
Donor Cultivation: What It Is and What It Is Not

By KIM KLEIN

In a number of my recent fundraising workshops, I have asked participants to give me a definition of donor cultivation. Here are the five worst and five best descriptions people have offered.

Worst

1. Cultivation is where you act like you like the donor, whether you do or not, so they will give you more money.
2. Cultivation is like gardening — you feed the donor a lot of manure, water with flattery, and pick the fruit as soon as you can.
3. Cultivation is like going on a date. You want to have sex, and your job is to get the other person to want it too.
4. Cultivation is where you go and visit a rich person three or four times without talking about money, and then you finally bring it up. I don't know how you get to the money part, though, or what you talk about on those other visits.
5. Cultivation is a nice word for the games you play with donors, where you try to win a lot of money and they try to give you less than you want.

Best

1. Cultivation means you treat the donor like a whole person, instead of just a checkbook.
2. Cultivation is where you get to know your donors to find out things you have in common, especially what you each most like about the organization, so you can talk about something besides money when you see them.
3. Cultivation is what I tell myself I am doing when I am

actually procrastinating about asking for the gift.

4. Cultivation is what you have to do to get the donor to trust your organization, so he or she will give you a really big gift.
5. Cultivation refers to the things you send your donors, especially more personal things, like birthday cards.

I had been in fundraising for more than ten years before I started to understand what donor cultivation was. I would hear the word at conferences and read it in articles, especially in relation to big gifts. “She gave \$10 million, but of course, that gift was cultivated over many years.” Or, “They left their entire estate to our institution because we had been cultivating them for a decade or more.”

The tone of these comments seemed predatory rather than simply descriptive, and I was put off by them. In the meantime, I was asking for — and sometimes getting — gifts of \$100, \$500, and \$1,000 and teaching other people how to do what I was doing. Since I was able to raise money, I didn't spend a lot of time thinking about cultivation one way or the other.

UNDERSTANDING CULTIVATION

Although my understanding of what cultivation meant didn't come to me in a big revelation, two incidents stand out in my mind as helping me to clarify what cultivation is.

The first incident occurred when a longtime donor to a group I was working for told me she appreciated how I and the other members of the development committee cultivated her. I didn't tell her this, but I was not aware that we were cultivating her and had never thought of her or any of our donors in those terms. When I asked her what

she meant, she said, “You often send me articles on topics you know I am interested in, you always add a personal note at the bottom of any form letter or invitation, and I was particularly touched that you remembered that my cat was having surgery and called to see how she was doing.”

By her response, I could see that she was referring to my policy of personalizing as many pieces of correspondence with all our donors as I could and of keeping track of donor interests, so that I could send them information related to our group that spoke to their particular interest.

The second incident occurred at a workshop I was teaching with the late Hank Rosso, founder of the Fund Raising School. In an exercise during his session on “The Big Gift,” he asked participants to tell him which of the following four activities fundraising was most like: seduction, hand-to-hand combat, sales, or stalking. To my surprise, most people in the class identified fundraising with seduction, and a few even chose stalking. Only a handful related fundraising to sales. Fortunately, no one chose hand-to-hand combat.

Hank explained that seduction is not a bad thing in its place, but that its place is not in fundraising. “We don’t want the donor to be swept away with passion, particularly if there is to be any regret later. We want a donor to make an informed choice to give — a choice he or she will continue to feel good about, and which will lead to another gift.”

Stalking, of course, was ruled out not only because of the image of the donor as a victim, but because stalking implies that the donor would not willingly come near the organization, but must be hunted down and trapped into giving.

Sales was the correct analogy because there was a quality product — the work of the organization — to be sold to a customer seeking that product. The product merely had to be described in words that the customer could understand, with a price attached that the customer could pay. While the sales analogy has its shortcomings, it does place appropriate emphasis on the organization and its work, whereas all the other analogies focus solely on the donor.

CULTIVATION AND FUNDRAISING

Now, what does cultivation mean in the context of fundraising? In the five best definitions above, the one that is the most accurate is the one that admits that, much of the time, cultivation is a code word for procrastination, as in, “I can’t ask for the money yet, because I haven’t cultivated the donor enough.” The definition that best

summarizes cultivation is, “Cultivation is where you treat the donor like a whole person.”

The analogy to sales is also critical here. You and the donor are in a partnership because of your organization. The staff, the people who give time — board members and other volunteers — and the people who give money (who ought to include but not be limited to the staff and volunteers) are all committed, to greater and lesser degrees, to the goals of the organization. People who donate money help to build the organization and also the movement the organization may be a part of. Donors need to be seen as integral to the framework of the organization rather than as a separate group to be dealt with differently than other constituencies.

So, cultivation is what you do to build the loyalty and commitment of the donors to the organization. Obviously, the more highly a person thinks of your group, the more they will be willing to do for your group. A person thinks highly of a group for one or both of two reasons: First, as the person understands the work of your group and sees it as successful, important, and well planned, and perceives that you spend money (their money) wisely, they increase their respect and admiration for what you do. Second, as a person feels appreciated by your group, believes that their gift makes a difference, that they are noticed individually and cared about individually, they will also increase their respect and admiration for what you do. Both of these perceptions of your group build loyalty, but the two combined build the most loyalty.

Let’s look at what this actually means. Cultivation usually begins after a gift has been made. While you may read and hear many stories of donors who were “cultivated” for years before they finally gave millions of dollars, I think these are the fundraising equivalent of fishing tales. Grassroots organizations in particular do not have people like this whom we can “cultivate.” We don’t have buildings to name after people, academic positions to endow, or esoteric pieces of medical equipment or research projects to underwrite. Just as in sales, you want to attract new customers, but most of your energy should go into keeping customers you already have. Your greatest energy should go toward those customers who buy the most frequently and who buy the most.

So, to begin thinking about cultivation, sort your donor list into three categories: frequency of giving, recency of giving, and size of gift. Your highest priority for cultivation will be people who are in all three categories: those who give large gifts often and who have given recently. The next-highest priority will be people who give large gifts frequently, even if their last gift is not

very recent. Third priority will be people who give large gifts anytime, and last will be people who give frequently.

CULTIVATION TECHNIQUES

The minimum cultivation effort required is that every donor receive a thank-you note for every gift. All donors may also receive a newsletter. Those donors who do more — either by size of gift or by frequency of giving — should be given a little more attention. How much more will depend on how much you know about them and how many of them you have.

Here are some possible cultivation techniques:

Receptions for donors: An example

A group in New Mexico successfully completed a three-year campaign to have child care offered at the workplace of a local corporation. They planned a celebratory reception where one of the main organizers would give a short talk, to which they invited the following categories of donors: anyone who was a donor at the time the campaign started, all the donors who gave specifically to this campaign, and all current donors who give annual unrestricted gifts of \$250 or more. To the first group, they sent a letter saying, “You may recall that we have been working on this issue for the last three years. You were helping us then and have continued to support us. Now help us celebrate.”

To the donors who gave specifically to the child care campaign, the letter read, “Your financial help has paid off, and thanks to you and all the people like you, we have won. Come celebrate with us.” The major donors got a similar invitation. Furthermore, anyone who was a major donor, gave specifically to this campaign, and had been a donor at any level for three years or more also received a follow-up phone call.

The organization decorated the reception venue with a timeline showing the progress of the campaign, highlighted by newspaper articles and pictures about the campaign, so people could relive the success. More than 60 people came to the celebration, giving the staff and board members a chance to meet other donors. There was no additional request for money — this was simply a time to say thank you and celebrate.

Sending articles and information

When donors send money in response to a specific appeal, or they tell you they are most interested in one particular issue, or you think that because of their job, other groups they are involved with, or other information you have about them that they have particular interests in some aspects of your organization’s work over others,

make a note of these interests in their donor information file. As newspaper articles come out or reports are published, send copies of these to those donors who will be interested with a brief note saying, “Thought you might enjoy this.” Or, “As per our conversation, here is the report I told you about,” or whatever happens to be appropriate.

Offering to visit

The most effective cultivation technique is meeting a donor in person. Mostly, these will be times when you want to ask for a larger gift, but every so often, you should meet with a donor in order to get advice, tell them about what is happening in your organization, or simply to drop off an annual report or a premium such as a mug or a T-shirt. These visits can last five minutes or an hour — just taking the time to show that you are interested in knowing more about the person will be effective.

Other techniques

Things like birthday cards, congratulatory notes, and get well cards are not necessary. If you are the type of person who remembers special occasions or would be likely to send a special note, then do so. If this is not something you do for your own friends, then don’t do it for your donors. Cultivation only works when there is a genuine desire to know the donor better. Many of us find that we become friends with some of our donors, so we treat them like friends. Those who are not friends we should consider to be colleagues — they share our values and they wish for the success of our organization’s work.

If I were in charge of reinventing all the words that would ever be used in the context of fundraising, I would never choose the word cultivation. I think it is a difficult word to truly humanize, and I don’t use it very often. To me the word adds a sense of something that I, as a development director or board member, do to the donor in order to get the donor to do something for the organization. I prefer concepts like graciousness, hospitality, and sharing — the idea that we are all donors, and that we are all pulling together toward the same end, which is fulfilling the mission of the organization.

Some of us give a lot of money and some a little. Some of us give what is a lot to us, and some of us give what is a pittance to us. Some of us give time, advice, or products as well as money. The way that we will keep getting whatever gifts our donors give us is to keep doing good work and to keep appreciating those who make the work possible.

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