



Getting To Know You:

A Guide to the Hidden Power of Donor Surveys



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EBOOK:

Intro

Think of the last time you went out for groceries, stayed at a hotel, rented a car, or downloaded an app.

Chances are you received some kind of customer satisfaction survey.

For-profit businesses understand that in order to retain customers and improve their offerings, they need to continuously collect and act on feedback. It's why so many send surveys. They know that even though not everyone answers surveys, the ones who do offer valuable feedback and present themselves as highly engaged.

Unfortunately, the nonprofit sector's equivalent – donor surveys – are not as ubiquitous. Picture this: It's your birthday week. You're sitting at home and the doorbell rings. A package has just arrived! You don't recognize the name or address of the sender, but inside is your favorite brand of loose leaf green tea (jasmine pearl, of course).

What would you do next? Would you:

- Brew a pot of tea and think nothing of it?
- Send a short thank you note and move on with your life?
- Show up at the sender's house and try to figure out who is randomly sending you tea and why?

Maybe the third choice is a bit extreme, but I think most people would succumb to at least a little bit of curiosity.

How does this person know me? How do they know I like tea? How do they know that's exactly what I wanted? Why do they like me enough to do something so nice?

As fundraisers, we sometimes suffer from a lack of curiosity about our donors. Sure, the birthday present analogy isn't exactly the same as receiving a donation, but we are getting donations from people who oftentimes we know nothing about.

Why did they donate to us? How did they hear about us? What do they expect from us?

We're even less curious about existing donors in terms of the current state of the relationship:

How do they feel about what we're sending to them?

Are we their favorite charity?

Are they still passionate about the cause?

Not only does knowing the answers to these questions prove invaluable in guiding our efforts, but research shows that donors actually like it when we ask them questions about themselves!

What's inside:

- Why you should send surveys
- Which donors you should send surveys to
- What surveys should ask
- What to do with the information you receive from surveys



The case for surveys



Just as engagement and communication are important factors for customer retention, so too are they for donor retention.

Research by Dr. Adrian Sargeant, who literally wrote the book on donor retention and loyalty, shows that surveys are effective in measuring a donor's satisfaction, commitment, intimacy, and trust for the organizations they support.

They provide a vehicle for constituents to make their voices heard, while also offering organizations invaluable information regarding how they are perceived by their constituents.

Dr. Adrian Sargeant speaks to the power of donor surveys in his **7 Principles of Donor Commitment**:

- 1. Your "customer service" is good.**
- 2. They share your beliefs.**
- 3. They're aware of consequences.**
- 4. You've connected.**
- 5. They trust you.**
- 6. Multiple engagements.**
- 7. They're learning. Are you taking them on a journey?**

The good news is, you don't have to wonder if any of the above seven are in place. You can ask!

In 2011, a Donor Voice study of more than 250 nonprofits found that the fourth-highest driver of donor commitment directly relates to soliciting feedback from donors.

1,200 long-time loyal donors were asked to rank, by order of relevance, 32 reasons why they kept giving to those 250 nonprofits.

Here are the top seven:

1. Donor perceives your organization to be effective in trying to achieve its mission
2. Donor knows what to expect from your organization with each interaction
3. Donor receives a timely thank you
4. Donor receives opportunities to make his or her views known
5. Donor is given the feeling that he or she is part of an important cause
6. Donor feels his or her involvement is appreciated
7. Donor receives information showing who is being helped

A study conducted in 2021 by the IU Lilly School of Philanthropy uncovered similar sentiments.

When asked what types of communication and content that subscription donors (a form of monthly recurring donors) would prefer to receive from nonprofit organizations they support, donors responded with the following:

52% - Stories and experiences shared by the people my gifts have helped

32% - Frequent updates about the organization's programs and services

32% - Emails with my donation's impact and heartfelt thank you(s)

25% - Educational and interactive webinar series related to the organization's mission and impact areas

It likely won't surprise you to see that thanking donors quickly and communicating the impact of their philanthropy keeps them around.

But were you surprised to see feedback opportunities were ranked so highly?

It makes sense. Donors give because they want to change something they don't like about the world. So why wouldn't they want to express those feelings in other ways besides their hard-earned dollars? And why also wouldn't they want to provide feedback on the organizations they've chosen to funnel those dollars through?

Not only can surveys make donors feel like you care about them, but you can also leverage the information gained to predict future giving and alter your communications to make them more effective.

DonorVoice touts the results of their own donor commitment survey, which has been shown to predict future giving from high-commitment donors (130% more net revenue over a 36-month period). The alternative is a one-size-fits-all approach to donor communications.

You needn't spend more than a few minutes on [SOFill.org](https://www.sofill.org) - the showcase of fundraising innovation and inspiration - to see countless case studies of organizations leveraging the power of donor surveys to enhance feelings of loyalty amongst their constituents.

So what are you waiting for?

Deciding who to survey

Much like building segments of donors in your database, there's no limit to the amount of survey types you can build.

If you're just getting started, consider prioritizing these three types of donors:

Let's dive in and outline the importance of each:

1. New

First-time donors have the lowest retention rates of any donor frequency (high 20%s to low 30%s). These abysmal rates come into play when you consider fundraising ROI.

For example, let's say you spend \$25 to acquire a new donor who gives you \$10. Right off the bat, you have negative ROI on that gift. If they never give again, you'll have lost \$15 on your efforts. It's imperative that you secure a second gift, and one of the best ways to do that is to find out how your donors feel about you in the first days of the relationship.

2. Existing

Even though retention rates are higher (low 60%s) you shouldn't rest on your laurels. Not only could they stop giving in any given year, but you could also be missing out on additional gifts and interactions (volunteerism, board or committee membership, etc.), not to mention upgrades, pledges or bequests.

With existing donors, your primary goal should be to take the temperature of the relationship.

Are you providing the types and quality of communication they want to receive from you? Do they feel your program offerings are understood and are being delivered in a way that satisfies the donor's philanthropic goals?

3. Lapsed

The recapture rate on lapsed donors is around 5%.

By no means should you stop at these three. Monthly donors, event attendees, volunteers, and sub-segments of existing donors (based on length of giving, for example) are all excellent candidates for donor surveys.

Building your surveys

Now that you know who you will be surveying, it's time to build the surveys.

What will you ask?

Many nonprofits ask information about the donor: why they gave, what their connection to the cause is, etc. This information can be gleaned at the point of transaction (such as through an additional field on an online donation form) or in the gift acknowledgement process.

If you want to get into rarefied air, consider emulating the work of Dr Adrian Sargeant.

Dr. Sargeant suggests four categories of surveys:

- **Satisfaction**
- **Commitment**
- **Trust**
- **Intimacy**

We know from research conducted by Dr. Adrian Sargeant and his colleagues over 25 years that these are the four key drivers of loyalty that nonprofits need to be attending to.

1. Satisfaction

The first is how satisfied people are with how they have been treated as donors.

Have they been properly thanked?

Do they get a timely response to any issues or concerns?

Are they asked appropriately and for what they deem appropriate sums?

Clearly we can't ask questions about every aspect of service quality, but the good news is that we don't have to. It is only necessary to measure a few components to get a sense of how people feel about the service in general.

So, did we just pluck this idea from the ether?

No.

You'll know from the commercial world that customer satisfaction surveys are now ubiquitous and they are ubiquitous for a reason. It is now well established that satisfaction has a strong positive effect on loyalty intentions in a wide variety of product and service contexts (Fornell et al 1996; Mittal and Kamakura 2001) including fundraising.

In the first study to address donor satisfaction, Sargeant (2001) identified a positive correlation with loyalty; donors indicating that they were 'very satisfied' with the quality of service provided being twice as likely to offer a second or subsequent gift than those who identified themselves as merely satisfied. More recent work (by Sargeant and Woodliffe, 2006) has confirmed this relationship, while in the latter case simultaneously identifying a link between satisfaction and commitment to the organization. Work by Bennett and Barkensjo (2005) similarly provides support that there is a significant and positive relationship between satisfaction with the quality of relationship marketing activity (in this case, relationship fundraising) and the donor's future intentions and behavior, particularly the likely duration of the relationship and the levels of donation offered.

Despite the weight of evidence that it is the single biggest driver of loyalty, few nonprofits actually measure and track levels of donor satisfaction over time (Sargeant and Jay 2004, Burk 2003). That said, a number of major charities are now measuring and tracking donor satisfaction, with a handful constructing supporter satisfaction indices that can be fed into their organizational reporting systems (e.g. a balanced scorecard). Managers are thus now being rewarded for changes in the level of aggregate satisfaction expressed.

From where we sit this seems a long overdue practice.

2. Trust

Of course loyalty is a function of much more than just how people feel about their experience with fundraisers. It is also a function of whether they believe they are having an impact on the beneficiaries or cause. The difficulty for most donors though is that they have no objective way of knowing whether the money they gave

actually delivered the requisite benefits. Donors can't typically see the service being delivered. So the mechanism for most of our donors is one of trust. Do they trust that the organization is doing what it says it is doing and do they trust that it is spending its money wisely.

In the commercial sector successive studies have demonstrated how trust drives customer loyalty when other factors such as commitment are held constant (e.g., Gournaris, 2005; Hart & Johnson, 1999; Ranaweera & Prabhu, 2003a). For example, Ranaweera and Prabhu (2003b) report that customer loyalty and word of mouth reviews by customers are positively related to a customer's trust in the service provider. These authors also determined that highly satisfied customers with low trust levels have significantly lower levels of loyalty intention.

In fundraising, Sargeant and Woodliffe 2007 have demonstrated empirically the impact of trust on giving and this is further supported by data from the About Loyalty project (Sargeant and Lawson 2015).

3. Commitment

The relationship marketing literature suggests a further driver of customer loyalty, namely relationship commitment (Bendapudi and Berry 1997, Morgan and Hunt 1994). Moorman et al (1993) define this as a desire to maintain a relationship, while Dwyer et al (1987) regard it as a pledge of continuity between two parties. Often the concept for both these definitions is referred to as the 'stickiness' (Gustafsson et al (2005) of a customer. It's stickiness "that keeps customers loyal to a brand of company, even when satisfaction may be low" (p211). It differs from satisfaction in that satisfaction is an amalgam of past experience, whereas commitment is a forward looking construct. Sargeant and Woodliffe (2007) found that there are actually two types of commitment. The first is what they term 'passive commitment.'

In their study a significant number of individuals 'felt it was the right thing to do' to continue their support, "but had no real passion for either the nature of the cause or the work of the organization." (p53). Indeed some supporters, particularly regular givers (sustainers) were found to be continuing their giving only because they had "not gotten around to canceling" or had actually forgotten they were still giving. By contrast, Sargeant and Woodliffe also identify active commitment which they define as a genuine passion for the future of the organization and the work it is trying to achieve. The literature suggests that this 'active' commitment may be developed by enhancing trust (Sargeant and Lee 2004), enhancing the number and quality of two way interactions (Sargeant 2001 and Sargeant and Woodliffe 2007) and by the development of shared values (Swasy 1979, Sargeant and Woodliffe 2007). Other drivers include the concept of risk which the authors define as the extent to which a donor believes that harm will accrue to the beneficiary group were they to withdraw or cancel their gift and trust, in the sense of trusting the organization to have the impacts that it promised it would have on the beneficiary group or cause.

Finally, the authors conclude that the extent to which individuals believe that they have deepened their knowledge of the organization through the communications they receive will also impact positively on commitment. The authors term this latter concept 'learning' and argue that it serves to reinforce the importance of planning 'donor journeys' rather than simply a series of 'one-off' campaigns.

4. Intimacy

The final driver of loyalty is the notion of intimacy. As relationships become more intimate, the breadth and depth of the bond increases. The more their interdependence grows, the

stronger the emotional experience becomes for both partners (Clark and Reis, 1988). A number of studies have now examined the role intimacy plays in marketing relationships. Yim et al. (2008), for example, identify intimacy as an important driver of customer loyalty in consumer relationships, while Hansen et al. (2003) note that consumers are willing to share information with (or about) service providers they normally would not in intimate relationships.

Yim et al. (2008) and Bügel et al. (2011) see intimacy as feelings of closeness, connectedness and bondedness and findings indicate that customer-firm intimacy has positive effects on trust, commitment and loyalty. It seems particularly impactful in what are termed high involvement situations (Yim et al 2008) where individuals reflect in more depth on their decisions and the meaning behind them. It is of course possible to imagine many scenarios where charitable giving is deeply meaningful for the individual and hence we include it here.

Our early testing in fundraising has suggested that intimacy should be measured alongside satisfaction, commitment and trust. Although related it adds significant additional explanatory power to models of loyalty (Bügel et al. (2011). It also drives how good people feel about offering their support and thus contributes substantively to feelings of donor wellbeing. In our current survey we follow Yime et al and operationalize intimacy as a feeling of closeness.

So What Does This Give Us?

All of these concepts have the power to drive donor loyalty, so sending surveys will give you a sense of how you are doing and doing relative to others. It will give you a sense of the elements of a relationship you're handling well and where there might be scope for improvement. And of course you can now track that improvement over time.

Let's look at our three segments - new, existing and lapsed donors - and which questions are best for each (notice that even in instances of overlap, categories are prioritized differently):

New

Satisfaction Questions

These are your basic "customer service" questions.

- I was thanked appropriately for my gift to (org name).
- Overall I am very satisfied with how (org name) has treated me as a new donor..
- I believe I've done the right thing in supporting (insert name).

Commitment Questions

Here, you're asking about the work and the cause.

- I care passionately about the work of (org name).
- My relationship with (org name) is something that I am very committed to.
- My relationship with (org name) is very important to me.
- (org name) is working to achieve a goal that I care passionately about.

Trust Questions

In this section, you're asking how the donor perceives your organization.

- (org name) has a very high level of integrity.
- (org name) can be counted on to do what is right.
- I trust X charity to deliver the outcomes it promises for its beneficiaries.

The set of questions for existing donors is the same as those for new donors, with the addition of the "intimacy" category. Notice also that the order of categories is prioritized differently.

Existing

Commitment Questions

- I care passionately about the work of (org name).
- My relationship with (org name) is something that I am very committed to.
- My relationship with (org name) is very important to me.
- (org name) is working to achieve a goal that I care passionately about.

Trust Questions

- (org name) has a very high level of integrity.
- (org name) can be counted on to do what is right.
- I trust (org name) to deliver the outcomes it promises for its beneficiaries.

Satisfaction Questions

- I was thanked appropriately for my gift to (insert name).
- Overall I am very satisfied with how (insert name) has treated me as a new donor
- I believe I've done the right thing in supporting (insert name).

Intimacy Questions

Since a relationship already exists, consider asking the donor how they feel about the state of the relationship itself.

- I feel very closely connected to (insert name)
- I feel that (insert name) and I were really "meant for each other."
- I feel warm when I think about (insert name)
- I feel a sense of intimacy with (insert name)

With all four categories, you've covered quality of service, affinity for the cause, perception of the organization, and health of the relationship.

Now, let's cover what to ask when the relationship appears to have gone sour.

Lapsed

In his 2001 study "Managing Donor Defection", Dr. Sargeant surveyed the lapsed donors of 10 national nonprofits to find out why they stopped giving.

These were their responses:

- 5%** - Thought the charity didn't need them.
- 8%** - No information on how monies were used.
- 9%** - No memory of supporting.
- 13%** - Never got thanked for donating.
- 16%** - Death.
- 18%** - Poor service or communication.
- 36%** - Others more deserving.
- 54%** - Could no longer afford.

As you can see, the reasons closely correlate with trust, commitment, intimacy and satisfaction (with the addition of financial difficulty).

When approaching a lapsed donor survey, it can consist of simply one question, with multiple choices for an answer.

Why did you stop giving? (Select all that apply)

- I was not aware my donation had stopped
- I can no longer afford to offer my support
- There was a mistake at my bank
- My personal priorities for giving have changed
- I switched to support a different charity
- I felt pressured into giving
- [Org name] asked me for an amount I found inappropriate
- I wasn't thanked appropriately for my gift
- The quality of service provided to me as a donor was poor

- I didn't enjoy [org name] communications
- This is not a cause that greatly interests me
- [Org name] did not tell me how my money was used
- [Org name] wrote to me too often
- Supporting [org name] doesn't fit with my sense of who I am
- [Org name] doesn't seem to need my support
- Other: (write in an answer)

One word of caution: don't let the survey recipient ever see the words "lapse donor" - in other words, don't address them as such. Words like "We miss you" or "Did we do something wrong?" can be good ways to preface the survey.

Remember: donors give on their own schedules. Even if you consider them lapsed, they may not consider themselves lapsed.



Conclusion

In his 2005 study with Elaine Jay entitled "Redefining Commitment," Sargeant surveyed 5,800 donors and found that:

"...a donor's level of commitment can be inferred through gathering information on attitudes, and (in the case of multiple engagement) through an analysis of behavior. The primary determinant of loyalty is active commitment. Donors expressing a high level of active commitment are significantly more likely to be loyal to the organization. Donors who share the beliefs of the charity and express higher levels of satisfaction with the quality of service provided to them are significantly more likely to express higher levels of active commitment. Similarly, multiple engagements, trust, learning and personal link all have a role to play in fostering active commitment."

If you aren't surveying your donors, you could be missing out on a golden opportunity to deepen relationships, find the best prospects, and raise more money.

Surveys provide a vehicle for constituents to make their voices heard, while also offering organizations invaluable information about how they're perceived.

So what are you waiting for? Get those surveys out the door!

Here are some additional nonprofit donor survey resources:

- [Fired Up Fundraising](#)
- [Nonprofit Marketing Guide](#)
- [Qgiv](#)
- [Nonprofit Quarterly](#)
- [DonorVoice](#)
- [SOFII](#)

DID YOU KNOW?

Bloomerang has a tool that allows you to send surveys to first-time, existing, and lapsed donors. The best part? Their answers will populate their constituent record, including the engagement meter.

[Learn more >](#)

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