

A Beginner's  
Guide To  
Finding The  
Best **DONOR**  
**PROSPECTS**  
Hidden  
In Your  
**DATABASE**

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# Introduction

Every fundraiser dreams of asking for upgrades, major gifts, and bequests. Imagine the possibilities that unfold when you connect with just the right person. While identifying those top-tier supporters may seem challenging, it's an opportunity filled with incredible potential.

Often, we might first look to those with vast wealth. Yet, research shows that true connections, not just riches, lead to the best donor prospects.

Whether you're a small nonprofit ready to discover the magic of prospect research, or looking to empower a professional prospect researcher for success, this eBook is your guide. Keep reading to unlock prospect research strategies that cultivate deeper, more meaningful relationships with your donors. You'll learn engagement strategies that enhance existing relationships and grow their giving, and uncover donors ready to share their generosity for the very first time.

## **What's inside:**

- What research tells us
- Retention strategies to set you up for success
- How to maintain clean, useful data
- What donors actually want from you
- How to get to know the donors you already have (and why you should want to)
- Factors that signal a likelihood to give more
- How to find prospective donors that are right under your nose
- Strategies for reactivating lapsed donors

# The body of knowledge.

Ask any consultant worth their salt what fundraising activity produces the most ROI (return on investment), and they will say the same thing. It's not major gifts (though they're wonderfully valuable). It's not direct mail (though it still sparks connections). And it's definitely not events.

## It's bequest marketing.

The average major gift, while impactful, is around \$5,000. However, the average U.S. charitable bequest shines brighter at around \$32,000. We're positioned to achieve even greater outcomes by emulating the success of nations like the U.K., where the average bequest is \$54,000, and Australia, reaching \$200,000.

So, let's say you're ready to jump in. First, know it's a long-term strategy, a planting of seeds that may blossom three or more years down the line before that first gift appears. Next, you need the prospects. Who will receive that heartfelt bequest letter?

The late, great [Jerry Panas](#) shared his insightful list of the 13 best characteristics of a planned giving prospect:

1. Length of giving to your organization (5 or more years of regular giving)
2. Giving to you over a long period of time (giving may not be year after year, but gifts have been made over a long, extended period of time)
3. Frequency of giving (monthly credit card donors, or those who give more than once a year)
4. Is an active volunteer (at one time or is now a board member, or a volunteer in some manner)
5. The family has been involved in some way with the organization (best if there is a long-time association)

6. Few family obligations (children and grandchildren are appropriately taken care of, no mortgage, no indebtedness)
7. Securely retired (feeling comfortable and confident about future financial situation)
8. No heirs
9. Have been called on regarding planned gifts and bequests
10. Has requested information on making a planned gift
11. 65 years of age and over
12. Has an interest in an organization similar to yours (similar mission, service, values)
13. Recognized by your organization (has received special recognition for volunteer service or past giving)

“It is not high net worth men and women who are necessarily your most likely best prospects. They may be. You need to look for men and women who are long-term and consistent donors. This is especially true of those who give four or more times a year, several hundred dollars a year. They are your very best prospects for a bequest.”

**Jerry Panas**



## It's not just wealth. It's loyalty.

Your brightest prospects are those who have been loyal, long-term supporters (and yes, wealth and childlessness are certainly bonuses). But let's extend our attention equally to all those who possess seven or more of these wonderful characteristics.

And for an extra boost of encouragement, the largest percentage of bequests comes from those with a net worth of \$3 million and less.

Planned giving isn't the only realm where these 13 characteristics can amplify your efforts. These long-term loyals are also ideal prospects for major gifts, capital campaigns, upgrades, and special projects.

# How to retain your best donors.

So how do you better retain your best donors? Clean data and a retention strategy are your secret weapons.

## Effective donor communication is your secret weapon.

One reason we might occasionally stumble with major gifts and bequests could be our donor retention rates. The [Fundraising Effectiveness Project](#) shows average donor retention rates have hovered in the mid-40% since the early 2000s. For first-time donors, it's around 20%. We're always striving to keep donors connected for many years. And if a donor happens to lapse, their rate of return is about 7%.

Happily, research exists to help us stem this tide. A [2001 study](#) by the esteemed Adrian Sargeant, the godfather of donor retention, beautifully explored why lapsed donors from various charities stopped giving. Most of their reasons are within our control through effective communications:

**5%**

thought charity did not need them

**8%**

received no info on how donation was spent

**9%**

had no memory of supporting was spent

**13%**

never got thanked for donating

**16%**

death

**18%**

poor service or communication

**36%**

thought other charities were more deserving

**54%**

could no longer afford

In 2011, Donor Voice partnered with around 250 nonprofits to uncover what made 1,200 donors incredibly loyal for many years. They surveyed those loyal donors, asking them to rank 32 drivers of donor commitment. Here were the top seven shining insights:

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 2021 study by the IU Lilly School of Philanthropy echoed these sentiments. When asked what types of communication and content subscription donors (monthly recurring donors) preferred from nonprofits, they shared these valuable insights:

**52%**

Stories and experiences shared by the people my gifts have helped

**32%**

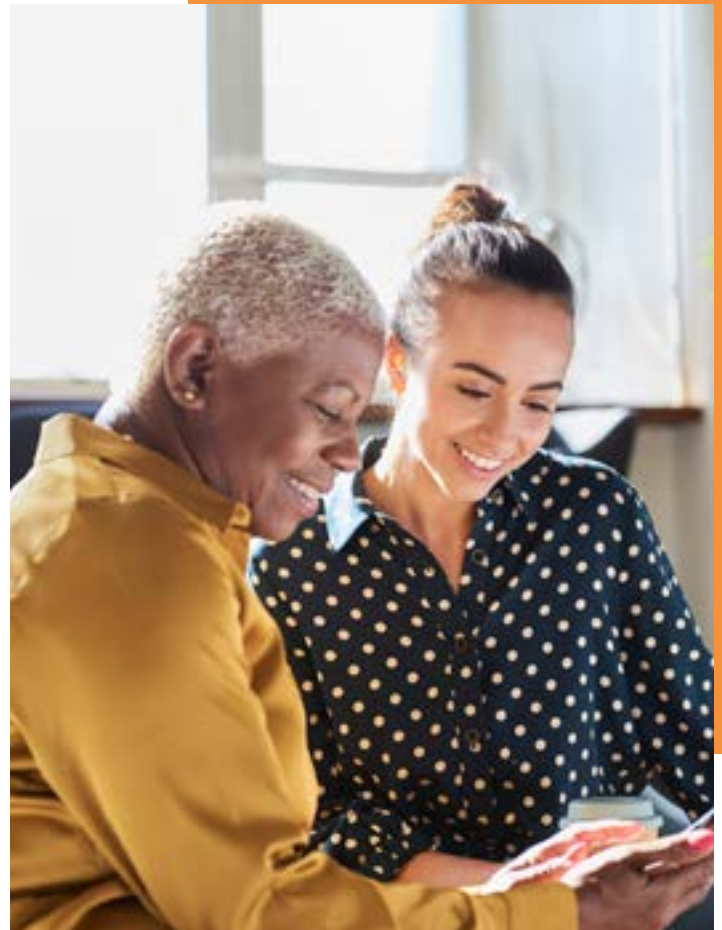
Frequent updates about organization's programs and services

**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



To put it simply, donors truly want to understand their impact, receive communications that speak directly to them, be thanked quickly, share their opinions, and feel utterly overwhelmed with gratitude.

It's quite simple, really. Easy? Perhaps not always, but certainly simple.

Bringing these principles to life is a journey, the subject of another eBook (and many more books, workshops, seminars, and years of experience). Your next joyful challenge is recognizing those long-term loyal donors.



## Maintain clean, useful data.

How do you know who has graced you with 5 or more years of regular giving? Or who is a cherished monthly donor? Or who has made multiple gifts within a year? Identifying these activities and segmenting your communications becomes a breeze with a dedicated donor database built for purpose and clean, usable data.

A rich history of interactions is also an absolute must. Imagine the delight of inviting a prospect for coffee, knowing their journey with your organization has been seamlessly captured, preventing any awkward repeats.

A standard operating procedure for entering data and universal access is equally vital. Picture returning from a donor visit, your notes sparkling with insights, knowing they'll be perfectly integrated into your database, preserving every valuable thought.

# Creating donor segments.

Let's fast forward and imagine you're already ahead of the curve with your donor stewardship and data management, and now it's time to segment your donors based on recency, frequency, and other insights and engagement signals.

Here are a few of our favorite donor segments:

## Obvious donor prospects:

Inspired by the wisdom from Jerry Panas, you'll be delighted to find our favorite low-hanging fruit includes:

- 1. Donors who have given for 5+ consecutive years.** A true testament to enduring support.
- 2. Monthly donors.** These gems are often overlooked due to smaller individual gifts, but they are incredibly 7 times more likely to leave a bequest. They believe in you, they trust you, and their consistent support is a powerful signal of commitment.
- 3. Volunteers (including board members).** It's natural to feel a little hesitation asking volunteers for monetary gifts. Thoughts like, "They already give," or "I don't want to spoil the relationship," might flutter through your mind. But fear not, and dare to ask. They might actually be wondering why you haven't.

Break your volunteers into two groups:

- 1. Volunteers who haven't given.** These wonderful individuals are 10 times more likely to give than non-volunteers. Don't hesitate to invite volunteers to donate. They adore you. You won't just preserve a good thing; you'll make it even better, promise.
- 2. Volunteers who have already given.** Could they give even more? Could they embrace monthly giving?

These are your best prospects to explore further. They are ready to transform into monthly donors, or to be invited into the wonderful world of bequest or major gift marketing. But first, let's uncover their capacity. Wealth-screening tools are incredibly handy for this exciting step.



### **Our friends at DonorSearch have five markers they wholeheartedly trust to predict future philanthropy:**

1. Previous giving to your nonprofit
  - How generously are they giving to you?
2. Previous giving to nonprofits like yours
  - Are they extending their generosity to other organizations?

### **These final three are powerful markers of financial capacity:**

3. Participation as a foundation trustee
4. Political giving
5. Real estate ownership

You might discover that your monthly donors, while financially comfortable at \$20 per month, might not be ready for a large gift ask. However, bequest marketing could be a perfect fit for them. Conversely, you may find a long-time annual fund donor who gives \$250 a year, and realize with joy that they could easily upgrade to \$2,500 each year.



## Not-so-obvious donor prospects:

If your current donor list feels lite on obvious prospects, there are always those who are on the cusp of joining that esteemed group. Others might be sending you easily overlooked signals. Here are a few ideas:

**1st-time donors.** Every journey begins with a single step, right? Even with their first gift, they are still wonderful prospects. While first-time donor retention rates are typically low, that just means more opportunity to cultivate a strong relationship and extend their support.

### Get to know them:

- Invite them for inspiring tours
- Send a survey—let them share their unique story:
  - "Why did you first give?"
  - "Why are you passionate about (cause)?"
  - "What would you like to hear from us?"
  - "How did you hear about us?"

**Lapsed donors.** You once captivated them, and assuming the relationship isn't a total loss, there's always a wonderful chance they could return. But not if we do nothing.

- Identify donors who haven't given in 2+ years
- Express heartfelt thanks for past giving (no ask for money just yet)
- Share a moving impact story (still no ask for money)
- Send a survey (and still, no ask for money):
  - "Did we do something wrong?"
  - "What would it take for you to give again?"
- Invest in helpful data services:
  - NCOA (They might have joyfully moved to a new home)
  - Email / Phone Appends (They might have new contact information)
  - Deceased Suppression Processing (They might have passed away)

Remember: donors give on their own schedule. Just because we consider them lapsed doesn't mean they feel that way.

**Current/former service recipients.** They have firsthand knowledge of your mission's profound impact. Former beneficiaries might now have a greater capacity to give, thanks to the wonderful services they received. Schools, social services, and healthcare organizations truly understand this value. Current beneficiaries might even feel a positive sense of pride in donating.

# Even less obvious donor prospects:

**Donors who give you updated contact info (unprompted).** If someone goes out of their way to share a new address or contact details, celebrate these people—they clearly cherish receiving your information.

**Donors who complain.** Data from TargetAnalytics reveals that donors who express concerns are retained at higher rates than those who don't, with even greater retention when those concerns are thoughtfully addressed.

**Donors who submit matching gifts from their employer.** They care so deeply that they're willing to double the impact of their donation. These wonderful individuals, and their co-workers, could also be fantastic volunteer prospects.

**Adult children (especially daughters) of parents who give.** According to the Women's Philanthropy Institute, they are highly likely to also support your heartwarming cause.

**Surviving relatives of deceased long-time donors.** Investing in a Deceased Suppression Processing data service can gently reveal beloved donors who have passed away, creating a tender opportunity to extend condolences and heartfelt appreciation to surviving household members. Who knows? They might continue a legacy of giving.

**Donors who just had their first child.** What exciting new beginnings are they exploring? Perhaps putting together their first will.

**Out-of-town donors.** Imagine you're a local environmental agency or school, and a generous donation arrives from someone ten states away. It's a wonderful invitation to be curious about that donor. Perhaps they are a former service recipient, or someone with a special past connection to your community.

**Contact person at a for-profit business/company that sends volunteers.** This person is a true advocate, spreading the joy of your mission by encouraging co-workers to volunteer. Cherish and nurture this relationship.

**Check > credit card, and American Express > Visa/Mastercard.** This has been shown to be a positive indicator of financial capacity.

This list, while not exhaustive, is a starting point to spark your thinking about all the diverse and wonderful donors you have, and the signals their giving sends you.



# The power of surveys.

There's no need to carry the whole load yourself. Some donors might joyfully tell you themselves (perhaps indirectly) if they are a promising prospect for more giving, so embrace the opportunity to ask them. The wonderful folks at Donor Voice have crafted a simple donor commitment survey that can predict future giving from high-commitment donors.

### The Donor Commitment Survey

On a scale of 1 to 10, please indicate how much you agree with each statement with “10” being “strongly agree” and “1” being “strongly disagree”.

	Strongly disagree									Strongly agree
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. I am a committed Audubon donor	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
2. I feel a sense of loyalty to Audubon	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
3. Audubon is my favorite charitable organization	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

- Donor Voice

The survey embraces three simple questions, inviting responses on a scale from 0 (strongly disagree) to 10 (strongly agree):

**1**

I am a committed  
(org name) donor

**2**

Feel a sense of loyalty  
to (org name)

**3**

(Org name) is my favorite  
charitable organization

Donor Voice has deployed this survey for 250 organizations, reaching 30,000 donors. The results have been truly remarkable, generating 130% more net revenue over a 36-month period than any other score, like a Net Promoter score, for example). Jeff Brooks, a Fundraisingologist at Moceanic, recently interviewed Roger Craver, founder of DonorVoice, for a wonderful explanation of this survey's power. You can find the video [here](#).

Another beautiful benefit of surveys is their ability to reveal the unique stories behind donors who might appear similar on paper. For instance, imagine two donors who each gave \$100 online, both first-time givers. A simple first-time donor survey asking "Why did you give?" or "How did you hear about us?" might uncover that Donor #1 gave because a beloved grandmother battled the disease your organization is fighting, while Donor #2 was inspired by a Facebook friend's post. These are two wonderfully different donors, with Donor #1 showing a much stronger likelihood to give again.



# Final thoughts

As you bring these ideas to life, you'll begin to discover the incredible potential within your database, identifying individuals ripe for even greater giving. And don't hesitate to invest in the services of a professional prospect researcher. This guide isn't here to replace their expertise, but rather to empower them for success.

Once you start viewing your database as a vibrant tapestry of many different types of supporters, rather than just "supporters," you'll unlock the power to segment your communications for next-level impact.

**Bloomerang can help you find the best donor prospects.**

[FIND OUT HOW](#)



# Fundraising and donor management software **BUILT FOR PURPOSE.**

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