

Strategy Session

Eight Steps to Launching a Planned-giving Program

By Alexander Macnab

Even though most development professionals understand the pyramid of giving and know that planned gifts sit at the top, many organizations never get a planned-giving program established because something else always seems a higher priority.

But a few simple steps can help even the smallest organization get started.

1) First, recalculate your existing personnel budget, allocating a portion or percentage of the chief development officer's time (and salary) to planned giving. Consider starting with 5 percent or 10 percent. Naturally, that means delegating or eliminating activities now taking that portion of the job. Build it into the job description. Add a similar amount of time to whatever support staff is available.

2) Find a board member or volunteer who will serve as the planned- and major-gifts chair and help you build a supportive committee. The person you seek is someone who has very likely been a board chair and has either personally benefited or has a close family member or friend who has benefited from your organization's work.

Don't expect the committee to do the work. They're there to provide support and open doors for the work you will do. Let the committee decide which of several planned-giving brochures you provide for them is the best fit for your organization. If they help choose one, they will proudly carry it to friends and acquaintances.

3) Join an existing planned-giving support group in your community. Visit the National Committee on Planned Giving Web site -- www.ncpg.org -- and find a group in your area. Ask those who attend what they've been doing that works and then copy it. Learn about the more complex planned gifts from this group. Ask questions and listen. Attend planned-giving training seminars.

4) Decide what you're going to promote. We all eventually die, so bequests are a logical starting point. In fact, even at places with very large, established planned- and major-giving programs, bequests represent the lion's share. So start asking to be included in wills, and actively ask for bequests.

5) Design a simple (and inexpensive) lapel pin that will be given to everyone who has named your organization in their will (or established some other planned-gift arrangement, but start with bequests). Name the recognition society you have just created for someone who helped in the past. Ask your planned-giving chair to make a bequest provision and to ask fellow board members to do so also. In time, this will result in substantial gifts.

6) Look back over the past few years and make a list of board members and supporters who have died. Use the list as a reminder that your organization needs a will and bequests program. Once you have an identifiable bequest program, you'll be ready to expand to promote other arrangements such as gift annuities, charitable trusts, life insurance policies (usually existing ones), retirement funds and houses.

7) Establish a simple, month-by-month time line of what you want to accomplish and by when. List only those activities you can actually accomplish with 5 percent or 10 percent of your time given to it. You were not hired as a planned-giving expert, so if you can afford it, consider hiring a consultant to help you, at least in the early stages.

8) And while it might seem laughably simplistic, success is all about planning our work and then working our plan. For an example of both a time line and a planned-giving expense budget, write or e-mail me.