

**The Art and Science  
Of  
Personal Solicitation**

**By  
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**(A Station Manager's Guide)**

## The Author

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Let's be clear from the start. This discussion is about major gifts, gifts of \$25,000 and more. In the transactional fundraising model, the one almost universally associated with membership drives and annual fund programs, the station is seeking annual support for operations. The customary exchange is something monetary (cash from the donor) given in exchange for a tangible benefit (a coffee mug, tee-shirt, subscription to your newsletter or magazine, etc.) Major gifts, as defined here, are investments in your station's future; they are visionary and inspired by a desire to see improvements made and not just the status quo maintained. They are often given with no tangible benefit expected in return. They are more philanthropic in nature. Major gift donors often find their rewards in intangible benefits, positive self-esteem, knowing they have done good and an improved human condition.

## **The Importance of Asking in Person**

Personal solicitation, a board member, volunteers, or staff member asking a prospect or a donor for a gift or pledge face-to-face, is the most effective way to solicit major gifts. It is an excellent way to generate larger gifts and higher percentages of participation than other solicitation methods produce. At its best, a direct mail piece may garner up to 15 percent participation (one to two percent is much more typical) and a telephone call as much as 50 percent (fifteen to twenty-five percent is the normal range) but personal solicitation, done well, can have a 75 to 80 percent success rate.

There are relatively few limitations to this method of solicitation, although most stations have yet to mobilize, organize, and energize enough volunteers to call one-on-one on a significant portion of their legitimate major gift prospect pool nor have they devoted enough personal time to the task or entrusted the responsibility to an able, trained, experienced major gifts officer. In addition, because of the research and cultivation typically necessary prior to a one-on-one ask, the cost of personal solicitation is sometimes seen as prohibitive by some stations. (This is penny wise and pound foolish thinking, but it exists.)

Nevertheless, even in the smallest markets, it is easy to imagine a passionate station manager, committed board member or properly trained major gifts officer making personal contacts with a few carefully selected prospective major donors. In such cases, all that is needed is an effectively prepared case for support, a bit of training, and courage. Here, the costs can be very low and the returns extremely high and the budgetary risks minimal.

Personal solicitation is both a science and an art. The science of it lies in properly preparing through research, training, experience, and strategy to make the ask, to solicit the gift. The art form is most often expressed in the handling of the actual ask itself, primarily its timing, as well as through the personalization process used to prepare the prospect to be asked. A prospect is defined as anyone who has the financial ability to give a major gift along with an interest, demonstrated or anticipated, to make a contribution to your station.

The prospect has been identified, research done, interests determined, and a vigorous cultivation process has lead you to the moment of fundraising truth. It's time to ask for the gift. It's not hard; in fact it's rather easy when you think about it. By now you know the prospect and he or she knows you. A relationship has been established.

You believe you know what to ask for, in what amount, in what form, cash or assets or a combination, and that the time is right. Even if everything is not perfect, ask now. Waiting for everything to be perfect before asking is a prescription for never asking. Chances are as rare that you will have the right solicitor asking the right prospect for just the right amount in just the right form, for just the right purpose at just the right time as a perfect storm occurring, a rare but occasional happening. Timing is key to all of this; be careful to measure your timing as best you can, but ask.

How important is asking? According to the Public Management Institute (Conrad, 1978) not asking the single biggest mistake made in fundraising. An Independent Sector poll conducted from May to July, 2001 (p. 26, Nov 8, 2001, The Chronicle of Philanthropy) 56 percent of households say that they have been asked to give by at least one nonprofit; of these, 95 percent made a donation to at least one nonprofit compared to 79 percent of the households that did not receive a solicitation. Again, the best form, most effective way, of asking for a gift is personal solicitation.

## **Soliciting the Gift**

Securing a gift is both the natural and the hoped for result of the cultivation process. Philanthropy is the act of expressing love for others, so large gifts are much more than money contributed to meet a station's needs. They represent a person's opportunity for investment, and they are based on his or her commitment and passion. Solicitation is the delicate presentation of an opportunity to invest material assets in a way that brings intangible rewards and a sense of fulfillment. Major gift solicitation is not begging; it is a high form of seeking investments.

### **Before the Visit**

The prospect is prepared to be solicited. Make sure you are also prepared before making the call. Even prior to making the call to arrange an appointment, do your homework. If this is not possible, it is imperative that you take time to do this before the visit.

- Know your prospect--his or her needs, wants, hopes, and ambitions. If this is not a peer, colleague, or friend you know very well, get all the help available as you prepare.

- Find out who the prospect's family members, friends, and advisers are and which people at the station the prospect knows and respects. Meet with those people and learn all they can tell you about the prospect.
- Identify a possible project that corresponds to the prospect's interest. Document the need for the project and the benefits that will accrue if it is funded. In some cases, you may identify two or more projects. If you do, document the need for each.
- Prepare a presentation--flip chart, proposal, electronic presentation, or letter--to take to the meeting with the prospect, and perhaps leave it with the prospect.
- Teams of solicitors, most commonly two or three people, usually work better than one individual on major gift calls. Develop a strategy for each major gift prospect, and review this strategy with your team. If necessary, develop a script, and rehearse it with your team until they have internalized it.

Telephone the prospect or visit in person to ask for time to talk about your station's case for support and opportunities for investment. Then confirm this appointment in writing. It may be useful to send the prospect some easy-to-read

information about your plans along with the confirmation letter. Select the meeting site where the prospect will be most comfortable. Avoid noisy, congested sites. Restaurants generally are not a good place to solicit a major gift. Reconfirm the meeting by phone shortly beforehand.

Large gifts from individuals do sometimes result from personal conversations alone, without the aid of a formal written presentation, but usually only when a donor is very closely identified and involved with your station. Even then, a follow-up presentation in writing often helps firm up the appeal. The written presentation may be anything from a letter to a highly individualized--and occasionally quite extensive--published document. Even in these cases, however, a statement of no more than eight to ten pages in length at maximum is all that is necessary. The written proposal should cover at least these four items:

1. Statement of the opportunity or need, related, if possible, to the prospect's own priorities or needs
2. Proposed action for meeting the need or fulfilling the opportunity
3. Financial data, including information about costs, other funds available, and the amount being requested
4. A summary statement of the benefits the donor will derive from the gift

Asking for large gifts should never be a hit-or-miss proposition, nor should such solicitation be made in casual conversations. This is a serious mission that requires preparation and planning before visits, an understanding of the



techniques to be employed during visits, and the willingness to follow up after visits.

## **During the Visit**

Here are the six stages necessary to soliciting and closing a gift:

1. Opening
2. Questioning
3. Listening
4. Presenting
5. Overcoming Objections
6. Asking for the Gift

### **1. Opening**

In any person-to-person encounter, the opening, to a large extent, will determine the outcome. It does not matter whether you are asking for a luncheon date, talking with a colleague, requesting something from an assistant, or soliciting a major gift, your opening will have a definite effect on the outcome of the conversation.

Some callers find opening an awkward time. It should not be. This is a time to exchange pleasantries, to engage in meaningful interaction not directly associated with the purpose of the visit. Think of it as slipping into a tub filled with warm bubble bath rather than jumping into a hot shower.

If you are at a loss as to how to open, where to begin, there are five universally common themes for discussion that are tried and true:

- The weather
- Family and friends
- Business associates, acquaintances, or situations
- Current events--international, national, local, sports, business, social, cultural
- Golf

In the case of public broadcasting, we can add a sixth:

- Your station's programs/the prospect's favorite program(s)

One of the primary goals you are trying to accomplish in the opening is to engage and put at ease your prospect. It is critical that you involve the prospect in what you are saying. One of the most effective ways to do this is to talk about the prospect's favorite subject--himself or herself.

Try to get the prospect to talk about himself or herself as soon as possible. Be warm, friendly, carry a smile, and give compliments as honestly as possible, whenever possible. Remember to be as specific and sincere as you can be. Keep in mind that you never talk *to* a prospect, but rather you talk *with* him or her. Ask for responses, listen closely, and reinforce positive statements. By

drawing a prospect out, you have a better chance of bringing him or her into a meaningful relationship with your station.

The key here is involvement. Always speak from the prospect's point of view; always ask for reactions; above all, talk about his or her accomplishments. Make your opening as dynamic and intriguing as you possibly can.

## **2. Questioning**

If you have done a good job of getting the prospect's attention in the opening, your task now is to keep that attention and deepen his or her involvement. That can be easily accomplished through questioning.

Questions are wonderful things. They allow you to talk *with* the prospect rather than *to* the prospect. Questions automatically force the prospect into involvement. Good questions fall into a number of categories--questions that call for a feeling response, fact-finding questions that verify your research, or challenging and new questions that help uncover your prospect's motivations and needs.

Be careful not to ask questions that require a yes or no answer. This type of question will give you little information. Ask open-ended questions. Do not ask questions like, "Do you think we need more programs about \_\_\_\_\_?" but rather, "How do you think we could improve our programming?"

Often times, you can draw a prospect out by making a statement you have heard from a respected third party, then following that by a question like, “How do you feel about this?” Try to emphasize needs and problems as much as possible and how your station is or can provide a solution.

The biggest mistake you can make at this point is to begin talking about the money. During the questioning stage, it is very important that you make sure the prospect is aware of the needs your station addresses or proposes to address before you show him or her how those needs may be met.

### **3. Listening**

Those who pursue large gifts, be they volunteers or staff, like the major gift prospects they cultivate and solicit, use a variety of talents and skills to achieve success. Although there is no one ideal prototype that describes the quintessential major gift solicitor, these solicitors do frequently have some traits in common. First and foremost they believe in the cause they represent, often as passionately, or even more passionately, as the prospective donors they are courting. And *courting* is often as apt description of the relationship that develops. This is a second common thread--they develop relationships. The art forms of romance are commonly employed in appropriate ways throughout a successful cultivation and solicitation process. Thoughtful gestures, special attention, timely appropriate actions, and proper advances are all incorporated.

Major donors are people, not automatic cash machines. Their giving is personal and often emotional. This makes the personal interaction between solicitor and prospect more than a casual or business relationship. Good solicitors are generally attentive, sensitive, thoughtful, thorough, responsive, and respectful of their prospect's needs, wants and desires. In all these areas probably the most underrated and clearly important factor is one more trait--they are good listeners.

Experts identify five levels of listening:

- Ignoring
- Pretending
- Selective listening
- Attentive listening
- Empathetic listening

Using the first three levels will not result in major gift fundraising success.

*Attentive listening* is critical to obtaining big gifts, but it is *attentive listening*, listening with the intent to understand, and seeing the world the way the prospective donor sees it coupled with empathetic listening, not necessarily agreeing with but rather completely understanding your prospect both emotionally and intellectually, that identifies the truly extraordinary solicitor. It is this type of listening that can truly advance the cause you champion.

Listening is probably the most difficult skill to master; however, if you are going to take advantage of all the questions you ask, you will have to do more listening and less talking. That is not easy, but the only way a prospect will invest in your solution is if the prospect thinks you have understood his or her position.

A good listener is a participant who understands communication is both an active and selective process. Most people speak at the rate of 100-150 words per minute. You are capable of perceiving approximately 400 words per minute.

This gives you a lead time of between 250 and 300 words. You can use this lead time to evaluate what your prospect is saying--anticipating the points he or she will make, judging what has already been said, and judging the importance of each word and each statement.

The technique of listening ahead gives you an opportunity to be discerning in your listening process. Listen with a purpose. Do not interrupt. Ask questions and give feedback to your prospect so that he or she knows you are hearing what is being said. You will notice that as you give feedback, your prospects will have a tendency to reinforce the topics that are most important to them.

Be empathetic in your listening. Put yourself in your prospect's position. By doing this, you will build respect and therefore have a better chance to achieve your desired results.

Listen empathetically with your whole body, not just your ears. Lean forward into the conversation. Listen with your eyes as well; you can pick up a lot of information by watching the body language of your prospect. Your own body language and responses will show your prospect that you are alert and interested in what he or she has to say. Use phrases such as, “Let me be sure I have understood what you said” and “Let me see, do I understand this correctly?” These kinds of questions give evidence that you are listening; they encourage the prospect to listen more actively to what you are saying; they help to build common ground between you and your prospect.

Good listening, then, involves your active and meaningful participation. Your feedback to the prospect’s responses helps you to qualify and understand his or her position. Probably the most important benefit of active listening is that it makes the prospect feel good about himself or herself. It makes the prospect feel that he or she has something important to say, and that you are listening intently to what is being said.

Developing good listening skills will help you become a more effective solicitor.

#### **4. Presenting**

This particular skill may seem like the easiest part of your solicitation effort; however, you must be careful not to fall into the common trap of oversimplification. The natural tendency is to emphasize your station’s needs, rather

than the benefits your station can bring to the prospect's needs. Basically, prospects want four questions answered about your station:

1. Is it the best?
2. Will it perform the way you say it will?
3. Will it become or remain the best in the future?
4. How will I be paid back for my investment?

Knowing that your prospect wants these questions answered, you can construct your presentation to answer these questions before they are asked. One of the best ways to do this is to talk about benefits and advantages to the donor and to the community rather than about your station's needs.

When discussing your station, always try to use dialogue with the prospect:

- Use people stories.
- Make your language vivid and descriptive.
- Make the benefits for both donors and those who will benefit from the gift seem real enough to feel.

Remember Bell Telephone's marvelous slogan, "Reach out and touch someone?" It sold the company's benefits rather than the features of the service. Emphasizing the benefits rather than focusing on specific features is what you are trying to do with your prospect. Your objective is to show real people solving real problems, ones that matter to the prospect, too, through your station's programming.



## **5. Overcoming Objections**

Most of us become uncomfortable when objections are raised. Remembering that an objection is not an attack, but rather a question, will help you overcome this discomfort.

When answering an objection, always show understanding of your prospect's position. Try to gain your prospect's respect by making statements such as, "I see your point of view" or "I can understand why you would have that concern."

Take the objection and turn it into a positive statement such as "(Name), our station manager, feels the same you do about this particular problem. She has talked to the board about it and the board has come up with a number of ideas to overcome this problem."

The main point is to let the prospect know his or her objection is acceptable, that others feel the same way, and that this type of question has helped us find constructive solutions to other problems. You can even turn the objection into the very reason the prospect should support your station.

Do not make the objection bigger than it is. Never let the objection lead into an argument. Respond to it with facts and never make excuses. If the objection is weak, however, pass over it. Ignore it and move on with your presentation. It is perfectly legitimate to compromise on minor objections if, in fact, they will not be a hindrance to reaching your primary goal.

Remember that all objections are really questions, and that the prospect's investment in you station will help overcome the cause of the objection. This will help you convert the objections into reasons for giving.

## **6. Asking for the Gift**

In April 1998, Joan and Stanford Weill announced a gift of \$100 million to name Cornell University's Medical Center. Mr. Weill, asked how he and his wife had decided to make this gift, pointed to Cornell's president and medical dean and said, "They asked" (Arenson, 1998). The circumstances surrounding this gift are private of course, but it can be surmised that the decision was not quite so simple. And yet Mr. Weill's brief, spontaneous answer is poignant. It teaches once again the age-old lesson of fundraising at any level; the single biggest mistake in major gift fundraising is failing to ask for the gift; therefore, asking for the gift is the most important thing to do.

This skill is commonly called "the closing." After you have dealt with all the prospect's questions and concerns, it is time to ask for the gift. Most failure in a face-to-face solicitation is a result of not asking for the gift.

It is important that you know how and when to ask. If you have mastered the five previous skills, you will be able to observe when you prospect is ready for you to ask.

Always give the prospect alternatives. Never ask for a yes or no answer. Keep in mind that many prospects will say no two or three times before they say yes.

It is common practice to ask for a larger gift than is expected, generally about twice the size reasonable to be hoped for. This gives you a stronger negotiation position, and in most cases it helps get the gift needed. By this point the prospect should know that this is no ordinary meeting, but that you are there to discuss serious concerns that interest both him or her and your station.

# Handling Objections and Obstacles

Overcoming objections, the fifth stage in the solicitation process, properly managed, can turn no or maybe into yes in fundraising. Here are some common objections and often used approaches to overcome them leading to a gift.

## 1. Assume you already have the gift.

Do not ask for the gift; act as if you already have it.

## 2. Tell a story.

Use a story you have heard about another prospect that had a similar objection. The prospect in the story should overcome his or her objection and make a major gift. Always use the name of the prospect in your story if you have permission to do so. Remember to make the story entertaining.

## 3. Reverse the question.

Have the prospect ask you a yes or no question, and then reverse it into a question that you ask. For example:

*Prospect:* "Will some recognition be given to me?"

*Solicitor:* "Would you like your name on the donor plaque?"

*Prospect:* "If I can afford the gift to get it there..."

#### **4. Close on the major objection.**

Use this technique when a prospect offers objection after objection.

- a. Hear out each objection completely.
- b. Restate and put greater emphasis on the major objection.
- c. Ask the prospect if he or she would donate, were it not for the objection.
- d. If no, deal with other minor objections in turn.
- e. If yes, work through the last objection and close.

#### **5. Last resort.**

If all else fails, you may want to try the last resort.

*Solicitor:* “Mr. Stockwealth, I believe (our station) has a number of great programs, strong leadership, and real vision. All it needs to continue being one of our community’s greatest assets is more support for its excellent programs and services. Is there anything I did wrong that kept you from making a gift?”

*Prospect:* “(Will bring up an objection.)”

*Solicitor:* “Of course, I should have thought of that? Thank you for being so honest with me and clarifying your feelings. I do not know how I forgot to clear that up for you.”

Then deal with the objection and close.

## **6. Reconsider.**

As you start to leave, ask the prospect, "Won't you reconsider?"

### **Overcoming Obstacles**

You may run into a number of problems in your solicitation presentation that will keep you from closing. Here are a few suggestions to help you overcome these obstacles:

#### **Problem #1**

*Prospect says, "I have to talk to my spouse."*

Strategy

- a. Ask, "May we both meet with him/her?"
- b. Hypothesize, "Just suppose he/she agrees."
- c. Ask, "Are there any other questions to which you think he/she will want an answer?"
- d. Do your research--be sure to speak with both spouses on the first visit.
- e. Get the spouse involved before you visit.

#### **Problem #2**

*Prospect imposes a time limit on the meeting.*

Strategy

- a. Ask, "Is this the only time we will be able to spend together?"

- b. Condense your presentation and continue.
- c. Reschedule the meeting for a more convenient time if the prospect will agree.

### **Problem #3**

*Prospect offers a gift that is too small.*

Strategy

- a. Suggest the offered gift as a first payment on a larger one. Say, "If you could make four or five annual gifts this size, look what we could do!"
- b. Apologize for misleading him or her about the amount you need. Say, "Before I can accept this gift, I have to check with my station manager."
- c. Take the smaller gift and upgrade later.

### **Problem #4**

*Prospect is a non-talker or silent.*

Strategy

- a. Ask questions.
- b. Look and act interested when the prospect does talk, and then ask more questions.
- c. Do not let the silence rest on you.
- d. Get another volunteer to play devil's advocate to stimulate the conversation.

- e. Go golfing, fishing, etc. with the prospect, a situation in which it is not necessary to have a lengthy conversation.



- f. Ask a good friend of the prospect to volunteer information about the prospect. Ask questions the friend knows the prospect is thinking about.
- g. Go into your presentation.

### **Problem #5**

*Prospect is aggressive or talkative.*

Strategy

- a. Let him or her talk until he or she runs down.
- b. Ask questions to change the focus of the conversation.
- c. Ask why he or she agreed to the meeting.
- d. Look for a bridge to your presentation.
- e. Ask to meet with the prospect's spouse.
- f. Do not press. Set up another meeting.

### **Problem #6**

*Lack of coordination among team members.*

Strategy

- a. Clarify roles in advance.
- b. Set an agenda of questions.
- c. Match complementary personalities and styles.
- d. Role-play and practice in advance.
- e. Be flexible
- f. Work signal

## **Errors to Avoid in Solicitation**

The Public Management Institute (Conrad, 1978) has identified the fourteen most common major errors that are made in soliciting gifts:

1. Not asking for the gift
2. Not asking for a large enough gift
3. Not listening--talking too much
4. Not asking questions
5. Talking about the organization and its approach rather than about the benefits to its clients
6. Not being flexible, and not having alternatives to offer the prospect
7. Not knowing enough about the prospect before the solicitation
8. Forgetting to summarize before moving on
9. Not having prearranged signals between solicitation team members
10. Asking for the gift too soon
11. Speaking rather than remaining silent after asking for the gift
12. Settling on the first offer that a prospect suggest, even if it is lower than expected
13. Not cultivating the donor before soliciting
14. Not sending out trained solicitors

These mistakes are all avoidable with the right preparation, approach, and presentation to the prospect.

## After the Call

After the visit, have the solicitor write a short note of thanks for the prospect's time and interest. As appropriate, draft or ask staff to draft a further note of thanks from the station manager and perhaps from the board chair. Prepare a complete summary report on the visit, with particular attention to new information on the potential donor's special interests, background, and idiosyncrasies. Be sure to include at least the following information:

- Name of individual visited, date visited, and place of meeting
- Names of the staff and volunteers who went on the visit
- The purpose of the visit
- The points that were to be highlighted or conveyed during the visit, and whether this was done successfully
- As much detail as possible about what happened at the meeting (what comments were made by who and the responses to those comments)
- Lists of any materials distributed during the meeting (state whether there are copies in the development office's research files)
- Mention of any pre- or post meeting correspondence of which others should have copies
- The concerns (if any) that were voiced by the prospect, and the positive comments that were made in response
- Whether a request for funding or assistance was made and, if so, the details of that request

- Whether additional action or follow-up is needed and, if so what types, by when, and by whom
- Whether other people should be alerted to the fact that this visit was made and, if so, who they are
- As appropriate, thoughts and recommendations on the best strategies or approaches for cultivating and soliciting the prospect

Doing this is important. Your current donors are your best prospects to make future major gifts. A key to continuity in relationships over time is a documented chronological file of interactions and involvements.

## **Conclusion**

The effort to attract major gifts requires patience, investment, persistence, commitment, dedication, and determination. It requires a long view and takes time to produce results. The effort and the wait will be worth it for those stations that stay the course. There is no public broadcast station in America that is not worthy of receiving or capable of realizing major gift success. The future belongs to the visionary, to the bold. Be visionary, Be bold.