



# AFP Information Exchange

## The Role Of Annual Giving Societies In Your Organization

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This AFP Information Exchange resource is provided by:

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Competition for charitable dollars is fierce, and donor retention is on the decline. With so many nonprofits fighting for a larger piece of the philanthropic pie, the need to attract and retain donors has never been greater. Many organizations overlook a very simple cultivation and stewardship tool — the giving society.

Some view giving societies as old school. We believe giving societies function as a self-perpetuating resource-attainment strategy to be applied to an existing pool of donors and integrated into everyday development efforts. By identifying each “next step” toward higher levels of involvement, nonprofits can communicate the importance of progressive giving while building relationships with donors and growing financial resources.

In a 2008 article titled “Fundraising tips: The art of setting and changing giving levels,” published by the Association of Fundraising Professionals, a suggested first step in identifying giving levels appropriate for the organization’s giving society is to determine which gift levels current donors cluster around over the course of your fiscal year. Careful research and consideration of your donor base are essential to effectively attract donors and increase donor sights. It is better to set the bar higher and start small, than to set the bar too low and negate the value of membership.

Brand your giving society by giving it an overarching name and corresponding gift level titles to engage your constituent groups. Gift level names tied to your organization, such as the year it was formed, or creatively themed groups, such as composers, musicians and maestros for a symphony, help create a sense of belonging to personalize your giving society and increase giving.

Once a giving society is established and named, identify where to direct your marketing and recruitment efforts. If you have wealth-screened your database, consider a special appeal or event that is aimed at attracting new members to your highest levels of membership. Donors who have given at the same level consistently are ready to be asked for a larger gift or to take a “next step,” like volunteering, or you can offer an organizational tour that will bring them closer to the heart of your nonprofit.

Associating specific and increasing benefits or demonstrations of thanks with each level of giving in the giving society can help retain members and charitable dollars. Consider what your donors appreciate most when developing benefits specific to your giving society.

Recognition may include publicly recognizing and thanking top giving society members, as long as they have the opportunity to opt out. Include names of those in the highest giving levels of a society in your organization's annual report. Create a unique giving wall or consider a video wall, which can easily be kept current. Be sure to clearly label each level of giving and update the wall continuously, highlighting those who have moved up to the next level in the past year. To further recognize and promote the society, point out the giving wall on tours and to volunteers, staff and other constituents who have giving potential.

Personal recognition is important to maintain a giving society that cultivates member relationships as well, although the time involved in thanking members may differ between society levels. Giving societies can offer donors the opportunity to be among the first to learn of new programs, changes or organizational events, with exclusive updates from the executive director aimed at members of higher giving levels. Special luncheons, personal tours or meetings with the executive director or board members leave a lasting impression. A personal request to volunteer on a key committee or board deepens a donor's commitment and engagement. Hand-written thank you notes or thank you calls from board members, development officers or individuals served can update donors on how the funds are being used while giving the donor an opportunity to ask questions and engage with the organization directly. Increasing direct personal contact through a giving society forms deeper relationships that help retain donors and cultivate increased giving.

Many donors give something each year, but are they giving their full potential? Ask yourself what you could be doing through your giving societies to facilitate larger gifts by providing donors with the "why now" behind habitually increasing gifts from year to year.

Allocating staff resources toward special events and other low return efforts can inhibit growth of an organization's financial resources. A giving society can shift the development focus from smaller gifts to more sustainable levels of giving, but it won't work without dedicated staff time and resources to ensure members are welcomed, thanked and recognized properly. With a giving society as a tool, a new focus on membership benefits for current and prospective donors in the higher levels of giving can lead to greater engagement, greater giving potential and a greater return on investment.

Giving societies can serve as a cost-effective way to further an organization's philanthropic efforts by appealing to a donor's sense of doing good and desire for personal recognition. As a guide for communications, cultivation and stewardship efforts, they can help shift an organization's time and focus to more sustainable and higher levels of giving. With careful research and planning, your nonprofit can communicate the importance of progressive giving, build relationships with donors and grow your financial resources to further your mission through a giving society.



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**About AMPERAGE:** Plug into Amperage and move the needle on your fundraising efforts with Amperage Fundraising Advisers' proactive, full service fundraising approach, including capital and annual campaign consulting, feasibility studies, strategic planning, Web, video production, design, branding and public relations.

**About Wendy Scardino, CFRM:** Wendy Scardino is a regional fundraising and marketing adviser with Amperage Fundraising Advisers. Her career includes 10 years in nonprofit development and communications. Wendy is a past president of the Greater Tri-State Chapter of the Association of Fundraising Professionals and a graduate of the University of Northern Iowa. She volunteers regularly with many community organizations and is an active member of Rotary International.

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