

major gifts



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how to find major gift prospects



Major gifts rarely come out of the blue. They result from a deeply considered cultivation and engagement process.

Cultivating major gifts is all about “relationship fundraising”, which means engaging donors by building long-term personal relationships with them.

To identify your major gift prospects, start with the people who participate in your work. Single out those who have an affinity with what you do and the capacity to support you in substantial ways. By developing quality relationships, you can unlock their support and ensure it flows to your organisation regularly and for a very long time.

What is a major gift?

It's up to you to decide on a cash sum that is transformative for your work. For individual artists and micro organisations, a major gift might be \$500. For larger organisations, a major gift might be \$2,000 or \$5,000. Don't set the bar too high. Even in major performing arts organisations, the major gift marker is often set at \$5,000. This is the level that invokes a higher level of stewardship and an ambition to develop that relationship in a sophisticated way.

Where do you find major gift prospects?

Most likely, they're among your audience already. Spend time getting to know them, starting with your immediate network of supporters.

Your warmest prospects include:

- Family and friends
- Current annual donors

Donors to any crowdfunding campaign you've conducted

- Customers (your buyers, subscribers, repeat ticket holders)
- Suppliers (those generating income from you as a customer)

Move outwards to your:

- Email address book
- Newsletter mailing list
- Social media followers (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, SoundCloud, etc)

It is often surprising to see how many prospects you have when you add these up.

Once you have a sense of your total fundraising market, you can develop a strategy for **building** and **deepening relationships** with these important people.

Qualifying your prospects

Throughout this engagement process, you will identify people who actively participate in and have an affinity with your work, as well as the capacity to donate. Ask them which aspect of your work excites them the most. Use online resources to learn as much about them as possible. Keep a record of your interactions and findings. A Google search can unearth which other organisations the donor supports and at what level.

Cultivation plans

Once you 'qualify' that person as a major gift prospect, your task is to develop an individual cultivation plan. The cultivation plan is a timeline of structured touchpoints and interactions. Every task you undertake in the cultivation plan leads to the next task, advancing the relationship to the stage where a solicitation (or 'ask') is appropriate. Having time-bound actions means there is no uncertainty about next steps and the point of arrival.

If you are fortunate enough to secure a rare 'unicorn gift' – a gift that has come out of the blue and you haven't spent a lot of time cultivating – then your follow up steps are critical. It's important to backfill the information you would normally gather in the cultivation period. Move swiftly to connect the donor to your work and organisation. Tell them about the impact of their gift. This is the best way to ensure their support extends beyond the initial unicorn gift.

TIP.

single out those who have an affinity with what you do and the capacity to support you in substantial ways.

FURTHER READING

[How to Get a First Meeting with a Major Donor](#) web video by Amy Eisenstein

[A Month by Month Cultivation Plan for Donors](#) web video by Amy Eisenstein

[The Art of Recognizing your next Major Donation](#) by Joanne Fritz

how to start a conversation about a major donation



After cultivating major gift prospects, it's time to execute your 'ask'. Tailor your approach based on what you've learned about them – and implement your plan.

A positive conversation about a major gift happens at the right time, in the right place, with the right person, about the right amount. Your hard work during the **cultivation period** will stand you in good stead for a successful outcome.

The right time

The 'ask' or 'solicitation' arrives as a natural next step in the evolution of your relationship. By this stage, you've cultivated the relationship by introducing them to your organisation and finding ways for them to experience your work. You've asked the right questions and understand what they're passionate about and which aspect of your work excites them most.

You have invested time in the relationship so it is mature enough to sustain a major gift solicitation. It should not come like a bolt of lightning out of the blue and they should not be shocked by the size of your ask.

The right place

The solicitation needs to be given the respect it deserves by taking place in a quiet place where you can converse privately. The donor's home or office is perfect, or use a quiet room in your office. Avoid having these meetings in cafes or a restaurant – if things don't go according to plan, it can make for a very uncomfortable situation.

The right person

Identify the most appropriate person to ask for the gift. Was the donor introduced to your organisation by a board member or ambassador? Are they a regular attendee who has been cultivated by the development team? Does the donor have a close relationship with your artistic director?

The best person for the task carries the most weight in the eyes of the donor, is comfortable asking for the gift and is well rehearsed.

If you're in any doubt about their ability to stick to the game plan, then the best person for the task is quite possibly you.

The right amount

Throughout the cultivation period, you learned a lot about your donor. You researched their levels of support of other not-for-profit organisations. You have a sense of their overall assets and income. In piecing it all together, you can identify the right amount to ask for, which fits the profile of the individual or family.

Your relationship needs to be sufficiently mature before you make the ask. Research is critical. You need to put a number on the table that reflects and honours the donor's status but doesn't put them off by overshooting the mark.

The right words

In a major gift solicitation you can pick one of two approaches that are suited to different types of donors.

The first approach is appreciated by people in business and time-poor donors. It involves being clear about your request in the first few sentences:

‘Today, we’d like to ask you to consider a gift of \$. And now we’d like spend a short amount of time telling you about the impact this gift will have.’

This approach can facilitate a better conversation with the donor. It enables more active listening on their behalf because you’ve led with the ask and neutralised the impatience they experience on longer journeys to get there.

The second approach is an ‘advertising approach’ where you build up a story. Explain the challenge, your proposed solution and the role your donor might play in making it possible. The story ends in you asking your donor ‘to consider a gift of x’. It is important to stop talking and allow space for them to respond. This approach works better for donors who have more time, are looking for the social impact of their philanthropy and are deeply connected to the organisation.

Sticking to the plan

Always have a plan for solicitation meetings – and make sure every participant is briefed and understands it perfectly. Be completely clear about who is asking and for how much. Ensure that everyone on your team is committed to *not talking* after the ask has been made. There have been many dollars left on tables when an uncomfortable team member jumps in and gives the donor an opportunity to scale down their potential donation.

Major gift solicitations are well planned and occur at the end of a cultivation period. Be brave, pay attention to small details and watch your major gift portfolio flourish.

FURTHER READING

[Dick Quan](#) talks about his support of the Biennale of Sydney
[Five ways charities can attract rich donors](#) article from The Guardian UK
[What to Say in Your First Meeting with a Major Donor](#) web video by Amy Eisenstein

how to build relationships with major gift prospects



Once you've identified major gift prospects, it's time to think through an engagement strategy. Follow these steps to turn prospects into supporters.

Step one: Integrate donor prospects with existing donor activities

One reason for developing an engagement strategy for *existing donors* is so you can integrate your *future donors* into these events and touchpoints.

Include your donor prospects on all your company communications and be sure to invite them to at least one of your high-value activities throughout the year. This could be an open-rehearsal, season launch, private viewing, screening or performance – anything that gives you and members of your team the opportunity to have a one-on-one conversation and learn more about them.

Step two: Master the art of active listening

Active listening is one of the greatest skills of a successful fundraiser. To be a great listener, you need to know how to ask questions that engage people in conversation. It's important to know the difference between open questions and closed questions and when to use them.

A closed question leads to short, factual answers. Your goal is to cue a response that will open a great topic of conversation. Examples include: 'Have you attended one of our productions before?', 'What do you do when you're not busy attending our performances?' or 'Do you play a musical instrument?'

An open question asks your guest to provide a longer answer and helps you discover what makes them tick. Examples include: 'How did you first come to know our work?', 'What aspects of tonight's show did you enjoy the most?' or 'What aspects of our work interest you most?'

Step three: Record information

Having great conversations is only useful if the knowledge is stored as a resource for relationship development. Every conversation uncovers truths about individuals and helps you understand what they care about and which aspects of your work inspire them most. This helps you build a picture of your donor and tailor a fundraising request to meet their needs. Don't let these valuable insights go to waste. Make sure they're recorded and available to your current and future colleagues.

Step four: Pay attention to small details

Your ability to get the details right is critical. Things often come unstuck when you misspell names or are inaccurate with post-nominals, job titles and other details. Another barrier for many potential supporters is being invited to an event so late that they're committed elsewhere. Get on the front foot and give them plenty of notice – otherwise it can undermine all your good intentions.

 A NSW EXAMPLE: **THE SONG COMPANY.**

Karen Baker, former General Manager of The Song Company, now Director of Development (Major Gifts) at University of Sydney talks about the importance of listening:

“ What motivates them to give? What is their purpose in giving? Ask lots of questions, LISTEN, LISTEN, LISTEN. Take their cues in their conversation, leave some SILENCE for them to make comments. A good question to ask is: “What would you like to do with your money that would be meaningful to you?” Sometimes, people have never really thought about it. ”

 TIP.

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FURTHER READING

Rupert Myer talks about how arts organisations can fundraise successfully.

Beginner’s Guide to Donor Cultivation web article by Joe Garecht of the Fundraising Authority

Twenty-five rules for fundraising tips from US fundraiser and author Michael Kaiser

Case Study: 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art

how to respond to a hesitant donor



Asking someone for a gift – and holding your own in the conversation that ensues – can be daunting when you're new to major gift fundraising.

After respectfully asking a potential donor for their support, you need to know how to handle their response and manage any hurdles in the conversation.

Be comfortable with silence

An important part of your fundraising plan is making sure everyone on your team is committed to *not talking* after the 'ask' has been made.

Let the donor respond first. If it's not an immediate 'yes' or 'no' (which it usually isn't), then their response will give you critical clues about where to take the conversation next.

"It's not a good time"

It's impossible to know everything that is going on in your donor's life. If you hear this response, pay attention and tread carefully. Your best bet is to respectfully ask if there's a more appropriate time to revisit the conversation with them. Let them be the guide. If it's appropriate to confirm a time frame for the next conversation – excellent.

"My cashflow is not the best at present"

In this situation, try offering gift payment terms that ease that cashflow situation for your donor. *'Would it help if we were to structure the payments of the gift either quarterly or monthly over the next [time horizon]?'*

If this is unsuccessful, you need to work with the donor to revise the size of the 'ask'. *'Could we tailor a different level of involvement for you? Is there a figure that you'd be happy to consider at this point in time?'*

"I need to consult with my (husband, wife, children, etc)"

This is a legitimate position, particularly in close families who participate in philanthropic activities. Offer to meet with all family members and talk about the project and the impact their support will have.

If this isn't possible, ask the donor when they'd like you to be in touch again. You have a deep interest in knowing the thoughts and feedback of family members so use this as a way of keeping the conversation going.

"It's not the right project for me"

Sometimes we do misread the donor and / or the signals and present the wrong project for consideration. If they tell you it's the wrong project, they're giving you a cue to talk about aspects of your work they may feel a higher affinity with. Use this opportunity to gather more information and confirm your interpretation with the donor before you leave. Ask them if you can send some follow up materials and arrange another meeting within the next few weeks.

“We will consider it. Leave it with me.”

This isn't a 'no'. It's your opportunity to ask when it would be convenient for you to get in touch again. Let them know that you welcome any further questions and are willing to speak to others (family members, etc) if appropriate. If there's genuinely no interest at this point, and they're just being polite, you'll force a more direct 'no'.

If you do hear 'no', it rarely means 'no, never'. Hold the relationship close, engage regularly and continue to surprise and delight them. There are many variables at play in major gift decisions. With the passage of time and the evolution of your work, there may be a perfect opportunity to collaborate in future.

 TIP.

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FURTHER READING

[Penelope Seidler](#) on supporting the Biennale of Sydney

[Making the ask, closing the deal blog post on Too Busy to Fundraise](#)

[Ten tips on asking for money from those who give it](#) ArtsHub article by Deborah Stone

how to build long-term relationships with your supporters



Looking after supporters is not the responsibility of one person, or one team. It's a responsibility that sits with the chair and the board, management, artists, staff and volunteers.

The saying, "A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush" tells us everything we need to know about looking after the supporters we have. Your current donors have demonstrated belief and commitment. They are capable of providing consistent and stable income for your organisation. They cost much less to look after than the cost of acquiring new donors. Treat them well and they will stay with you.

Nurturing these relationships requires consistent effort and needs to be embedded in the culture of your organisation.

Say 'thank you'

This may seem obvious, but you can never say 'thank you' too many times, or in too many different ways. Organisations that steward donors well are quick to acknowledge support via all staff, including their board.

Major gifts are often recognised by a same-day thank you call from the CEO or Chair of the Board. This requires planning but it's worth the effort for the power it has in making your donor feel valued. Medium-sized gifts are also acknowledged quickly, usually by a development staff member who puts in a call to say 'thank you' and explain how much their support means. Each time you interact with supporters, conclude with something as simple as 'thanks so much for your support' or 'thank you for everything you do for us'.

Set yourself the goal of sending tax receipts and personalised thank you letters within five business days of receiving a donation. It really counts.

Plan your stewardship

Stewardship is the process of relationship-building and communications that take place after a donation has been received.

Every organisation or person raising money needs a stewardship calendar. This is a physical calendar of the events, gatherings, communications and other touchpoints that bring your donors closer.

Around eight touchpoints per donor per year is a good working number. Organisations have developed many interesting and inspiring ways to do this. Ideas coming from NSW arts organisations include attendance at closed rehearsals, dress rehearsals, fireside chats with key artists, a pizza night at the Artistic Director's home, a slide night from an international tour, a script reading, sneak preview of the season launch, sitting in on a choir or orchestra rehearsal, pre-premiere film viewing, or private performances in homes. The list is endless and opportunities are unique to each organisation.

Other standard touchpoints include a thank you call, phone updates, regular newsletters, your annual report and performances or events. The stewardship calendar supports you by making sure no donor gets overlooked. It commits your board and key artists to events they must attend. It keeps you on top of administrative tasks such as getting invitations out with plenty of notice.

Pay attention to small details

Things can go wrong if you spell names incorrectly, make mistakes with post-nominal letters after their names, or miscategorise donors in your listing or database. Many relationships fail over small details like this.

Surprise and delight

Having learnt the art of **active listening** and **recording information**, you now have the information you need to build your relationships. You could send birthday cards (try including short greetings from your artists and staff) or acknowledge important milestones and events in your donor's life.

Try to have one trick up your sleeve each year that will surprise and delight. For example, send a stamped, hand-written postcard from your regional or international tour. Make a quick phone call to share news of an exciting development. Have one of the beneficiaries of their gift write and tell them about their experience.

Small moments of connection between people make all the difference. Make your donor smile and feel valued. It's one of the most powerful forms of differentiation you can muster.

TIP.

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FURTHER READING

8 Great Ways to Stay in Touch with Your Donors – blog post from The Fundraising Authority

Lynn Wester on Donor Relations and Thanking Donors – web video from Amy Eisenstein

Building a Lifelong Patron Relationship – web video by TessituraNetwork