

Top Ten Characteristics of Top Producing Major Gift Fundraisers ▶▶

Good help is hard to find, especially in development.

Major gift development in particular requires a unique type of individual to succeed. In our experience too many who carry the title could more aptly be described as “professional visitors” than effective fundraisers.

Successful development staffers aren't all cast from the same mold. I've met almost every conceivable shape and size (literally and figuratively). Few start out as fundraisers; most come into this profession after doing something else. I've known former missionaries, teachers, salespeople, psychologists, marketers, pastors, businesspeople, real estate developers, a former professional golfer, even a former farmer who performed well in this field. Once I worked with an emergency room physician who alternated between weeks—he'd work in the ER one week and as a fundraiser the next, week in, week out.

So, in the midst of this disparity of “types”, what separates successful major gift fundraisers from everyone else? Too often, nonprofit leaders don't know what to look for when filling these roles, or what to expect from them when they do have them in place.

At DickersonBakker we've had the privilege of working with many top-producing major gift fundraisers. We've also conducted in-depth background checks and administered personality tests to many of them as part of our executive search program.



Based on these results and observations, we have been able to identify these top ten characteristics that top-producing major gift fundraisers have in common.



They are sellers, not tellers.

There's an old adage that there are three types of people in the world: sellers, tellers, and yellers. Successful major gift development officers are almost always "sellers."

When meeting with donors or prospects, tellers resort to "information presentation", making a rational case for why a prospect should give. In closing major gifts, however, emotional connections are equally if not more important than information in influencing giving decisions.

Sellers, therefore, deal with prospects' emotional and personality needs as well as their rational needs. They are good listeners; gaining rapport with their prospects and getting to know them and "what makes them tick." When the time is right, they are not afraid to ask, presenting donors with giving opportunities that fit their motivations and objectives.



They are persons of integrity.

Major gift development is essentially an elevated form of salesmanship, and one of my favorite books on the topic is Integrity Selling, by Ron Willingham. Willingham explains it this way:

"Selling is a mutual exchange of value. It isn't something you do to people; it's something you do for and with them... In this context, developing trust and rapport is a critical precedent for any selling activity, and closing a deal becomes a victory for both the seller and for the customer."

Success in major gift development isn't driven by skills or techniques; it is relational, not transactional selling (think investment advisor versus car salesman). Top major gift fundraisers understand that truth, respect, and honesty with donors provide the basis for long-term success and serve their donors accordingly.



They are emotionally intelligent.

Did you ever wonder why some people who clearly have a high intellect sometimes don't get as far in their careers as others who never excelled in school or academics but get along well with people?

As we all know, there is more to success than just being smart. There's something called emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence is not the same as simply being friendly or having good social skills. It's the ability to recognize your own emotions and act intelligently, and to read other people's signals and react appropriately, and it's a critical ingredient to the success of top-producing major gift officers. When interacting with donors it's good to be smart, but it's even more critical to be emotionally intelligent.



They are intuitive.

Are you a left-brain or a right-brain person?

The left side of the brain processes information in a sequential, logical manner. The right brain processes holistically. It sees the big picture first, not the details.

Everyone uses both intuition and logic to make decisions, but most of us are hard-wired one way or another. Studies show that successful salespeople are almost always intuitive thinkers. We have found the same to be true in the major gift development.

Top-producing major gift officers trust their instincts and listen to their intuition, particularly as it grows experience as they continually learn and incorporate new reference points into their understanding.

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to win the big gifts.



They are organized.

Success in raising major gifts is equal parts art and science. People tend to think that the art is in the relationships, while the science is in the systems and processes. It's easy to see how organizational skills apply to the systems side of the equation (such as prompt processing of gifts, regular and systematic communications, etc.). Less obvious but equally important is the need for good organizational management of the relational side of the equation.

The role of the major gift officer is to strategically manage relationships in order to lead donors through increasing levels of commitment and support. Juggling a significant number of donors simultaneously quickly becomes complex, and anyone lacking strong organizational skills will soon be dropping balls.



They are pleasantly and professionally persistent.

A former friend and mentor of mine (we'll call him Harvey because that's his real name) once told me that the secret of his success was that he was stubborn as an old bulldog – when he sank his teeth into something he simply didn't give up. I remember stories he told about calls he made on one crotchety old donor. Sometimes this donor wouldn't answer the door when Harvey came to call, even though the television and lights were on, the car was in the driveway, and Harvey had called ahead to say he was coming. Other times this donor would literally let the dogs out into the yard when Harvey visited, having a laugh at his expense when Harvey ran for the gate. Despite these antics, Harvey kept going out to see him when no one else would, and eventually came home with a check for a million dollars.

In hindsight, I think Harvey mischaracterized himself. He wasn't so much a bulldog as a bird dog. He wasn't flashy and he wasn't aggressive; instead, he had a finely tuned sense to sniff out opportunities and worked persistently to bring them home. This is a good illustration of the level of persistence often needed to bring home a big gift.

Good major gift officers don't get disheartened or upset when they meet a setback; they keep at it, knowing it takes time, patience, persistence, and professionalism to win the big gifts.



They are results focused.

Educated donors, particularly large donors, want to know that their money is issued wisely and that the organizations they fund achieve their intended results. The most successful major gift fundraisers don't simply understand this about donors; they share these same interests.

I recently heard a colleague share a story about a recent visit with his organization's largest donor. He had just finished reviewing a report on how that donor's gift was making an impact. The donor thanked him, in his words, for "making sure he wasn't wasting his money". My colleague's impromptu response was a classic: "Well it's important to me too, because I want to make sure I'm not wasting my life!".

It's good practice to make sure that each offer or proposal you present to a major donor outlines clear objectives, and top-producing major gift officers make a habit of reporting back to their donors about the results of the work their donors fund. This runs counter to the amiable, empathetic, interpersonal types many organizations look for when they hire development officers. While social skills are important, donors don't want to get bogged down in excessive socialization in meetings. They want to know how their investment is helping to make a difference in people's lives, and they look to their representatives in the organization to give them the bottom line.



They are donor centric in their thinking.

Success in major gift development is built on the bedrock of a trusting relationship with top donors; relationships that typically take years to nurture and develop. Top major gift officers often place a higher priority on these relationships than they do on relationships with the organization for which they work. This doesn't mean they aren't loyal to the organization. In fact, the opposite is true—as the ones out "selling" the organization and its mission they are strong believers in what you do.

They usually don't care to become overly involved in internal workings or organizational politics, and tend to prefer not to spend much time in the office. And if push comes to shove and there is conflict between the interests of the nonprofit and the interests of donors, they will almost always advocate for the best interests of donors, sometimes even to the detriment of their own standing within the organization.



They are intrinsically motivated.

What motivates you?

Psychologists who have studied this have come to the conclusion that people are essentially motivated in one of two ways— intrinsic or extrinsic. Extrinsic motivation is motivation that comes from factors outside the individual, such as being motivated to work hard for a promotion. Recognition, money, competition or material incentives are examples of extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation, on the other hand, comes from the personal enjoyment and fulfillment that we derive from doing something.

The people who do best in major gift development have strong internal direction and motivation. It's what keeps them going through the rejection that comes as a part of any fundraiser's regular day of work. They believe in what they are doing and derive their motivation from knowing they are making a difference.

I like to say that the secret to success in development is the “rule of three C’s”:

see the people,
see the people,
see the people.



They have high energy.

If you polled most people in a non-profit organization, they will probably say that a major gift officer has a cushy job. Meetings with interesting people. Dinners, lunches, golf, and meetings with captains of industry. Opportunities to travel. Being able to kick back and work a 30-hour workweek as long as you make your numbers. It all sounds great! Too bad it's not true. Fact is, top-performers get to where they are by working long and hard. I like to say that the secret to success in development is the “rule of three C’s”: see the people, see the people, see the people.

Managing a hundred or more donors, this translates into a tremendous amount of shoe leather on the street, fighting traffic and/or slogging through airports day after day. Add to this late nights writing proposals or donor reports to meet a deadline, hours spent on the phone getting appointments, evenings or weekends attending networking or fundraising events, plus office time for expense reports and other administration, and it all adds up to a lot of work. It's not easy, and to succeed, one must have high energy, enthusiasm, and a willingness to do "whatever it takes" to get the job done.

Each of these attributes by themselves are not particularly rare. We all know people who have one or more of these characteristics. It's the combination that makes them rare.

So how do you find someone with the right combinations of these characteristics?

The answer is, it's not easy. The demand for people with these qualities and talents is intensifying, and successful major gift fundraisers are often unwilling to leave their current job or organization. Oftentimes we look for someone who doesn't have direct fundraising experience but possesses the right combination of skills and characteristics to be successful and can demonstrate a track record of success in a related field.

At DickersonBakker we specialize in finding and recruiting top talent for these positions, and use a combination approach to evaluate candidates: looking for key words and descriptions in a candidate's submittals, asking pointed questions when interviewing references and contacts, and deciphering patterns in personality assessments that we ask the candidate to take. We also apply a healthy dose of intuition.

If you are looking to fill a position in your organization, consider giving us a call. Leveraging a thorough understanding of the non-profit marketplace based on experience, a vast network of contacts, and memberships in numerous industry organizations, DickersonBakker will make sure you see candidates with the proven ability, experience and integrity to lead your organization forward and make a significant bottom-line impact.

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Serving since 2001 as a consultant with two other large firms specializing in major gifts, Derric has worked with dozens of organizations across the U.S., Canada, and overseas, helping to raise more than \$100 million for ministry. He is a recognized expert in the field, having successfully solicited countless major gifts, including some in excess of \$10 million. He has worked with organizations large and small, faith-based and secular, spanning a variety of fields of interest. In 2010 Derric founded his own firm, Keystone Major Gift Consulting, which in 2012 merged with Dickerson & Associates Inc. to form Dickerson, Bakker and Associates which became DickersonBakker in 2019.