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The Role of Annual Support in the Overall Development Program

By *Michael Shumway, CFRE*

In most basic courses on fundraising and development, students are taught that the first program to begin is a program for generating annual support. It has become a maxim in the advancement profession that an annual support program is an essential ingredient in any well-designed development effort. With this understanding, it seems strange that many annual support officers are left to wonder what their role is—and even their importance to the effort of the development program at their institution.

The four prime functions

- Educate prospective and current donors (*Education*),
- Acquire new friends and donors (*Acquisition*),
- Cultivate and build these initial and sometimes tenuous relationships (*Cultivation*), and
- Continue support from existing friends of our institution (*Ongoing support*).

Education

There is no doubt that one of the most important of these four functions is education. Many donors base much of what they know of an organization on the materials they are sent. Everything must always be informative, but this is even more critical when asking for money. With the “ask”, we tend to have the donor’s attention. This is a golden opportunity to provide useful and important information that may not be able to be communicated as effectively in any other venue.

Acquisition

Another very important function of the annual support officer is the acquisition of new friends and donors for the institution. In the well-known pyramid of donors, it is most often through annual programs that new donors are added to the bottom of that pyramid, and begin their relationship journey with the organization and its mission. This is when first impressions are made, and it is

through annual support programs that most our donors gain these first impressions of an institution.

Cultivation

Once new donors are acquired, how they are treated in the first stages of the relationship will often determine their potential for rising through the donor pyramid and becoming significant benefactors. Once again, the majority of relationships with donors are cemented through annual programs. This is a fragile time, and excellent programs are needed to ensure strong friendships are built with as many of these new donors as possible.

Ongoing support

Finally, it is vital not to ignore these carefully built new relationships. Frequently, annual support programs provide donors regular contact with an institution, even if they become *transitional or major donors* (described below). Careful design and segmentation of annual support efforts will ensure that all four of these prime functions are fulfilled.

Where does annual support fit?

Having said all this, where does annual support tie in with the rest of the development program? Many reputable “generalist” consultants in the industry believe the first thing a new development program must establish is a solid annual support program. This is best illustrated through a slightly different look at the classic “donor pyramid,” a look from an annual-support perspective.

In this perspective, as with the traditional donor pyramid, annual support programs make up the base of the pyramid. However, this new perspective shows more depth than the traditional view – showing annual support programs as an integral part of at *least* the first four stages of a relationship with any donor.

It is through the annual support programs that the organization acquires the donor, and

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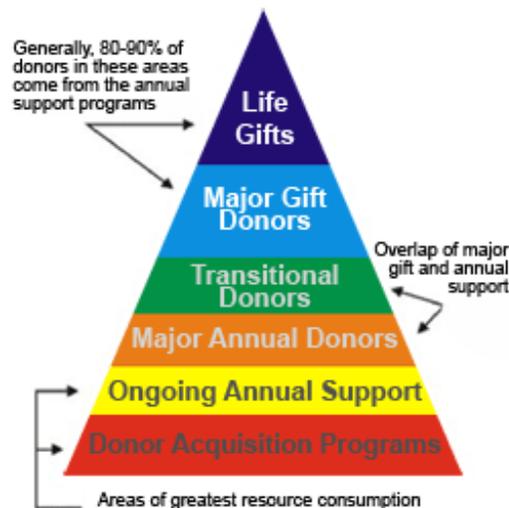
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Development Pyramid of Donors From an annual support perspective



then maintains and builds that ongoing relationship. Some of these donors will grow, through annual cultivation, into “*major annual donors*.” These are people who have increased their giving to the point where they are demanding more attention. It is at this point that they should become “*transitional donors*.” This is the stage where annual programs and major gift cultivation efforts must be able to join forces in further developing these relationships and moving these donors into becoming major gift benefactors and planned-gift or life-gift prospects. Throughout this process, many donors will continue to make annual gifts through your various annual support vehicles.

Annual programs are vital

It is an unfortunate fact in the world of development that annual support is often considered the least of our programs, frequently entrusted to an entry-level staff member. Foundational to many such programs is the belief that the bulk of development efforts must be focused on major-gift cultivation and solicitation. However, experienced chief development officers recognize that in order for a major-gifts program to thrive and endure, an efficient and well-run annual support program must constantly feed it with new individuals.

There is a lot of talk today about the tremendous generational transfer of wealth that will be taking place over the next decade or two. This is often a rallying cry for a renewed effort at cultivating and securing those major and life gifts – and it should be. But it is important to remember that once the transfer has taken place, continued support must come from those to whom this wealth was left. It is mainly through well-conceived annual support efforts that organizations will be able to attract this new group of donors to their mission.

Annual support is a complex and vital part of development efforts. If overall advancement programs are to thrive, they must recognize the importance of annual support and allocate to it the care and effort so willingly allocated to the more “glamorous” work in major gifts and planned giving.