

Thanks a Million

You need strong recognition programs to foster healthy donor relations

BY J. PATRICK RYAN

As I see it, giving appropriate major donor recognition is one of the most important things development officers can do for their institution's well-being. We as school, college, and university fund raisers should practice better recognition for several good reasons:

- *Recognition often inspires further investment from the donor.* Virtually no one makes one major lifetime gift and walks away. Giving grows as our involvement grows—and involvement is never more timely than after a person donates. I have yet to find a donor who is inaccessible after making a generous gift.

- *There's virtually no public relations downside to recognition.* It's news, the media like it, and it's positive. Quite often the recognition highlights a new facility, showcases a campus improvement, or introduces an activity within the institution. The connection between the donor and the new development is obvious; it's our job to show that relationship.

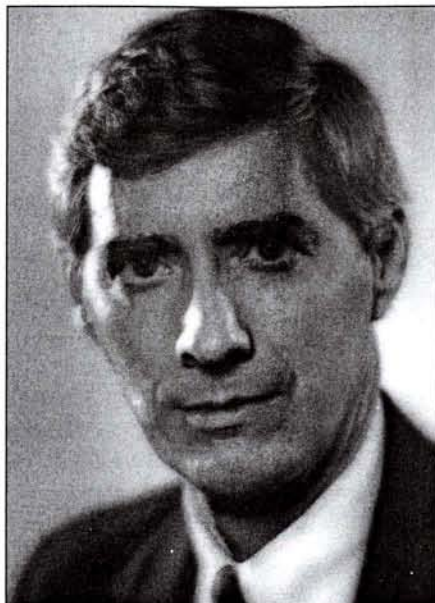
- *Recognition displays your institution's style and gratitude.* It shows good stewardship. It says you're thoughtful, attentive, and caring.

- *The donor has friends, family, and business associates who may be inspired by such gifts to be generous themselves.* Your trustees also appreciate the recognition; they want to know they aren't the only ones giving.

- *Your faculty, staff, and students may be inspired by donor recognition.* Certainly knowing someone just stepped forward to allow your campus to do something it couldn't before is the kind of good news your institution's family really appreciates.

- *You promised the recognition, and in some way it helped motivate that major*

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gift. (If that isn't true, you need to re-examine your major gift program.)

- *It's relatively easy to involve your president or your board chair in such a positive activity.* Key leaders usually like being asked to do something special for someone who has done something special for them.

- *Donor recognition usually doesn't take much time or money.* Rather, sincerity and creativity are the most important ingredients.

Given its importance and value, then, it's surprising that so few institutions receive top marks for recognizing major donors. Why not?

Some charitable organizations lack an attitude of gratitude. It's our job to let donors know we deliberately seek out major givers, we appreciate them, and we want to show it.

Another fault in the process is the idea that donors don't want recognition. Sometimes volunteers say donors don't want it; other times donors say, "No thanks." Our message needs to be: "We are asking you to allow us to thank you. We want to. Won't you please let us?" When donors say, "Oh, no need; I'd be embarrassed," what they're often saying is, "I don't want it to look like that was the reason I gave. Assure me that you genuinely want to recognize me."

To help your development staff do the right thing, follow these four steps.

1. *Write out your donor recognition plan.* When I examine an institution's fund-raising activities, I ask if there is such a plan. If not, the development staff is probably not thanking its donors very well. A good plan says who's directing it, lists the deadlines, and names the activities designed for donors at all levels. The plan contains details about acknowledgment and thank-you letters, donor listings, special events, follow-up reports to donors, private meetings, news releases, citations, gift club benefits, and more.

2. *Budget for it.* Some development officers say a donor recognition budget should be 1 to 2 percent of whatever you raise. That's not always an accurate guide, but whether we're planning for a capital campaign or annual giving, we should be sure to include donor recognition as a budget line item. How can we properly thank the person who just gave us something if we haven't allotted the money to do it right?

3. *Announce your recognition policies in advance.* Let donors know what they can expect. Produce a brochure that outlines your recognition plan: "If you give us \$100 you become a member of the President's Club" or "If you give \$1 million we would like to name the building after you." As fund raiser and author Si Seymour said, "People relish earned reward and recognition." So make those things part of asking.

4. *Promote your major donor recognition plan,* especially with board members, key volunteers, and the first large givers in any fund-raising effort. Volunteer solicitors must know you want to recognize donors and that you want them to stress the idea to major gift prospects. Your solicitors should use the plan as a tool to encourage additional generous gifts.

The best way to make that happen, of course, is to fully and sincerely recognize those volunteers as initial major donors for what they have so generously given.

That's because showing your institution's gratitude is not just the right thing to do. It's essential to keeping those major gifts coming. **CASE**