Meeting the Hurdles of Effective Prospect Development Head On

By Jennifer A. McDonough

A well-established and frequently referenced principle in development work is the very familiar “moves management” system, which has become one of the primary means by which strategies are conceived and implemented to move a given prospect from the point of discovery through solicitation and, ideally, the envisioned gift commitment. Some have also suggested that the moves management process has as much to do with all of us as development professionals moving to take the requisite steps ourselves with our assigned prospects. In some instances, the pace with which these steps are executed can have more to do with our timing than with the desires of the prospect.

Consider the following in your own organizations:

1. The number of prospects included in formal portfolios without full and documented strategies leading up to the point of the envisioned solicitation.

2. The number of times a face-to-face visit is completed without a completely clear sense of the purpose of the exchange and an anticipation of the desired outcomes.

3. The number of times a visit or some other substantive interaction or communication is completed without negotiating the next step as well as the timing of that next step directly with the prospect and, ideally, before that interaction has been completed.

4. The number of prospects with only a single next step planned and/or documented versus several steps representing a continuum of deliberate engagement.

Additionally, we often refer back to the assertion that it takes between 18 and 24 months to develop a prospect from the point of discovery to the actual ask. While this may have appropriately evolved as an average of some sort, this timetable has come to represent more of the standard for such
expectations and, actually, is not necessarily the case. If we truly listen
to and engage with our prospects and clear the hurdles before us, we
should find that designing and executing an effective and efficient
approach for our prospects and donors has much less to do with
pre-determined formulas and much more to do with their interests,
personal circumstances, and charitable plans and intentions.

The following represents a summary of eight hurdles that, when
surmounted, will maximize our productivity as development
professionals and, more importantly, provide for the optimal level of
satisfaction our donors and our institutions deserve.

**Getting the Appointment**

Recognized by a good many
development professionals
as their least favorite task,
it is true that success in
getting appointments
for newly qualified
prospects with little to no
current relationship is difficult and
can be legitimately frustrating. An
important condition for success is
mentally dismissing the characterization
of this outreach as a “cold call.” There
was clearly a reason these individuals
appeared on someone’s suspect or prospect list.
They are either alumni, parents, friends, and/or the recommendations
of potential donors from someone closer to your institution.

There is no magic to overcoming this hurdle. It simply takes
persistence and the engagement of multiple means of contact
including asking those who may have recommended the contact
in the first place to help open the door. Researching what boards
and organizations these potential prospects are affiliated with and
checking for existing institutional contacts with whom you can
engage is yet another means of getting a response to your own direct
contacts. Working with and engaging the individual’s assistant where
appropriate is yet another means of connecting and ultimately getting
that all-important first appointment. It is also helpful to plan contacts
for a variety of times and a variety of days of the week to diversify the
incidence of your outreach. At this very early stage of the relationship-
building process, most everyone else connected with the prospect is
higher on their list than you are!
Conducting Purposeful Discovery

One can easily make the case that this is one of the most important stages in the development process. And it is critical to maximize the outcomes of the first in-person meeting, especially considering how difficult it can be to secure.

If conceived of and executed thoughtfully, the discovery visit should not only yield some determination on whether the individual is a viable prospect to be formally managed or not, but it should also support the articulation of key aspects of the potential gift and the development of very specific and relevant cultivation steps. Contact reports from discovery visits should be among the most detailed and relevant of all such documentation. And it goes without saying that effective discovery cannot be done absent an in-person visit, preferably in the person’s office or home where important clues in the prospective donor’s own environment can be observed and noted.

Based on active listening and the fielding of strategic, open-ended questions, key outcomes from a discovery visit should include the following:

1. An assessment of how close the prospect is to the institution and how that degree of connection can be advanced or strengthened through meaningful cultivation and, importantly, the involvement of others including volunteers and internal partners.
2. Where your institution, program, etc. ranks within their charitable priorities and/or volunteer engagement with other institutions and organizations.
3. Their reaction to and degree of interest in key plans.
4. An initial determination of how soon you might be in the position to proffer a solicitation and for what area/priority.
5. At least one next step and preferably multiple next steps. As stated earlier, the next step with the prospect should be negotiated and confirmed before the visit concludes. And you should not feel you have to be able to answer all of their questions. In fact, if there is an opportunity to offer to get back to them with a response having pursued or validated the information following the visit, this can quickly advance the relationship, often impressing the individual and even more so if the follow-up is especially timely.

Implementing Content and Interest-Based Cultivation

Transactional and one-dimensional cultivation typically yields transactional charitable gift responses. We talk a great deal about “donor-driven” philanthropy, and yet we can fall short in designing a cultivation regimen that is truly interesting and meaningful to our prospects. We can also fail to act on the premise that donor interests can actually be created and nurtured in many cases and in direct alignment with funding and programmatic priorities. But this takes very focused and intentional effort.

As development professionals, one of our most significant roles is that of facilitator. It is our responsibility to facilitate connections between our prospects and the information and people that represent content-rich opportunities for them to
learn and become a part of what they will ideally come to support financially. If you find that the majority of contacts with a given prospect are with yourself or with one particular staff member, you will generally not motivate or elicit the maximum charitable response. We are not the point of the relationship. To that end, some institutions have gone so far as to establish the engagement of others in direct cultivation, solicitation, and stewardship efforts as a key performance metric codified through documentation in the prospect management process.

**Consider the following opportunities as you conceive of your cultivation process:**

1. Connecting the prospect to high-end engagement opportunities existing within your alumni relations program. These opportunities are often overlooked and can require little time and effort to make happen.

2. Consistently using your institution’s calendar of events to support the extension of special invitations to attend or have special access to those featured in these events.

3. Engaging prospects directly with admissions and career development colleagues and their efforts to support students. Your colleagues will appreciate the access afforded to such talent and the contributions of time by these prospective donors and prospects. In turn, your prospects will have the benefits associated with very direct and personal experiences with your institution’s students.

4. Asking for input and feedback on planning documents and as part of planning processes. There are often missed opportunities as plans are created with the express intention of using those plans to support solicitations and then not involving prospects before they are asked for their investments. We need to listen for the words “our” and “my” as prospects engage with us. These words signal they are ready to be asked in many instances, having adopted and embraced the specific program or project as their own.

5. For individuals already serving on your boards, committees, and councils, asking them to add some time preceding or following formal meetings to meet with students and/or faculty individually or in small cohorts, sit in on a class, give a guest lecture etc. These very direct experiences greatly enhance what is gained through the more formal meeting experience and environment. Be committed to providing these “mission moment” opportunities as frequently as you can.

An additional means to support the purposeful and well-paced execution of a cultivation plan is to segment the more general stage of cultivation into three separate stages including cultivation awareness, cultivation involvement, and cultivation ownership. This framework supports the development of a series of cultivation steps and represents an attunement to deliberate movement within and across the cultivation continuum. Absent that, cultivation can be unnecessarily prolonged and ambiguous.
Testing the Solicitation

This could easily and appropriately be part of the description on the prior hurdle on content and interest-based cultivation. Essentially, effective cultivation “tests” the solicitation. This means that most if not all of the major elements of a solicitation should be determined as part of and through a purposeful cultivation process including the ask amount, the designation/s of the gift, and who represents the most effective solicitor/s. By the time the actual solicitation is conducted, the terms of the proposal should have been tested and, to a great extent, confirmed directly with the prospects as part of their engagement before the formal proposal is written and presented.

In many operations, gift officers are expected to document a target ask and a projected yield from that solicitation as a part of their strategy statements for assigned prospects. Earlier on in the relationship-building process, it is appropriate and understandable for there to be some degree of disparity between those two figures. However, as the timing of the solicitation becomes imminent, the degree of variance between the ask amount and the yield should have been reduced or even eliminated. The prospect should know what to expect. The solicitation and its key elements should not be a surprise; it represents that formal moment for consideration and the opportunity to accommodate any additional fine-tuning in the terms of the gift.

Gaining Permission to Solicit

The implementation of a strategy to position and incorporate the solicitation is often defined and punctuated by stages correlated with the development cycle. In some instances, we can be challenged on how to transition from the cultivation process to fielding the actual request for support. Recognizing when a prospect is ready to give is critical and often associated with affirming the terms of the solicitation as described in the previous hurdle on testing the solicitation. In addition, many prospects have very deliberate plans and objectives for their overall philanthropy as well as for their giving specifically earmarked for our institutions. It is our obligation to ask the questions that result in the sharing of those plans including timing considerations held by the prospective donor. Without that intelligence, cultivation can be unnecessarily protracted and, in some instances, the most opportune moments for solicitation can be bypassed.
Avoiding the Default Ask

Most of us have been part of many conversations surrounding how much to ask a given prospect. And in some instances, these discussions are conducted in the absence of fully strategic qualification and cultivation where the prospect is directly engaged in answering this very question. In many institutions, we are also faced with eventually having to solicit individuals with no giving history or, at best, limited or modest giving histories and who are believed to have higher capacity. Prior and lower levels of giving can often be correlated to a greater extent with the absence of sufficient engagement rather than with a representation of the prospect’s actual giving intentions.

It is critical to avoid the default ask, which is typically a fairly arbitrary amount such as $10,000 or $25,000, for example. These default ask amounts are often justified based on a determination that the target represents a perceived logical upgrade from prior gifts, even for prospects rated at six- and seven-figure levels. We need to give these individuals the opportunity to become substantively engaged and to become vested in accomplishing objectives held by both themselves and the institution. The gift amount should emerge from these interactions and be calibrated against the resources needed in relationship to these shared interests as well as to fulfill anticipated outcomes. Otherwise, we run the risk of not sufficiently honoring our institutions or our donors. We can actually diminish the potential for larger charitable responses, given the extension of solicitation amounts that are unnecessarily too modest.

Closing

Based on purposeful cultivation and testing the solicitation prior to the ask, our yield rates should be strong. However, we all understand that upon completing the actual solicitation, the majority of prospects need time to fully consider their response. What is critical is to take the opportunity during the solicitation meeting to fully understand the condition upon which “yes” depends. In addition, when and if the prospect suggests a less than affirmative response, we must take the time to understand what factors must be addressed in order to close the gift successfully.
Those factors can be diverse and include timing, the amount (even though they have been part of preliminary but specific discussions prior to the ask), and needing an opportunity to secure the input and endorsement of others including spouses, partners, other family members, and advisors. Next steps and the timing of those next steps should be affirmed before the solicitation visit has been concluded. Leaving the meeting without agreement on the nature and the timing of those next steps results in guessing and an avoidable aging of solicitations. These outcomes only detract from our assertions of the urgency associated with the fulfillment of these requests by the prospective donor.

**Visioning Stewardship as Cultivation**

The final hurdle in our process can actually be the very definition and conceptualization of stewardship. On many levels, it is understandable that gift officers focus more attention on those prospects that represent potential for new gifts. And stewardship can sometimes represent more of a “holding tank” than a plan for active, purposeful, and continued engagement.

For these reasons, it is recommended that the stewardship stage be bifurcated into two segments. The first segment would equate to permanent stewardship for those donors believed to have essentially finished with their major gift contributions or whose next major gift commitment is believed to be a long ways off. The second segment would be stewardship restaged as cultivation for those believed to hold potential for additional contributions to the same and/or a different designation. These donors should be managed in the same manner and with the same rigor as their counterparts in the cultivation process positioned for their first major gift commitment. Again, we need to remember that donors have a plan and, in many instances and presuming the fulfillment of best practice in relationship development, will give again and again.
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