ordinary ways of recognizing gift commitments include formal letters, receipts, personal handwritten notes, phone calls and phone messages and/or when seen in person. We thank donors because, whether their gifts are modest or extraordinary in size, they contribute to the life and the betterment of our organization and our ability to fulfill our mission. Sometimes it is appropriate to express recognition above and beyond ordinary means of recognition.

When you judge it to be appropriate to recognize a donor in a unique way, it is advisable to consult with your donor before doing so. Propose to the donor how you wish to thank them. Such recognition can be a wonderful opportunity to touch their lives and to build up the life of your organization.

There is a wide continuum of donor preferences regarding recognition. Some are interested in receiving high levels of publicity as they want their gift to be widely known. Others want very little fanfare, strict anonymity on occasion. This range of preferences is something to which we should be sensitive so as to bring the appropriate recognition proposal to the donor. Once the donor indicates that they would accept additional recognition, then you organize the recognition in a way that honors the donor.

This graph illustrates the two ends of the spectrum of donor preferences to recognition. Consider the two axes of publicity and anonymity. Emerson, a Fortune 500 company based in the St. Louis area, has its headquarters situated in Ferguson, Missouri. When the tragic events around Michael Brown took place and with what transpired thereafter, Emerson's leadership wanted to be responsive and use the power of their philanthropy to help young people living in Ferguson and the surrounding communities. One of their commitments was made to the University of Missouri-St. Louis with a $1.5 million scholarship program. It was designed to help young people afford and pursue post-secondary education. Pictured is an advertisement representing the gift commitment. Emerson carefully crafted a publicity plan to get the announcement out as widely as possible, to inform the public that Emerson was partnering with several non-profits through a series of sizeable philanthropic commitments to help young people in those communities.

On the other axis there is golf course signage. The Normandie Golf Course was given to the University of Missouri-St. Louis through the support of a major donor. University representatives proposed to the donor that their name appear on the lower portion of the sign. Their response was, in this case, to decline all public recognition. Of course, UMSL honored their request, although the fundraising leadership was disappointed because they had hoped to extensively broadcast the news of this generous gift.

When a donor reaches an extraordinary philanthropic milestone or makes a truly extraordinary gift commitment, it provides your organization the opportunity to offer special recognition above and beyond the ordinary expressions of gratitude. We do this by personalizing the recognition to create unique memories for the donors and reinforce their importance to achieving the mission of your organization.

A generous couple associated with UMSL, both of whom were alumni, were longtime volunteers and as donors reached an extraordinary milestone of philanthropy. They were asked if the chancellor could organize an evening to enjoy their company and to express appreciation and they were agreeable. They asked that a special retired faculty member be invited. Several of their children and spouses of those children attended. Representatives of the university included the chancellor, the dean of the business college, and some advancement staff with spouses. The gathering was held at a club in St. Louis and it was a splendid evening. Champagne was served and toasts to the couple were offered by the chancellor and dean. Fine wine and a delicious meal were enjoyed. Then the donors took the opportunity to reflect upon talk about how vital and important their relationship with the university was to them. Afterwards, the couple expressed how deeply appreciative they were for the university putting forth the effort to honor them in this manner for their generosity. Since then, their generous support has continued.

Recognition is a means through which to celebrate remarkable levels of support for your organization and it reinforces the attachment of donors to your organization. Oftentimes, honoring a donor in a unique, personalized way can lead to future additional philanthropic support.

Recognition can also be an opportunity for the donors to inspire others to give. Donors who are reluctant to be publicly recognized often will agree to it, if they believe that having their gift made public may inspire others (especially their peers) to increase their philanthropy, too.

Recognition is an expression of gratitude. It is the right thing to do.