



# Raising Major Gifts—From \$250 to \$250,000

by Will Cordery

**AFTER BEING A VOLUNTEER AND MEMBER** of Amnesty International USA for more than nine years, I came on staff as their first major gift officer for the Southern region. My primary task in this position is to deepen relationships with current major donors across the 11-state region and identify major donor prospects.

As at many national nonprofit organizations, a major gift at Amnesty is defined as \$5,000 and up. A donor may not be giving at that level annually, but major donors have a history of some giving at that level or higher. Similarly, prospects for a major gift rarely start giving at a major level, but we have identified that they have the capacity (and, we hope, the interest) to do so.

I was previously the development director at Project South: Institute for the Elimination of Poverty and Genocide. There I was responsible for leading and/or overseeing all the organization's fundraising efforts, including direct mail membership, foundation grantwriting and cultivation, monthly giving, publication sales, fee-for-service, accounting, budgeting, website, marketing materials, fundraising events, and passing the hat. With the help of a member who had experience in major gifts fundraising and wanted to see Project South further diversify its income streams, in 2005 I instituted Project South's first major donor program.

Project South's founders and founding director were committed to creating an organization that was financially independent and supported by its base. They knew that the only way such a transformative organization could flourish and stay principled was to be primarily funded by its members and its community. That also meant that we wanted to create a major gift program that was accessible to many people—from wage workers to independently wealthy people. Thus, as with many grassroots groups, Project South defines a major gift as \$250 and up.

Although organizations like Amnesty International USA and Project South are on opposite ends of the spectrum in size and scale, the methods needed to raise a major gift are quite similar. The same theory and skills are applied to raising a \$250 major gift as a \$250,000 one—and for smaller groups, those skills can turn that \$250 gift into a \$5,000 donation.

One of the first things I learned about cultivating a donor prospect or stewarding a current donor is that you want them to hold three important elements: a relationship to the organization or its leadership, an interest in supporting its work (often identified by other charitable work they may support and through conversations with the prospect), and the capacity to make a larger donation. I still use these criteria in my prospecting, cultivation, and stewardship of new donors.

## Finding Your Prospects

I quickly learned during my time at Project South that organizations working in sparse areas of wealth and resources must collaborate with other organizations, groups, and communities in order to make real strides in advancing our collective mission for social justice. Our people and our resources stretch beyond our own neighborhood or our local metropolitan area. Similarly, at Amnesty, I find new prospects across the region. I look for them in three places:

**Among members.** Individuals or families who have made \$25, \$50, or \$100 annual donations for years but have never been asked for a major gift may be good prospects. I have major donors who currently give gifts of well over five figures who started supporting Amnesty with annual gifts of \$25 many years ago. There must be others like them.

**Individuals who support similar work or causes.** Some donors never knew that Amnesty's human rights programs or campaigns were in their realm of interest. Many of my donors are involved with or support other causes. Once you learn about a donor's other organizational affiliations, you may start to notice common threads in the work they support: women's rights, education, leadership development, environmental justice, local organizing projects, regional organizations, humanitarian aid, policy organizations, and so on.

**Research.** As fundraisers, we sometimes make assumptions about someone's capacity based solely on their job or a previous gift they made. Although these can be indicators of capacity, they don't always give the full picture. So I always start with a

**A COUPLE OF YEARS AGO**, I attended a reception for an organizational partner. At my table was a successful business executive of an international corporation. Not only did this person have an interest in supporting human rights work, he had a history of giving to human rights organizations, including Amnesty, and even had relationships with current and former leaders at Amnesty. However, his support for Amnesty had waned due to bad feelings from a relationship with a previous staff member who did not leave Amnesty on the best of terms.

I saw, however, that this person still had an interest in the work, the capacity to support it, and some relationship to the organization. It was key to move this prospect beyond his previous experience with Amnesty. This meant introducing him to new staff leadership, building a personal relationship with him myself, finding out what his philanthropic interests were when he was previously involved, and providing him with information on current work that was similar in scope and currently of interest to him.

Most important, I needed to be patient. Early on, this prospect warned me that he was willing to meet with me but was not interested in reengaging with the organization. The fact that he was even chatting with me and willing to meet with Amnesty staff was a sign that there was an opportunity to bring him back to the organization in a thoughtful and respectful way.

Over the span of 11 months, I continued to keep him updated on Amnesty's work and seek his counsel on how to expand visibility in the South. Eventually, I was able to set up a meeting between him and Amnesty's executive director. Our interactions gradually became more personal and engaging. He was moved by a few email updates I provided on recent Amnesty successes. He was even willing to meet again in person despite his busy schedule. One year after our initial meeting, he renewed his support to Amnesty with a major gift.

simple web search on the person or family and see what type of hits I get. But Google is just a starting point. Jobs, organizational affiliation, social media profiles, professional history and business relationships may all be found on LinkedIn or Plaxo. I often check campaign giving websites like NewsMeat to see if and what kind of political giving a person or family has done. Dig a bit further and you can find out if they have foundations or funds managed by foundations. If they do, you can sometimes learn what their assets or philanthropic giving is on sites

like The Foundation Center or GuideStar. (See the article "What You Don't Know Won't Help You: Major Gift Prospect Research" in this issue.)

Initial searches on Google have also given me insight into some of my donors' other philanthropic and charitable endeavors, such as serving on boards or fundraising committees for other organizations. Some may just have a history of giving sizeable gifts to your own organization and may warrant having in-person meetings about significantly increasing their support. Research can help identify if a member currently giving \$25 has the capacity to give more.

### **Being Personable and Having Patience**

Being patient and personable are critical to major gift fundraising. Giving a major gift is a mark of investment on the part of the donor, particularly new major donors. They want to feel good about the contribution they're making, they want to know it will have impact, and they want to trust the organization's leadership. Cultivating these assurances takes time. You'd never ask someone to marry on a first date and expect them to say yes. Some of the best and most fruitful relationships are the ones that develop over time and with mutual benefit. They are the ones where you both know each other well and have developed a mutual level of respect and trust.

### **DONORS WANT TO FEEL GOOD ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTION THEY'RE MAKING, THEY WANT TO KNOW IT WILL HAVE IMPACT, AND THEY WANT TO TRUST THE ORGANIZATION'S LEADERSHIP.**

I always keep in mind that donors are people. So I make it a priority to get to know both prospects and donors as much as they will allow. I want to know who they are, what they like to do, what moves them to support human rights and social movement. I always ask what first brought them to Amnesty International or even what inspired them to make their first major gift. So many of them have a compelling story or memory that can be quite beneficial for the organization to know.

More times than not, the causes that your donors support at their most generous levels typically involve a personal relationship with someone within the organization's leadership. This is where major gift officers, executive leadership team members, board members, executive directors, and even major donors play a critical role in fundraising for major gifts.

Amnesty has been intentional about investing in building our donor base, from \$25 to \$250,000. Having staff or volunteer lead-

ership devoted to major gift fundraising out in the field has been critical for meeting this goal. Previously, Amnesty had one staff person in New York and another in Los Angeles who managed and cultivated all relationships with major donors and prospects. Now, we have part-time and full-time major gift officers located around the country. As with grassroots organizing, major donor fundraising is most successful when you have real people building real relationships. We can know our supporters personally and they in turn have access to a person close by with whom they can talk about the work they're supporting. It is a mutual exchange that benefits both the organization and the donor and it is a relationship that can bring unexpected or increased support.

Here's an example of the benefits of closer relationships. One donor started as a direct mail member and after some years gave a major gift of \$5,000. Since then she had given much more modest gifts. After introducing myself through a letter and offering to have a phone conversation to answer any questions she may have about our work, she and I began to exchange emails periodically and we spoke on the phone a few times. I learned

more about what first moved her to make a gift (a major human rights crisis twenty years ago that she knew we were working on). I also learned of her deep commitment to women's rights and to combating gender-based violence. Most important, I learned that the major gift of \$5,000 many years ago came because she and her husband had come into some extra discretionary income and wanted to give it away to organizations they admired.

Our phone and email exchanges taught me several important things: her philanthropic priority was women's rights, she was married and made decisions about her philanthropy with her partner, she thought enough of Amnesty to make a major contribution with little or no personal interaction with our staff or leadership, she and her husband were not in the position to sustain their support at a major level every year but were committed to supporting the work, and she welcomed the opportunity to have a phone conversation with an Amnesty staff person. Although she may not have become a major priority for securing another major gift in the near future, she was definitely invested in the work (Interest) and open to building closer ties to the organization (Relationship). I tried to meet this donor in person during my travels throughout the Southern region, but our schedules did not coincide. Nonetheless, the relationship between her and the organization was strengthened by the mere effort to meet.

Approximately a year after she and I began communicating by phone and email, she called me with some great news. She and her husband had come into some stock (valued at nearly \$10,000) that she wanted to donate to charity and she wanted to give it to Amnesty! I'm confident that she felt good about making this gift not only because she was kept updated on Amnesty's work and our campaigning to stop violence against women but also because she had now developed a personal relationship with the organization and was even more confident that her support would have impact.

### Putting Your Donors in Leadership

Some of the most committed members and donors want to do more than just write a check. If they have been cultivated and stewarded properly, your closest donors will want to help strengthen the organization's infrastructure through volunteer leadership. I've worked with donors on host committees, planning committees, fundraising committees, community service projects, boards, foundation site visits—you name it. Their willingness to take on responsibilities and to learn about the inner workings of an organization demonstrates a loyalty beyond any single major gift. In fact, donors who join your fundraising committees or chair your boards are almost always planning to be lifelong supporters of your work.

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I'm working with donors who not only give large annual donations and sit on fundraising committees, but who have also offered to meet with new donor prospects, give testimony about why they support Amnesty, and ask others to do the same. I've learned that you always want to have an "ask" for a major donor if you get a meeting. Sometimes it's for a gift, but most of the time it's to do something that will help deepen the relationship—like attending a meeting with you, making a key introduction, taking an action, underwriting an event, or other volunteer leadership roles.

Timothy Higdon, successful fundraising consultant, Adjunct Assistant Professor of Philanthropy and Fundraising at New York University, and Amnesty International USA's Deputy Director for External Relations, has a straightforward, three-step model of donor stewardship: cultivate, brief, and ask. You and your donor prospect first get to know each other, you find out their interests and keep them up to date on those interests, and you ask them to deepen their commitment to fulfilling your organization's mission.

The beauty of such a simple model is that it can be applied to

many types of organizational relationships. I recently met with the coordinator for Georgia's Alternative to the Death Penalty to discuss fundraising strategy. We agreed that many of the elements used in fundraising are also used in grassroots organizing campaigns and partnerships. Fundraising is organizing. You're gathering up your supporters, finding new supporters, strengthening their commitment to your ultimate collective goal, and springing them into action.

Whether your major donors give \$250 or \$250,000, finding and keeping them follow the same principles: get to know them and treat them as the important people they are to your group. You will be rewarded with loyalty in giving and ever-greater involvement in the success of your group. ■

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Will Cordery is the senior major gifts officer for the Southern region of Amnesty International USA. As a key member of the Resource Mobilization Working Group for the first US Social Forum, Will designed and helped institute multiple fundraising strategies that raised nearly \$1 million.



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