

# CLAIRIFICATION

## Major Gifts Pipeline Assessment

Your major gifts pipeline feeds your fundraising program. Think of it as your fundraising umbilical cord. Without it, you won't get the essential nutrients you need to birth and sustain a thriving fundraising program that will live long and prosper.

To begin this assessment, all you have to do is answer 'True' or 'False' to a few questions about your current pipeline. And, rest assured, you do have one. It may not be a very strong one. It may be rusty and leaky. But it's there.

Your goal will be to figure out how to deliver a steady stream of major donor prospects into your pipeline; then move them steadily through so they come out the end as major donors.



Ready to get a sense of the state of your pipeline and learn your areas for improvement?

Let's go!

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## Respond with a TRUE or FALSE to the following:

1. I'm confident my organization will receive at least one major gift in the next 12 months and know who is likely to give it.

2. Major gifts prospects are differentiated in some way in our database (i.e. marked by a predictive modelling program as MGL (major gift likely); marked by our own screening process as a VIP; placed in portfolios for assignment to the E.D., Director of Development, Major Gift Officer or Board Member).

3. We have "stages" assigned to all of our major gift prospects according to where they are in the fundraising cycle. (e.g., identification; qualification; cultivation; solicitation; stewardship).

4. We have a process for identifying new prospects (i.e. through research or wealth screening).

5. Newly-identified prospects are placed into major gift officer (or other development staff) portfolios for qualification.

6. Gift officers allocate and spend time on discovery and qualification work ("feeding the pipeline").

7. Our chief executive is introduced to new prospects at least once a quarter.

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8. Our gift officers (or other staff) have written strategies in place for moving prospects in their portfolios from one stage to the next.

9. We track major gift proposal activity in a meaningful way and can quickly ascertain which proposals (i.e. major asks) have been delivered and which are still planned.

10. Some of our previous major donors transitioned from the “stewardship” stage back to “cultivation” for another major gift.

## Results:

**0-4 “True” answers:** You’re just beginning on your major gift journey. Wonderful opportunities are ahead of you! There are many ways to invest in improving your major gifts pipeline. It will take work, but it will make a huge difference to your bottom line.

**5-7 “True” answers:** You’re on the right track. You’re doing some things well, but could definitely be working more effectively and reaping greater rewards. Further focus and discipline in the area of major gifts will set you up for greater success and lead you down the path to victory!

**8+ “True” answers:** You have a mature major gifts operation! Keep up the good work, improve your systems and focus, and explore how further pipeline optimization may yield even greater rewards.

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## Track Where Folks are in Your Pipeline

Success depends upon making a plan; then monitoring your actions as you move folks along the pipeline. You can ensure your organization is doing all it can to optimize the major gift development process by tracking success metrics.

### Identification

How many new major gift prospects have you identified, based on individuals who have (1) linkage to your organization; (2) interest in your mission, vision and values, and (3) ability to give? Do you have enough, or do you need to identify more? If the latter, what type of research may be needed? Note that only about one-third of the prospects you identify will ultimately be “qualified” by you as having an interest in building a stronger relationship with you. So if you need 10 major donors, identifying just 10 prospects will not be sufficient.

### Qualification

Once the prospect is identified, the next task is engaging in some preliminary pre-cultivation “moves.” Keep track of how many of your major donor leads you have qualified by reaching out and determining they will be receptive to cultivation. If not, there’s no sense beating your head against a wall. Drop these folks from your list, and move further down the list to find someone who *will* be receptive.

Is this a manageable amount for you to handle? If not, will you recruit additional staff and/or volunteers to help with cultivation and solicitation? Or will you hone your list?

### Cultivation

Once the prospect is qualified, the next task is building a relationship with them. Sizable donations aren’t normally secured through a cold call. Your nonprofit has to go out and develop relationships with the prospects and learn about them before they can move to the next stage. Spend some time thinking about what cultivation moves you’ll measure, trying to reduce your pipeline to the smallest and most basic number of moves possible. Measure only those activities that get you closer to a gift, like number of calls, emails, meetings, presentations, written proposals, and number of follow ups made.

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Keep track of how your qualified prospects are responding to your cultivation moves. Are they moving them further along the pipeline towards readiness to be asked to make a major gift? If not, what else might you try?

There are many cultivation strategies, but if you want to really get to the point where your prospect is ready to be asked you should prioritize face-to-face encounters. Just like you can't secure a gift without asking for it, you can't build a relationship with a donor if you don't meet with the donor.

Make sure you set a goal for donor visits, and track your progress against your goal. One tip is to set aside certain days on your calendar to make visits out of the office, or to work from home making calls to prospects. If you stay in the office, it's too easy to get stuck behind the computer or pulled into internal meetings.

Since visits take time, assess whether you need more people assigned to make these visits. This is not just a job for the development director or major gifts officers. Ideally, the executive director should spend about 50% of their time on major donor fundraising. And your board president should be similarly involved.

If there is reticence among your staff and volunteers to make in-person visits (this can include some group meetings like tours and house parties), do what is necessary to help folks become more comfortable. For example, invite a facilitator in to discuss peoples' concerns and lead your group in exercises that address their fears and misgivings.

## Solicitation

Once the prospect has been sufficiently cultivated, they are ready to be asked. You don't want to extend cultivation beyond this time. When the prospect is ripe for picking, they're ready. Leave the solicitation hanging unasked? It may just rot on the vine. People know what this is all about. If you never get around to the ask, they may become frustrated.

How many asks have you scheduled and/or made? Have you established monthly goals for solicitations? A proactive ask strategy is the best way to ensure your major gifts program grows. Tracking asks made on a monthly basis guarantees that ask frequency is always a part of the planning conversation.

Of course, you never want to rush the cultivation process and make your ask before the donor is ready. But maintaining a schedule will help keep you on track for also doing timely and appropriate cultivation. Always be aware of this readiness factor, and be prepared to be flexible where advantageous. At the end of the day, quality wins out over quantity.

Set your monthly goals according to other fundraising initiatives, the statuses of donors in your pipeline, and upcoming events. Target reaching or exceeding those goals. Then,

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across a larger time period, use this metric in conjunction with other major gifts metrics to determine if it's time to raise the volume of your asks.

## Gifts Secured and Amount Raised

How many major gifts did you hope to secure and how much did you hope to raise? How are you doing against this goal? Is there anything you'll need to adjust? Look for decreases and/or stagnancy in major giving in major giving to tell you whether you need to begin troubleshooting.

## Stewardship

Have a plan in place to stay in touch with every single person you approach with an ask.

Regardless of how your prospect responds to your solicitation, follow up will be needed. If they say "no," your stewardship afterwards will impact how closely connected that prospect remains with your nonprofit. No solicitation is ever wasted if you consider it just part and parcel of your ongoing efforts to build a stronger relationship. If you simply ignore your donor after you ask, they'll likely feel guilty or blamed and pull further away. This is the opposite of what you want!

If the prospect says "no, not yet," they may need time to consider. Or perhaps they need time for circumstances to change. Whatever the reason for their hesitation, be sure to thank them graciously and follow-up with more information.

If the donor says "yes," your exemplary stewardship is your ticket to retaining that donor. It's the first step on the way to repeat major gifts.

