



Bequest Commitments – Don’t Make It a “Hail Mary” Ask

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A question for gift officers – “how much preparation goes into asking a donor for a bequest commitment?” Do you engage in the same strategic planning process you would before asking for a major gift? In many cases, a realized bequest is at a major gift level and often exceeds the total lifetime giving of the deceased donor. Asking for a bequest commitment deserves the same strategic planning as a major gift ask. Unfortunately, too often the bequest commitment solicitation becomes a last-ditch effort when all else has failed. Instead, consider these intentional steps before asking a donor to include your organization in their will or trust, or for them to make your organization the beneficiary of any of a number of assets (e.g. life insurance, IRA, brokerage account, etc.):

- 1. The prospect.** Has the prospect been qualified? How much is known about their resources, their family, their other philanthropic priorities, and their commitment to the mission of your organization? Are there specific programs at your organization that they choose to support? What motivates them to give and what would motivate them to continue your mission into the future with their bequest commitment? Even more than with a current gift, a deferred gift such as a bequest intention is driven by donor passion.
- 2. The strategy.** Successful major gift solicitations have a strategy. A solicitation for an estate gift is no different. Could an estate commitment endow support for a program that motivates the donor’s philanthropy? Should a blended gift be considered such that the donor can see during her lifetime the impact of her gift and know that her estate commitment will sustain that program? Might a naming opportunity be a motivating factor? Successful strategies are born from collaborative efforts. Who in your organization could contribute to developing a meaningful strategy for the donor?
- 3. The cultivation.** The cultivation necessary to get to the point of asking the donor for an estate commitment should be part of the strategy. What steps or “moves” are necessary in advance of the ask? Who should be involved? Should program staff be brought on a

visit? Should someone who has benefitted from a program be introduced to the donor (i.e. in higher education, donors with endowed scholarships meeting their scholarship recipients). Is there a point when organization leadership needs to get involved? Also, has the possibility of the donor making an estate commitment been raised to “test the waters?”

4. **The ask.** Consider these elements when determining when and how to make the ask:
 - a. **Timing.** Has sufficient cultivation taken place such that the timing feels right for the ask? Is the gift officer sufficiently aware of the donor’s family situation? Might the proposal address a unique family situation, such as providing a stream of income for a family member using a planned giving vehicle rather than an outright estate distribution?
 - b. **The program.** Will the estate commitment ensure the future of a program important to the donor and that is a priority for the charity? Is the ask for the right program?
 - c. **The person to do the ask.** Who should be present at the ask? A collaborative approach is more likely to lead to success. The gift officer with the relationship with the donor should be present and coordinate the effort. Depending on the size of the anticipated estate commitment, the use of the funds, and even who the donor is, may require that someone in leadership at the organization be present. The president, a board member, or even the board chair can add gravitas to the ask. Program staff can often be very passionate about the needs and impact of their program.
 - d. **Follow-up.** Whether or not the ask has been successful, what are the next steps? Staff will need to debrief after the ask. If the ask has been accepted, then Step #5 is appropriate. If the ask has not been accepted then a strategy should be developed, which might determine that the donor is not open to an estate commitment. Revisiting the initial strategy and cultivation may be warranted. A revised proposal may be a next step if there is still the possibility of acceptance.
5. **The structure of the estate commitment.** There are many ways that an estate commitment can be structured. While including the charity in a will or trust is what donors think of most, planned giving professionals are aware of other tax-saving strategies that may better suit the donor’s estate plan. It is generally best if technicalities of how the estate commitment will be made is handled after the ask and by involving the donor’s advisors, along with hopefully the organization’s gift planners. The donor should remain excited about what their estate commitment will mean for your organization throughout the process.

Conclusion

The steps leading up to asking for an estate commitment are much the same as the planning that goes into asking for a major gift. Making a “Hail Mary” ask is a strategy, but unless you’re Doug Flutie, it’s generally not a winning one.