

ASKING FOR BEQUESTS

Even the most sophisticated planned giving programs report that bequests account for approximately seventy percent (70%) of their planned gifts and planned giving dollars. And, even if your organization has a small staff and few active board members, you can still ask for and receive planned gifts

To start a planned giving effort, begin with the planned gift that is easiest to ask for and to deal with once made: the charitable bequest. A bequest is a provision in a will or living trust which directs the executor of the will or trustee of the trust to distribute part of the assets the document controls to another person or charity.

A bequest is a very flexible planned gift. Donors can revoke a bequest or change its provisions easily with a codicil or amendment to a trust. Since a bequest is almost always revocable, it is important to remember that stewardship of bequests involves a life-long relationship that must be sustained to assure eventual distribution.

Because bequests often transfer the largest gifts individual donors ever make to charity, there has been quite a bit of research about the process and who make the best probable donors. In short, affluent, better educated donors who are or have been married and have children are your best potential bequestors. In this description, affluence is the least predictive attribute. People with modest estates often leave charitable bequests and should certainly be given the opportunity to do so.

Where to Start?

Before you send that eloquent letter asking for an annual gift, you make sure two things are in place. Both are based on the presumption that you will get a response. One is a thank you letter acknowledging and substantiating your receipt of gifts. Waiting until the gifts start coming in only delays your acknowledgement and frustrates donors. Second, you have a system – usually known as your Donor Information System – that will facilitate gift accounting and acknowledgement.

Planned giving, even simple bequests, requires important preparation, also. You want to be ready to expeditiously accept and process requests for information and notices of gifts, whether they're expectancies or matured (when you get the money).

Once you have donor-centered policies and procedures for accepting planned gifts in place, and a system to respond to inquiries established, it's time to give people the opportunity to give. The primary bequest encouragement strategy is best described as "dripping." Repetition and brevity mark good bequest messaging.

That's not to say you won't be using articles in publications and other messaging tactics to get the word out. You will. But, the core effort to encourage bequests has to deliver simple messages when your probable donors are thinking about estate planning. Most of them probably won't call you to say, "I'm thinking about writing my will, can you tell me how to include a bequest for you?" So, you have to pique their interest when it's top of mind.

To do this, you create a multi-channel, systematic messaging process. It should include most or all of the ideas in this checklist:

- At least once a year, focus a letter to everyone on your mailing list inviting them to consider making a bequest to your organization. The best theme for such a letter is to relate the impact a bequest has had on your programs. If you've not had a bequest to highlight, write about another organization transformed through bequest giving. If you are using JPL&P's *Thirteen Touch Program* to cultivate and solicit support, make this the first of your three planned giving letters.
- Include an article in every publication produced by your organization about some aspect of bequests such as sample wording for a will that has a bequest to your program, or a profile of how a realized bequest is impacting your service to your constituency. If a service is the subject of an article in your publication that has benefited from a bequest or other gift support, put a distinctive graphic element in the layout of the article that will attract attention.
- Share anecdotes about bequests made to other nonprofits and how those gifts transformed the donor and those organizations.
- On all pledge and gift/response forms, include two key sentences with checkboxes:
 - "Please provide me with additional information about making a charitable bequest"
 - "I have made charitable bequest in my will or living trust to benefit (your organization)."

- All gift acknowledgment and substantiation letters should include a postscript. It is generally accepted that this device attracts more attention than a letter's body copy. Create "standard bequest messages" to use as postscripts. Examples:
- Another way to strengthen our service to this community is a charitable bequest. Please remember us in your will or living trust.
 - Many of our most helpful gifts come from the estates of our generous donors. Please consider a bequest to us when you plan your estate.
 - Charitable bequests can reduce taxes and help you benefit your family and others through your will or living trust. We've learned about these devices and would love to share our ideas with you. Please call me today about how we might help you.
 - The program your wonderful gift will support has recently received a gift through a donor's will. If you'd like to learn how you can do the same, call me at (XXX) XXX-XXXX.
 - We recently received a wonderful gift through a donor's living trust. It is a magnificent legacy for the donor and for us. The sadness is that we didn't know it was coming and I didn't get to say "thank you" as I sincerely want to do. Please let me know if you have a bequest for us in your will. I promise only to thank you as warmly as possible for your thoughtfulness.
 - A gift that transforms our organization or one of our programs is a wonderful philanthropic expression. These are often made by donors in their wills or living trusts. Please let us know if you've included us in your planning. (or) Please call me to discuss how you might do the same.
 - I'm often frustrated when donors make bequest gift to us because I can't write a letter like this one to say thank you. Please let me know while I can still write you with our gratitude if you've included us in your estate giving.
 - In this wonderful season of renewal, we often take time to remember those who have gone before us and added so much to our lives and work. Please consider a bequest in your will or living trust that those we serve will celebrate with gratitude in the future.

- ❑ In fundraising brochures and literature you produce, include sentences and phrases that stand alone and encourage bequests. Examples are, "Remember (your organization) in your will or living trust," "A gift through your will or living trust will continue your support of (your organization) as an important legacy in our community," "Many of our donors use their wills or living trusts to make their most generous gifts, please remember us when you create yours," "A charitable bequest is an excellent way to create a lasting memorial."
- ❑ In any material which references bequests, be sure that a staff member's name, address, e-mail, and telephone number is easy to spot when reading the reference. Convenience is crucial once any interest is piqued.
- ❑ Make sure speakers who report on programs which have benefited from major gift support – including bequests and even if indirectly – have PowerPoint slides to include in their presentation which acknowledge notable bequest and other gift support of the program. This is especially important if a program or facility was named through a bequeathed gift.
- ❑ Create distinctive recognition devices for bequest donors, such as special name tags, lapel pins, cuff links, or medallions to wear at your events. This can be a part of a formal recognition society for planned gifts or just evidence of very special status in the life of the organization. These devices, along with plaques and certificates become endorsements of your program whenever their displayed.
- ❑ Seek the permission of those who have made bequest provisions to tell others – through your publications and your conversations – about their generous intent. This is another form of endorsement of your bequest program and a great secondary way to say thank you for their generosity.
- ❑ Consider creating a "Special Legacy Recognition Area" in a prominent place in your organization. A high traffic area for the public is best. Recognize bequests and other planned gifts, both expected and received. Give donors who advise you of bequests to you a small replica of the plaque you place in this area. Do the same for families of donors whose gifts mature.

Jerold Panas, Linzy & Partners offers the Planned Giving Help Desk service to assist philanthropic organizations in their efforts to secure the largest charitable gifts most people make: planned gifts. There are a variety of service options which can be customized to meet your specific needs. Please contact us if you would like more information about this important element of our service to philanthropy.