

Why Fulfillment and Donor Relations are Even More Important for Monthly Giving

BY ERICA WAASDORP



You already know your relationships with your regular donors are important, not only to cultivate and upgrade them, but also to

keep them giving to your organization.

But what about monthly donors? Are they just nice to have? Nothing special really? Well, think again! Based on results from organizations that have established monthly donor programs, we find that monthly donors really become major donors. Some have been giving for more than 10 years!

But just because you have brought someone in as a monthly donor does not mean he or she will stay with you forever. It still takes some work, especially in the thank-you arena and in following up. And it starts right when they join.

Let's think through the following scenario:

You offer a sustainer program for a hospice organization and you've agreed to call it "Compassionate Champions." You promise a special pin and a certificate for amounts of \$5 or more a month. The sustainer can join through a credit card account, a pledge reminder program, or an Electronic Funds Transfer (EFT) via his or her bank.

You'll want to make sure to send out the pin, certificate, and the thank-you letter as soon as possible, preferably within a week of the donor's decision to join the program. Also, make sure to charge the credit card as quickly as possible so the donor is committed. If you manage the process through your online system, make sure the email confirmation is also up to date, that it shows the special logo, and that it recognizes the donor every month as a Compassionate Champion.

Some organizations think a sustainer has to be renewed every year, just like a member. That is *not* the case. Once the donor authorizes you to take a regular ongoing donation via his or her credit card, you can keep going. So if someone tries to talk you into including a stop date in the database, don't. That's the neat part about sustainers, they keep on giving and giving.

Fast-forward a few months. All of a sudden, the credit card does not go through. Perhaps the donor changed cards and forgot to pass on the new information? Perhaps the card was declined for some reason? I recommend sending a letter right away, asking for the updated information, followed by a phone call to verify that the donor received it. The letter/phone call seems to be the best combination for getting the information as quickly as possible. You'll have to correct the donor's record because this month's sustainer payment did not happen, but hopefully next month everything will be fine again.

Fast-forward two years. The donor's credit card is about to expire. If you wait until this happens, you may lose the sustainer and it becomes harder to get him back. Rather, work up a system that gives you a list of those donors whose credit cards are about to expire and send special letters one or two months **BEFORE** the cards expire. It is a simple thank-you letter with a request for updated information. Depending on the type of organization, you can consider a letter first with a phone call follow-up to verify the information. Nowadays, a lot of people are not comfortable

giving their information over the phone, so the written request is usually better. The great news is that you may be able to ask the donor to reconsider their donation amounts. Many sustainers upgrade at this time.

Some organizations simply forward the credit card expiration date by two or three years (depending upon the type of credit card). I would not recommend this. Some donors do not like it and you'd lose them forever. Especially with the large number of credit card spoofs and hackers, as an organization, you're better off getting something from the donor in writing or over the phone that they'd like to continue with that card. It's better to check than to assume.

Finally, if you have a bank EFT sustainer program, the system you put in place to update the credit card sustainers' information can be simply adjusted to accommodate for bank problems. Donors could contact the bank and stop their sustainer donations without telling you. And you won't find out until you get the rejection information back from the bank. In these cases, I recommend a letter and phone call if you can do it. Otherwise two letters. It's crucial to find out why donors drop off.

It's still easier and more cost effective to retain a sustainer than to generate a new one. Simple donor relations go a long way. Make sure everybody realizes the tremendous value of a sustainer over the long run. They'll stay with you for years and years and they may leave you in their wills, which means these little \$5-a-month donors could become major donors in time. So, are you treating them as such?

Erica Waasdorp is currently writing a comprehensive guide to monthly giving. This is just part of a chapter in the book. Erica has helped organizations raise millions of dollars through starting and expanding monthly giving programs. She can be reached at ewaasdorp@dmwdirect.com or at (508) 202-4011.