



CONNECTING WITH PURPOSE

6 Strategies to Build Lasting Donor Engagement



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Introduction



Your success as a fundraiser isn't just measured by the money—it's about the relationships you build. Too many nonprofits focus on the next donation and overlook the ones they already have. The real opportunity? Building connections that last. That's where the magic happens—because those who feel connected don't just give; they stick around.

Many donors don't leave because they can't afford to give. They leave because they don't feel connected. While financial circumstances play a part, research shows that [63% of donors give because they feel connected to a mission](#), yet the [average donor retention rate is just 45%](#). That means most nonprofits are losing more donors than they keep.

Why this gap? Transactional fundraising treats giving like a one-time exchange, not an ongoing relationship. When donors feel like customers rather than participants, they disengage. The good news? Simple actions—like inviting donors into conversations, sharing personal impact stories, or involving them in behind-the-scenes decisions—turn one-time givers into lifelong champions.

When donors feel like part of something bigger, they don't just give—they invest. A thank-you note acknowledges a gift, but lasting engagement happens when supporters see the difference they're making. By fostering meaningful connections, you build more than financial support—you cultivate a community of committed advocates who stay involved and inspire others to do the same.

Nonprofits thrive when they prioritize meaningful connection over transactional relationships. This ebook will show you how you can forge stronger, more authentic relationships with donors by connecting over shared values and purpose-driven engagement. We'll explore strategies for moving beyond one-time gifts and creating long-term supporters who truly believe in your mission.

1. Reimagining donor relationships

Donors want more than simply to fund your work—they want to shape it. Giving them a role beyond donations flips the script from ‘supporters’ to partners.’

Invite donors to join in

Nonprofits have an opportunity to turn giving from a transaction into a true partnership. But many still default to a passive model: donors give, and nonprofits thank them. But what if giving wasn’t just an act of support but an invitation to participate? Small shifts—like inviting donors to help shape campaign themes or vote on new initiatives—create ownership. Donors who feel personally involved are more likely to stay involved and connected.

Turn donors into collaborators

Donors want more than simply to fund your work—they want to shape it. Giving them a role beyond donations flips the script from ‘supporters’ to partners.’

- **Start an advisory group** with donors of all giving levels, not just major givers.
- **Ask for donor input** through quick polls or interactive Q&As.
- **Invite donors to step in, not just give.** Some of your most committed supporters want to do more than write a check. Giving them real ways to contribute—through volunteer roles that tap into their skills or hands-on opportunities that connect them to your work—[turns donors into active partners](#).
- **Seek out expertise, not just dollars.** A donor who shares their knowledge in a committee or gives their services in-kind can be just as valuable as one who gives financially.





Go beyond the ask—create moments of belonging

Donors don't leave because they stop caring. They leave when they stop seeing themselves in your story. Give them ways to connect that aren't just about giving:

- **Behind-the-scenes tours.** Invite donors to see their impact in action.
- **Personal calls—not just to ask, but to update.** A two-minute check-in can mean more than a polished annual report.
- **Exclusive experiences.** Let donors beta-test new initiatives or attend pre-launch briefings on upcoming programs.

Why donor involvement matters:

Donors who engage beyond giving—whether they volunteer, attend events, or advocate for your cause—are more than twice as likely to stay loyal and become long-term advocates for your mission.

2. Using technology to build stronger donor relationships

Technology has changed the way we connect with donors, making it easier to personalize outreach, automate processes, and predict giving behavior. But the nonprofits that thrive aren't the ones with the most sophisticated tools—they're the ones using technology to make donors feel seen, valued, and essential to the mission.

Use data to strengthen, not replace, real connection

Donors don't want better algorithms—they [want to feel known](#). Automation can streamline processes, but it shouldn't leave donors feeling like a number. We've all seen it—emails that say 'Dear {First Name}' or appeals that miss the mark with inaccurate past gift info.

[The Boys & Girls Clubs of Indianapolis](#) struggled with fragmented donor data, which made it harder to keep strong relationships. Once they moved to a giving platform that consolidated their data, they were able to reconnect with 60% of their lapsed major donors.

This change did more than improve their outreach—it made their outreach more personal. Technology can't replace personal connections, but the right platform can help to strengthen them.



Why personalization matters:

Donors who receive personalized outreach are [40% more likely](#) to stay engaged and continue supporting your mission compared to those who receive generic communications.

Let donors shape their experience

Some donors want detailed impact updates. Others prefer hands-on involvement. Use segmentation and AI-powered insights strategically—not to dictate donor journeys but to offer meaningful choices. Organizations that do this well see a [20% - 30% boost in engagement](#) because their outreach aligns with donor interests.

AI-powered tools can help fundraisers recognize patterns and anticipate donor preferences, making segmentation more precise. But technology is just that—a tool. The most effective nonprofits use AI to reveal insights, not make decisions, so that personalization feels intentional rather than automated.

Make every touchpoint an invitation, not just a transaction

Every donor interaction should encourage not just an ask—but another opportunity to engage. The right technology makes this easier by tracking past interactions, personalizing outreach, and creating seamless multi-touch engagement.

- **Use automation to create natural follow-ups.** A quick survey, a behind-the-scenes update, or an invitation to weigh in on new initiatives can be triggered automatically based on donor behavior, keeping supporters engaged between appeals.
- **Map donor journeys with CRM insights.** Tracking giving patterns and engagement history using a donor management system helps you see when to reach out, ensuring timely and relevant outreach.
- **Segment outreach based on past interactions.** A donor who attended an event last year but hasn't opened an email in months might need a different message than a regular supporter. CRM insights help tailor engagement.

- **Turn setbacks into strategic engagement.** When [Peace Community Center](#) had to cancel an in-person event, they used their giving platform to pivot quickly to a multi-touch email campaign. By segmenting donors, automating follow-ups, and tracking responses in real time, they raised over \$118,000—proving that a giving platform isn't just for fundraising—it's a tool for ongoing engagement

Personalize interactions to deepen commitment

AI-powered segmentation makes it easier to recognize patterns, tailor outreach, and engage donors in more meaningful ways. But the most successful organizations use AI to inform their approach—not replace genuine human connection.

A donor who gets a quick, personal [thank-you video](#) is much more likely to stay engaged than one who receives a highly targeted but impersonal appeal. When technology supports engagement and humans add the personal touch, retention climbs. Organizations that blend AI-driven insights with thoughtful, human-centered communication and appreciation see [higher donor retention and increased fundraising success](#).



3. Building trust through transparency and engagement



Donors may believe in your mission—but they give because they feel connected. And nothing builds connection faster than **trust**. But trust isn't just about financial reports or compliance checkboxes. It's about making donors feel like insiders. The more donors connect with your work, the more they'll invest—not just financially but emotionally.

Transparency: more than just reporting—it's storytelling

Nonprofits often see transparency as a means of financial accountability. But donors want more than numbers—they want narratives. They want to understand how their gift makes a difference, who it helps, and *what* it makes possible. The best transparency turns data into [stories that donors can see unfold in real time](#).

Show real progress as it happens

Don't wait for an end-of-year report to demonstrate donors' impact. Highlight their giving in action. Use real-time updates to create momentum, turning one-time gifts into a shared, ongoing effort. [Fundraising thermometers](#), live goal trackers, and campaign updates don't just show progress—they fuel it.

Studies on donor psychology show that [people are more likely to give when they see others actively contributing](#). A [live giving tracker](#) taps into this social proof, encouraging participation in the moment rather than waiting for a later appeal.

Seeing impact in motion builds donor trust. A static "goal met" announcement at the end of the year is a missed opportunity. When donors can track progress as it happens—whether it's meals served, animals rescued, or students supported—they feel like they're part of the mission, not just funding it.

INSTEAD OF:

A year-end summary of how many people were helped.



TRY:

A running total updated monthly or a live progress bar that lets donors watch the impact grow in real time—on your website, on social media, in your monthly e-newsletters—anywhere they engage with your work.

Make updates about donor impact, not just organizational achievements

Nonprofits have an incredible opportunity to celebrate their donors as part of their success. Instead of focusing only on organizational achievements, why not highlight what your donors have accomplished? For example, “Together, you helped provide 10,000 meals last year!” By emphasizing the impact donors make, you create a deeper sense of connection and inspire them to continue driving your mission forward.

INSTEAD OF:

“We launched a new mentorship program this year.”



TRY:

“Because of your support, 50 students now have mentors helping them navigate their future.”

When updates center donors in the story, they’re more likely to stay engaged—because they see themselves as part of the mission.

Invite feedback—then act on it

Transparency isn’t just about what you show—it’s about what you listen to. Donors who feel heard are more likely to stay engaged. But engagement isn’t just asking for feedback—it’s showing donors that their input matters.

INSTEAD OF:

A generic year-end donor survey with no follow-up.



TRY:

A one-question poll—*“Which program are you most excited to hear updates on?”*—followed by targeted updates for donors who want to stay in the loop.

Small actions like these signal that donors aren’t just funders—they’re stakeholders in your work.

Build trust by involving donors in the work

People stay where they feel needed. Instead of just updating donors on decisions, bring them into the process.

- **Let donors vote on new initiatives.** [Carmel Swim Club](#) let supporters help shape its fundraising initiatives based on donor feedback and community needs. By involving donors in decisions, they increased engagement and built stronger long-term relationships.
- **Use VIP experiences to recognize loyal donors.** A private reception, a small-group conversation with leadership, or a [personalized experience for long-time supporters](#) engages donors—and it shows them they matter. When recognition feels exclusive and intentional, it deepens connection and strengthens commitment.
- **Make transparency a conversation, not a broadcast.** Donors don't just want updates—they want to be part of the story. Organizations that create two-way engagement—through surveys, live Q&As, and interactive reports—deepen donor investment and strengthen long-term relationships.



The nonprofits that build the strongest donor relationships [aren't just transparent about impact—they make donors part of it.](#)

Why transparency matters:

Only 16% of donors report [feeling highly connected](#) to the nonprofits they support. But nearly half (48%) say that [consistent, meaningful updates keep them engaged](#) and inspire continued giving.

4. Keeping donors engaged beyond the ask



Fundraising doesn't stop when a donor gives. Maintaining donor relationships is the key to sustained success for nonprofits. Every dollar spent on retention [does the work of five dollars](#) spent on acquisition. Yet retention efforts often take a back seat to recruitment.

Most lapsed donors don't leave intentionally—they just fade away. The problem isn't donor fatigue—it's donor disengagement. They leave when they don't feel connected. But when they see themselves as part of the mission—not just funders of it—they stick around. And they bring others with them.

Nonprofits often focus their engagement efforts on fundraising campaigns. But keeping donors engaged between appeals—not just when you ask them to give again—is what turns occasional donors into lifelong supporters. The difference between a one-time donor and a long-term champion is what happens between asks.

Updates should do more than check a box—they should invite donors to stay part of the work

- **Use engagement as an early warning system.** A donor who [used to engage](#) but stops opening emails? That's a signal they may be slipping away.
- **Reignite [lapsed donors](#) before they're lost.** A donor who hasn't given in a while isn't necessarily gone for good. A simple, no-ask message—*"We miss you! Here's what your past gifts have made possible."*—can remind them why they gave in the first place. Sometimes, all it takes is a nudge.
- **Tap into the psychology of belonging.** People stay [where they feel known](#). Instead of just tracking transactional engagement, look for signs of emotional engagement—a donor who consistently responds to impact surveys, leaves comments on social posts, or refers friends to your organization. These behaviors signal deep connection—and those donors are your best ambassadors.

Why early engagement matters:

One-time donors retain at a rate of only 19%, while those who give three to six times tend to stay engaged 63% of the time. Improving your retention rate by as little as 10% can multiply your donor lifetime value by 200%.



Predict who's at risk before they leave

Losing a donor doesn't happen overnight. It's a slow fade. The signs are there—you just have to pay attention.

One-time donors have just an 19% retention rate, but those who give three to six times stick around 61% of the time. That means one thing: Engage donors early or risk losing them.

- **Look at patterns, not just past giving.** A donor who attended every event last year but skips this year's gala? That's a signal to reach out before they disappear.
- **Use your giving platform or donor CRM to flag disengaged donors early.** The right tools can help you see who's slipping away so you can act before it's too late.

Donors don't just stop giving. They stop engaging first. The organizations that thrive aren't just good at fundraising—they're good at making donors feel like they belong and have a role to play beyond the donation.



5. Make recognition feel personal

Recognition can sometimes become routine—a generic thank-you, an automated receipt, a donor wall where names blur together. It’s well-intended, but if it doesn’t feel personal, it doesn’t last.

Nonprofits spend so much energy winning donors, but what happens after the gift matters just as much. [While only 36% regularly share impact reports](#), failing to keep donors in the loop drives nearly a quarter of donors away. Thoughtful updates—real stories, meaningful recognition, and clear impact—that have a personal touch keep donors engaged and committed long after they give.

Why personal recognition matters:

Donors who receive a thank-you call within 48 hours are [39% more likely to give again](#).

Personalization is powerful, but it doesn’t have to be time-consuming

Small, thoughtful gestures create lasting loyalty. A one-line email from a program director saying, “Saw your gift today—made my morning,” feels more meaningful than a formal letter.

- **Scale personalization without losing impact.** If one-to-one outreach isn’t feasible, segment donors by interests and send targeted updates that feel direct—even if they aren’t handwritten.
- **Make milestones matter.** Instead of a standard donor anniversary email, acknowledge impact: “A year ago, your gift helped launch [initiative]. Here’s what it’s achieved since.”

- **Recognize more than giving.** Celebrate donors who engage beyond donations—volunteers, advocates, and longtime supporters. A donor who consistently shares your mission on social media deserves a thank-you, too.

What makes recognition effective isn’t the size of the gesture but whether it makes donors feel like they belong. The best acknowledgment is the one that deepens their connection to the mission.

But personal recognition doesn’t just happen once—it should continue between asks, keeping donors connected to your mission beyond the moment of giving.



6. Donors do more than fund your mission—they make it stronger

Many nonprofits focus on keeping donors engaged, but what if the real opportunity is something bigger? What if involving your donors is more than retention—but about making your nonprofit stronger, more innovative, and more sustainable?

- **Donors as market intelligence.** Your supporters see your work from the outside in. They know what messages resonate, what feels authentic, and where trust is won or lost. The best nonprofits treat donors as an advisory board, using their insights to refine strategy—not just fundraising.
- **Donors as force multipliers.** A donor who feels like an insider doesn't just give; they advocate, recruit, and expand your reach in ways no campaign can. The difference between a one-time gift and a lifelong champion often comes down to whether donors feel like participants or spectators.
- **Donors as co-creators.** Instead of just updating donors on your work, let them shape it. Nonprofits that crowdsource donor feedback on program design, messaging, or strategic priorities often see higher engagement and stronger long-term investment.

From transparency to shared ownership

Trust grows when donors have influence, not just information.

INSTEAD OF:

A polished annual report that tells donors what you accomplished.



TRY:

Bringing donors into decision-making moments—whether it's beta-testing a new initiative, voting on campaign themes, or weighing in on upcoming priorities.

When donors feel like insiders, not outsiders, their connection shifts from passive support to active investment in your future.

Why donor involvement matters:

Building [trust-based philanthropy](#) through open, collaborative relationships with donors helps nonprofits increase their impact and create long-term stability.

The last word: Making every connection count



Your mission thrives because of the commitment of your donors, volunteers, and advocates. But commitment isn't just about giving—it's about belonging. When you move past transactional relationships, you tap into the full strength of your community—not just through financial support but through shared purpose and deeper engagement.

Every interaction with a donor should affirm their role as a valued partner in your mission. A thank-you note? That's nice. A real conversation? Even better. When donors see themselves as part of the work, they stay. And they bring others with them.

This goes beyond changing tactics. It's about rethinking how your nonprofit engages with and empowers supporters. When your team focuses on building real connections instead of managing transactions, your mission becomes stronger.

Technology can strengthen donor relationships when used with intention. Predictive analytics and real-time dashboards help personalize engagement and offer donors an immediate sense of impact. But data alone doesn't build loyalty. The real power of technology is how it frees up time for human connection.

Donor loyalty isn't about sending more follow-ups or better thank-you notes. It's about making people feel like they're part of something bigger. Their support goes beyond the dollars and cents—it's an investment in your mission, one they help shape. This isn't just good fundraising; it's how you create lasting change. Loyal donors become your advocates—they spread the word, inspire others, and expand your impact.



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