

Well-Planned, Dynamic Recognition  
Can Foster Deeper Donor Relations

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***Editor's Note:** In seeking to offer additional resources for our nonprofit partners, we invite guest articles from our colleagues who serve the nonprofit development field. In this month's **New\$ You Can U\$e**, we feature a submission from Larry Greenwald, general manager of Florida-based RecognitionArt©, a national donor recognition firm. Larry was a founding member of Recognition Resources® and, since 1992, has designed and manufactured donor*

*recognition displays for the largest and smallest nonprofits in the country. Larry and his wife, Shelley, have served on numerous nonprofit boards and have helped in capital campaigns ranging from \$2.5 million to \$165 million. They are frequent speakers at regional and national fundraising conferences.*



In the world of recognition there are many different possibilities, choices and opportunities to help you maximize your communication, donor acknowledgement and fundraising efforts. The problem is that there is no way that one person can think of them all.

## **Discover the Emotion Behind the Gift!**

Donors have compelling reasons for giving to an organization, and there is always a definite and identifiable “emotion” behind the gift. This simple statement of fact is the basis on which all donor acknowledgement and recognition fundraising projects must be built.

There are three objectives related to this concept that, once implemented, will lead your nonprofit organization to differentiate itself above others and, ultimately, succeed in its fundraising and communications effort:

- Research, investigate and study how to “discover the emotions” behind your donors’ gifts
- Use your findings to build strong “heartstring” relationships with your donors

- Thank your donors in creative ways that make them feel valued, needed, proud, appreciated and flattered

## Donor Recognition Can Accomplish Much More than the Obvious

Often we get so bogged down with our day-to-day tasks that we end up putting aside our real and important work, which is thanking donors in a way that maximizes every dollar raised.

“Show Yourself the Reasons”

- Why people give to your organization
- What past traditions have helped/hindered your efforts
- How people perceive your image

A successful donor recognition display will communicate to your audience a variety of messages to help educate and increase fundraising income.

- Leave space for quotes, photos of donors and why they support your nonprofit
- Educate subtly with areas reserved for informative messages about planned giving, endowments, uses of proceeds, historical data and more
- Showcase volunteers and staff
- Make the display a focal point so it will draw viewers to ever changing information and photos

## Design Location

Recognition fundraising works so well because people enjoy seeing their name and their gift displayed in a prominent location.

The design should be motivating and inspirational, but it is *critical* that the display is in a location where it is the center of attention. If it is not visible to the public, then efforts have been wasted and many donor opportunities are lost.

The success of a design does not simply rest on how much is spent to create it, nor does it lie in the application of the latest fad design. Rather, the location is so critical that in most cases, it is better to sacrifice a secondary component such as display size in order to capture a prime high-traffic location for your project.

So what factors contribute to a prime location?

- High visibility

- Prominence
- Great traffic patterns
- Impact area

The location also conveys to the donors the importance placed on their contributions and their names. As they say in real estate: LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION!

### What Constitutes a Good Design

Just as corporations spend millions of dollars to have their products put on billboards or showcased in a dazzling design, donor recognition walls are the “billboards” for donors – *your* investors.

It is of paramount importance that you showcase your donors’ names in a billboard design. The “billboard” part is the style appropriate to your organization and region. But, make no mistake, if your donor recognition project does not engage or grab your investors, they will hesitate to donate again. Let’s discuss some of the important components in recognition design.

### **Show Me the Reason Why I Gave!**

By incorporating elements from the organization’s history or current mission into the design, you can create a sense of community with your donors.

There are reasons your donors selected to invest in your nonprofit. Remind them — and any prospective donors — of those reasons by customizing the design’s details.

### **Create a Challenge for Your Donors**

Including a hierarchy of giving levels is an equally important feature in donor displays. It has been our experience that even in completed campaigns, once the display is unveiled there will be new donors who will want to come onboard and current donors who will express interest in moving to a higher level or a different status. Therefore, the ability to interchange donors among the predetermined giving levels will create a lively environment that viewers will continually notice.

Donors invest in your organization for a reason; your goal is to find those reasons and integrate them into your design. This is a partnership between achieving the goals of your organization and achieving the recognition for your donors.

## **What Are Your Objectives?**

First, create a list of your organization’s goals, wants and needs. Next, review each point below and consider if it will play a part in your recognition project. If so, how it will be integrated into the final design?

- **Set** giving levels and consider if donors will be listed by dollar amounts or category name
- **Find** and capture previous donors
- **Raise** current donors to higher investment levels
- **Increase** local and national awareness
- **Consider** expansion opportunities
- **Compute** past giving patterns, including average and median gifts — these are critical in defining donor levels
- **Plan** for historical recognition
- **Formulate** room, wing and building naming opportunities
- **Determine** a location early, and explain to the organization’s planners the importance of location
- **Differentiate** your nonprofit from all others
- **Think** about finding a sponsor(s) to underwrite the display’s costs and possibly partner with you in other areas of your plan
- **Establish** a comfortable budget. Try not to withhold or overspend — two mistakes that can upset your donors. Have the budget in-line with your organization’s size and stature
- **Decide** on the length of time each recognition project will be in place, and be certain this information is communicated to the donor

By establishing primary and secondary goals and then developing and implementing an action plan, you will increase your revenue, bond your donors for life, and create a lasting legacy for generations to come.

### **Static vs. Dynamic Recognition**

Too often organizations find themselves in the dilemma between static (never changing) and dynamic (cumulative) recognition. Here are some thoughts about these two structures:

A dynamic recognition display allows everyone to participate. It not only recognizes large, single gifts that are received from time to time (especially in a specific campaign), but also smaller gifts given with consistent caring over a longer duration. Each is important to the organization’s success and both deserve recognition to show appreciation. Additionally, cumulative recognition allows the donor to see and be thanked for his/her entire history of giving, and not simply for a brief “snapshot” of the donor’s generosity.

Nonprofits spend significant amounts of money to recognize donors who give during annual appeals or capital drives. With static recognition, those donors will feel appropriately thanked at the time of dedication. However, the recognition vehicle soon begins to fade into the surrounding décor after the end of the event. As a plaque on the wall, it soon loses its appeal and disappears — if not from view, then certainly from our consciousness.

If, however, organizations would invest a little more into the display, a flexible, expandable, non-defined perimeter piece can be created that will become a dynamic part of their ongoing fundraising efforts. For example, it could include a rotating art exhibit of historic and/or current events that tell a story; this will keep it a consistent area of interest. It will allow organizations to recognize into the future for all donations: large and small, planned gifts and legacies, life insurance proceeds and wills.

As you can see, cumulative recognition, or a dynamic display, works for organizations dependent on their donors both large and small. After all, both should have the opportunity to be recognized for their total effort on behalf of the nonprofit.