Socratic Fundraising
“LEGACY EDITION”
How to ask for the gift in a will without fear or anxiety
Squeamish?

“For many of us, asking for a bequest is akin to asking, ‘So when are you going to die and what are you going to leave us when you do?’”

-Anne Melvin
Harvard University

Death is a problem.
Death is a problem. People use two solutions.

1. Ignore the problem. [Avoidance]
2. Live on after death. [Symbolic immortality]
Avoidance

- “This doesn’t apply to me”
- “I’ll deal with that later”
Symbolic immortality

Some part of one’s identity – one’s people, values, or story – will continue on after death.
Symbolic immortality in experiments

Death reminders make people more

• Protective of their social group
• Resistant to outside groups
• Responsive to group “norms”
• Interested in social prestige, fame, a positive life story, personal heroism, or putting their name on something

Phrasing = preface + ask

The legacy ask usually consists of two parts:

• A preface (motivating the ask or the gift) +
• An ask (making the request)
Phrasing = preface + **ASK**

- Simple ask: Will you?
- Soft ask: Would you consider?
- Softer ask: Thoughts?
- Softest ask: Silence after preface
“Would you be willing to include our organization in your estate plans?”

“Say, Bill, does your will provide something for the [organization]?”
“Would you join me as a member of our Legacy Society by making a planned gift?”
“Would you join me in making a legacy commitment?”

Fridman, N. (2021, May 26). Why now is the perfect time to have a conversation about values, giving and your family’s legacy [PowerPoint slides]. Life and Legacy Annual Gathering, online. p. 22.
“Have you remembered XYZ in your will?”
“Can you tell me if we are included in your will plans?”
Phrasing = preface + **ASK**

- **Simple ask:** Will you?
- **Soft ask:** Would you consider?
- **Softer ask:** Thoughts?
- **Softest ask:** Silence after preface
“Would you be willing to consider including us as one of the nonprofit organizations in your will?”
“Would you consider... including us in your estate plans?”

Soft ask: Would you consider?
“Will you consider putting this organization in your will?”

Soft ask: Would you consider?
“Would you consider leaving a (specific amount or percentage) of your estate to our organization?”

Soft ask: Would you consider?
“Would you consider a pledge commitment that isn’t paid until you pass or when you no longer need it?”

“Would you consider making a legacy gift?”
“Of the types of planned gifts that we’ve talked about, which one would you consider?”

Phrasing = preface + **ASK**

- **Simple ask:** Will you?
- **Soft ask:** Would you consider?
- **Softer ask:** Thoughts?
- **Softest ask:** Silence after preface
“Do you know that we have a legacy society that recognizes our donors who have included our organization in their future plans?... Is that something you and I should be talking about?”

“What would you say to someone who might be considering including us in their last will & testament?”

“What are your thoughts about making this kind of gift?”

Softer ask: Thoughts?

First quote from Tumolo, J. (2016). Simplify: A simple approach to building a sustainable planned giving program. P.44
Phrasing = preface + **ASK**

- Simple ask: Will you?
- Soft ask: Would you consider?
- Softer ask: Thoughts?
- **Soallest ask:** Silence after preface
Ask (“challenge”) phrase: Preferences? Why?

1. Simple
   A. “Would you be willing to include our organization in your estate plans?”
   B. “Say, Bill, does your will provide something for the [organization]?”
   C. “Would you join me as a member of our Legacy Society by making a planned gift?”
   D. “Would you join me in making a legacy commitment?”
   E. “Would you consider making a pledge commitment that isn’t paid until you pass or when you no longer need it?”
   F. “Would you consider making a legacy gift?”
   G. “Of the types of planned gifts that we’ve talked about, which one would you consider?”

2. Soft
   A. “Would you be willing to consider including us as one of the nonprofit organizations in your will?”
   B. “Would you consider … including us in your estate plans?”
   C. “Will you consider putting this organization in your will?”
   D. “Would you consider leaving a [specific amount or percentage] of your estate to our organization?”
   E. “What are your thoughts about making this kind of gift?”

3. Softer
   A. “Do you know that we have a legacy society that recognizes our donors who have included our organization in their future plans? … Is that something you and I should be talking about?”
   B. “What would you say to someone who might be considering including us in their last will & testament?”

4. Silence
   A. Use a preface mentioning a gift in a will and then be silent.
People were more likely to agree to “make a gift to charity in my last will & testament.” than “leave a legacy gift to charity in my last will & testament” or “make a bequest gift to charity in my last will & testament.”

People were twice as likely to want to read about “gifts in wills” rather than “estate giving,” “legacy giving,” or “bequest gifts.”

Ask research: “Gift in a will”

People were twice as likely to want to read about “will planning” rather than “estate planning,” or “legacy planning.”

Ask research: “Gift in a will”
Not for "people like me"

- Some people perceive words like "estate," "legacy," or even "bequest" as a bit too grand
- But a "gift in a will" applies to everyone

Sargeant, A. (May 2, 2014). Personal communication from Professor Adrian Sargeant, Plymouth University regarding unpublished focus group results.
People were more likely to expect information about

- living trusts
- life insurance
- IRA transfer-on-death
- bank account transfer-on-death

from “gifts in wills” or “will planning” than from “estate giving” or “estate planning”
Long list?

Share interested in reading more on a charity website was,

- 26% for “Gifts in wills”
- 25% for “Gifts in wills, trusts, or retirement accounts”
- 24% for “Gifts in wills, trusts, retirement accounts, or life insurance”

Avoid death phrases

“Make a gift to charity in my last will & testament that will take effect at my death.”

Annuity paying “each year you live until you die.”

The will-making headlines that performed 2X better

“Even if you plan to live to 150, you still need to make a plan.”

“Even if you plan to live to 150, you still need a will. Get started today.”

Leading with LONG life, not death!

Even a “naked” ask works.

2,000 people completing will planning,

- Half weren’t asked about charity: 4.9% made a gift
- Half were asked “Would you like to leave any money to charity in your will?”: 10.8% made a gift

A preface makes the ask more comfortable or compelling.

- The **external issue** preface [*from avoidance*]
- The **identity** preface [*from symbolic immortality*]
- The **victory** preface [*from symbolic immortality*]
People avoid estate planning because it’s a death reminder. So, create a non-death reason to have the conversation or sign the gift now.

- Campaign deadline
- Matching gift deadline
- We’ve got a problem
- My job is to help you
Legacy campaign deadline

“We’re in a campaign to get 100 new legacy society members before the end of the year, and we’re making great progress… [ask]”
“So far, we’re at 72% of our campaign goal for current gifts and 68% of our goal for planned estate gifts. You’ve already helped us in the first goal...[ask]”
“The new planned giving campaign starts this fall. We’ll be announcing our board participation at the banquet. Signing your planned gift before then could really influence others to take this step ... [ask]”
Matching gift deadline

“If signed by May 1, planned gifts of up to $250,000 will be matched with a 10% cash donation in your name from The XYZ Foundation.”

(For several charities this has doubled or tripled planned gifts.)
We’ve got a problem

“We’ve run into a bit of an issue. The number of new people joining our legacy society has fallen off in the last year. Do you mind if I ask you a few questions about your thoughts on this topic?”
We’ve got a problem

“We need your advice on some new legacy fundraising ads. Would you mind sharing your thoughts on a few examples?”
We’ve got a problem

“We held a planned giving seminar, but people didn’t show up. We’re trying to figure out why. So, we’re asking donors like you to share your thoughts in a focus group…”

Helping you is my job

“My job is to help donors plan their gifts... This might look at multi-year strategies or even a gift in a will...”

“Part of my job is to show donors how to give smarter. For example, any IRA money inherited by family members triggers income tax. But naming [our charity] avoids those taxes...”
External issue preface

The non-death-related reasons make starting the conversation easier

- Campaign deadline
- Matching gift deadline
- We’ve got a problem
- My job is to help you
Which of the following approaches would be most comfortable for you? [Type your answer in the chat]

A. Simply making the ask

B. Using a preface first (external deadline, help us with a problem, my job is to help you) then making the ask

C. Sharing a donor story then pausing for a reaction
Which of the following external issue preface types do you prefer?

a. **Legacy campaign deadline**: “We’re in a campaign to get 100 new legacy society members before the end of the year, and we’re making great progress... [ask]”

b. **Combined campaign deadline**: “So far, we’re at 72% of our campaign goal for current gifts and 68% of our goal for planned estate gifts. You’ve already helped us in the first goal... [ask]”

c. **Leadership group campaign deadline**: “The new planned giving campaign starts this fall. We’ll be announcing our board participation at the banquet. Signing your planned gift before then could really influence others to take this step... [ask]”

d. **Matching gift deadline**: “If signed by May 1, planned gifts of up to $250,000 will be matched with a 10% cash donation in your name from The XYZ Foundation.”

e. **We’ve got a problem**
   a. “We’ve run into a bit of an issue. The number of new people joining our legacy society has fallen off in the last year. Do you mind if I ask you a few questions about your thoughts on this topic?”
   b. “We need your advice on some new legacy fundraising ads. Would you mind sharing your thoughts on a few examples?”
   c. “We held a planned giving seminar, but people didn’t show up. We’re trying to figure out why. So, we’re asking donors like you to share your thoughts in a focus group...”

f. **Helping you in my job**
   a. “My job is to help donors plan their gifts... This might look at multi-year strategies or even a gift in a will...”
   b. “Part of my job is to show donors how to give smarter. For example, any IRA money inherited by family members triggers income tax. But naming [our charity] avoids those taxes...”
Create your own external issue preface for your own ideal scenario

a. **Legacy campaign deadline:** “We’re in a campaign to get 100 new legacy society members before the end of the year, and we’re making great progress... [ask]”

b. **Combined campaign deadline:** “So far, we’re at 72% of our campaign goal for current gifts and 68% of our goal for planned estate gifts. You’ve already helped us in the first goal...[ask]”

c. **Leadership group campaign deadline:** “The new planned giving campaign starts this fall. We’ll be announcing our board participation at the banquet. Signing your planned gift before then could really influence others to take this step ... [ask]”

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   a. “My job is to help donors plan their gifts... This might look at multi-year strategies or even a gift in a will...”
   b. “Part of my job is to show donors how to give smarter. For example, any IRA money inherited by family members triggers income tax. But naming [our charity] avoids those taxes...”
Identity preface: Back to theory!
Steps in a compelling fundraising ask:

Original Identity → Challenge → Victory → Enhanced Identity

public (reputation) or private (personal meaning)

or simply
Death reminders trigger pursuit of symbolic immortality (resistance to disappearing)

• This increases attraction to ways in which one’s identity can live on

• A gift in a will helps when it continues the donor’s identity (the donor’s people, values, or history)
Identity preface

“People like you make gifts like this”

• “You are the kind of person who makes gifts like this”

• “Other people who are similar to you make gifts like this”

because of your (shared) identity: history, behaviors, values, beliefs, or group membership
Identity preface examples

“Many donors who give as regularly as you have put our organization in their will; what are your thoughts about doing that?”

-Anne Melvin, Harvard University
Identity preface examples

“Mrs. Jones, you are such a wonderful and loyal donor. Many of our most loyal donors are including Kent State in their estate plans in order to make an impact beyond their lifetime. Have you ever considered remembering Kent State in your will?”

-Mindy Aleman, Kent State University
Identity preface examples

“I can’t say thank you enough for all your support for so many years. Would you consider extending your amazing legacy by including us in your estate plans?”

-Jason James Shuba, University of Illinois Foundation
"Thank you so much for all your support for so many years – we truly appreciate it. Donors like you who have supported us for so long often include a gift in their estate plans. I’d love to say thank you for that as well if you’ve done so. Have you included us? Have you considered it?"

-Jason James Shuba, University of Illinois Foundation
“‘John, you’ve been a terrific supporter of Friends of Shakespeare. I want to thank you for all you have done for us over the years. I’m curious: what are your thoughts about becoming a member of the Fortinbras Society?’ ‘What is the Fortinbras Society?’ [This allows you to describe other committed members of the society, mention some that he knows...]

-Anne Melvin, Harvard University
“I’ve found the mission so compelling and the programs so meaningful that a few years ago I made a planned gift because I wanted to make certain that my support continued into the future. Other people I’ve met have wanted to make sure that their support continues as well and have let us know that they’ve made legacy gifts too. Could I take a few minutes before we’re finished here and tell you, briefly, about our legacy giving program and how we plan to use these gifts?”

-Katherine Swank, Blackbaud
• 4.9% left a gift to charity without being asked.

• 10.8% did so when asked “Would you like to leave any money to charity in your will?”

• 15.4% did so when the ask began with, “many of our customers like to leave money to charity in their will…”

Identity preface research: People like you

People read the story of Sara who had made a planned gift.

The effect of this story on their interest in making the gift depended on their response to one question, “How much do you identify with Sara? She is [a lot / somewhat / a little bit / not really / not at all] like me.”

Identity preface research: Your life story

In a test of 24 bequest gift descriptions among nearly 10,000 participants, the best was:

“Make a gift to charity in your will to support causes that have been important in your life.”

Identity preface research: Your life story

“Many people like to leave a gift to charity in their will.” worked better as,

“Many people like to leave a gift to charity in their will because they care about causes that are important in their lives.”

Identity preface research: Your life story

The donor’s life story arises in

• Qualitative interview research (“When discussing which charities they had chosen to remember, there was a clear link with the life narratives of many respondents.”)

• Neuroimaging research (charitable bequest decisions engage “visualized autobiography” brain regions)

Identity preface research: Your people (family tribute)

One experiment dramatically increased charitable bequest intention by,

1. Ask if there was a “friend or family member who would have appreciated (or would appreciate) your support of [Cause] such as [Org]”

2. Ask about that person’s connection to the cause

3. Ask about a bequest gift “honoring a deceased [or living] friend or family member”

Identity preface: Your people (family tribute)

“Some of the people with whom I meet are interested in hearing about ways to honor and memorialize their loved ones. Would you like to hear more about this option?”

-Alexandra Brovey (Stoney Brook U) & Patricia Roenigk (Penn State U)

Reply card samples courtesy of Phyllis Freedman, President of SmartGiving
"Victory" describes a visualizable, personally meaningful outcome. Death reminds donors they’re going to disappear. Legacy giving helps if it provides a way in which the donor’s identity – their people, values, or story – can live on.
Drs. Claire Routley and Adrian Sargeant explain, “The choice of charity to receive a bequest gift could, therefore, be a way of extending one’s autobiography, and thus a sense of self, forward in time beyond one’s physical death.”

In one experiment, a poverty relief charity was described as either,

- “meeting the immediate needs of people,” or
- “creating lasting improvements that would benefit people in the future”

Normally, the first description generated more gifts but for people reminded of their mortality, the results reversed.

Victory preface research: permanence

Those with a preference were 3X more likely to want a permanent fund for bequest gifts than for current gifts.

The most powerful motivation to make a second gift in memory of a loved one was the chance to make the fund permanent.
Victory preface examples: permanence

The ultimate “victory” in legacy giving is symbolic immortality. The donor’s identity – his people, values, or story – lives on after death.

• Permanence language
• Permanence structure: scholarship, lectureship, professorship, endowment funding a favorite part of operations
Victory preface examples: permanence

“Would you consider leaving a legacy of a $100,000 bequest to ensure that the help you provide these families will continue in perpetuity?”

-Janet Levine & Laurie A. Selik

Victory preface examples: permanence + identity

“You’ve been such a wonderful friend to [the charity] over the years. Many people like you want to include a gift in their will. My job is to help them plan that out, so their gift will make a lasting impact. Do you mind if I share some options with you?”
Victory preface examples: permanence + identity

“Look, Bob, you’ve given to us for 8 years now. You’ve given over $300,000. That’s fantastic! I’m here to build [this charity] for the long run and you’re building that with us. Have you thought about having [this charity] as part of your legacy plan?”
Take a moment to construct your own example estate giving ask that connects with a hypothetical donor’s identity (people, values, or life story)

“Look, Bob, you’ve given to us for 8 years now. You’ve given over $300,000. That’s fantastic! I’m here to build [this charity] for the long run and you’re building that with us. Have you thought about having [this charity] as part of your legacy plan?”

“Mrs. Jones, you are such a wonderful and loyal donor. Many of our most loyal donors are including Kent State in their estate plans in order to make an impact beyond their lifetime. Have you ever considered remembering Kent State in your will?”

“Thank you so much for all your support for so many years – we truly appreciate it. Donors like you who have supported us for so long often include a gift in their estate plans. I’d love to say thank you for that as well if you’ve done so. Have you included us? Have you considered it?”
Large estate gifts come with instructions. This is nothing new. In the 1800s, charitable bequests were restricted in,

- 14% of small cash gifts
- 58% of real estate or large cash gifts
- 70% of gifts of a share of the entire estate

Large gifts produce a specific, usually lasting, impact that motivates the gift size. These extreme gifts dominate. Most charitable decedents (60%) leave less than 10% of their estates to charity. This majority – the “normal” donors – transfer only 3.8% of all charitable dollars.

Identity vs. Victory:
Define a victory

The identity preface works to get a bequest gift.
The donor includes the charity because of the donor’s people, values, and history.
But it doesn’t give a reason for making a gift of a specific SIZE.
Victory preface examples:
Define a victory

“Tell me, ‘What you would like to accomplish with your gift?’”

“Have you ever thought about how you would like your gift to be used?”

Define a victory by sharing a story

“The reason I ask is this. I was working with another donor; you remind me of him. You both have a real heart for this cause.” [Identity]

“He decided to create a permanent endowment for a scholarship / lectureship / professorship / our ___ operations. It will ... [describe the impact].” [Victory]

“This will come from a $___ gift in his will. Would that type of gift appeal to you?” [Challenge]
The motivation to move from a token estate gift to a large estate gift often comes from the possibility to create a meaningful, lasting victory.

What question or approach might you use to help a donor uncover or construct a personally meaningful victory?
Victory preface: External competition

The most powerful permanent expression of identity is the private family foundation

• Lives forever
• Follows the donor’s values and rules forever
• Named for the donor or donor’s family

For estates over $5 million, 78% of charitable bequest dollars go to private family foundations

The motivation to move from a token estate gift to a large estate gift often comes from the possibility to create a meaningful, lasting victory.

What giving opportunities - products, designations, or just impact descriptions (perhaps at your organization) - might be particularly attractive for some estate donors? At $100K? At $10MM?
“Deliver value to legacy donors? No, no, no. The donor’s job is to deliver value to us! Besides, that just turns unrestricted money into restricted!”

Victory preface: Internal barriers
Charities are losing to private family foundations.
Many aren’t offering any victory, much less a permanent one.
Overcoming internal barriers: Point to the competition

“The donor wants to put these instructions with their money. They can use a private family foundation or community foundation. But I would rather they gave it directly to us to manage. What do you think?”
“I ask legacy donors what they want to accomplish with their gift. That way I can learn if they’re going to put any instructions in their wills. Sometimes those instructions are a problem. If we don’t learn about it until after they die, we might have to reject the gift. We just lose that money. But if we can talk about their plans in advance, then we can agree on some feasible option”
There isn’t just one magic phrase or magic story

Instead, there are unlimited expressions of the magic ideas
Still nervous?

Let me end with the easiest, softest - but still highly effective - approach.
So, what’s new at Texas Tech?

1. ... new coach ...
2. ... new building ...
3. Oh, and Jon Smith did a neat thing. Did you know Jon? He graduated two years before you... No? Well, Jon spent his career helping other people get their finances in order and he recently signed a new will that one day will endow a permanent scholarship for our financial planning students.

4. [Silence]
Three stories and shut up

So, what’s new at Texas Tech?

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4. [Silence]

Using social “story” words not formal words

AVOIDANCE: Don’t lead with death

Story: Character

Identification with the hero. “People like me do things like this”

life story connects with gift in a will

norming the gift

impact on our in-group

SYMBOLOC IMMORTALITY: lasting impact

Silence as the softest ask – donor decides where the conversation goes
Build your own! The story doesn’t have to be your donor experience, or even a donor to your organization. “You remind me of another donor, you both…”

3. Oh, and Jon Smith did a neat thing. Did you know Jon? He graduated two years before you... No? Well, Jon spent his career helping other people get their finances in order and he recently signed a new will that one day will endow a permanent scholarship for our financial planning students.

4. [Silence]
Socratic Fundraising
“LEGACY EDITION”

How to ask for a gift in a will without fear or anxiety

For free links to all my slides, videos, papers, books, please connect on LinkedIn!