How to Find Your First 100 Donors
A Donor Acquisition Guide for New Nonprofits
Congratulations! You’ve defined your mission, received your 501c3 determination letter from the IRS, and filed the required charitable solicitation paperwork for your state. You’ve done it!

You’re an official nonprofit organization. You’re ready to do good and change the world.

You just need money.

You are working on such an important cause, and you are doing good work – surely if others know, they will happily donate to support your cause, right?

But figuring out who to ask, when to ask, and how to ask can be tricky. But remember, the international and national organizations with thousands of donors who raise millions of dollars each year didn’t begin that way. They started small just like you.

In this guide, we offer practical, effective tips for finding your first 100 donors – and hope that they encourage you to be bold and brave as you invite others to support a cause they care about.
Getting Started

Start Small

• Make the first gift yourself. The most difficult gift is often the very first one. By making the first gift yourself, no one else will need to be first, they will be joining others who’ve already given.

• Create a system for tracking EVERY donation to your organization. This system can be as simple as an excel spreadsheet. Remember a few important factors:
  • Track ALL relevant information: first and last name, contact information, donation date, donation amount, and payment method. (For donor and data privacy, password protect your documents and keep them in secure locations).
  • Track it electronically so it can be handled more easily when you are ready to upgrade to a donor management system. (Avoid using multiple documents or hard copy sign-in sheets as this will cause more work for you later).
  • Don’t forget to track in-kind donations and include the donor-stated “market value.”
  • Consider one of the many simple, often free, donor management systems on the market to get you started.

• Ask the five people you know best to make a small gift (and preferably to become a monthly donor). For new nonprofit founders, board members, and staff, the idea of asking for money can be scary. Remember, you are simply inviting those you know to support a cause you care about. You don’t need to be business-like and formal. You could visit over coffee, send a text message, or post on social media – with a message like, “I’m really excited about this great new project/organization I’m involved with!” [Explain why the organization exists.] Then add, “I just made a donation. Would you join me in making a small monthly gift to support the mission?”
Engage Your Board Members

• Ask board members for a monetary commitment – even a very small donation will create a peer relationship between the board member and those they will ask in the future because they can invite others to “join” them in giving. Ask board members to each invite the five people they know best to become monthly donors as well.

Mind-Mapping Activity for your Board

• Invite board members to mind-map their spheres of influence. Ask each board member to think of all the places they visit or inhabit on a given day, week, month, or year. They can think of all their activities: work, church, book club, spin class, barber, massage therapist, golf buddies, neighbors, summer house neighbors, etc. At this point, they don’t need to decide whether these folks will ever donate. We just want them to jot down everyone they encounter.

For more on how to get your board involved with your fundraising process, check out our eGuide Turning Your Board Members Into Fundraisers.

• Once the lists are complete, ask them to categorize their lists into buckets or categories for the many opportunities to ask these individuals to support the cause:
  • Event attendee
  • Raffle ticket purchaser
  • Auction item donor
  • Auction item bidder
  • Direct ask for monthly donation
  • Major donor
  • Corporate sponsorship

• When you’ve put all potential supporters into categories, estimate the likely dollar amount you’d anticipate from each bucket. For example, if you have 200 people who fall into the “raffle ticket purchaser” category, and you plan to sell tickets for $5, you can estimate a $1000 gross monetary goal for the raffle. Don’t forget to subtract the expenses related to the raffle (ticket printing, prices, etc.). Technically speaking, event ticket purchases, raffle tickets, and auction bids are not considered donations so these individuals will not be donors, but they can surely be added to your contact list for further communications and engagement.
Create an Online Presence

**Website**

Setting up your website is a very passive method of establishing your online presence, but it is an important step. Be sure that your website is “responsive” to different screen modes so that the visitor has a positive experience on a desktop, tablet, or mobile phone.

When developing your website, create opportunities to grow your contact list:

- Place a donate button clearly near the top of your website. In addition to a navigation menu link, create donate buttons that are visible BEFORE a visitor would need to scroll.
- Include a “subscribe to our newsletter” form or button on the sidebar or in the footer of your website to capture the names and email addresses of your visitors. If you can enable a pop-up form, even better.

**Social Media**

Choose one or two social media platforms to begin with. Ask yourself, your board members, volunteers, and staff - where those who would likely support you “hang out.” How can you best get in front of them? LinkedIn, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, Pinterest? The list goes on, but you’ll want to begin with one or two.

Once you have set up your social media accounts, here are some tips for managing them:

- Invite friends of the organization to become ambassadors by liking your pages and committing to sharing your posts with their networks.
- Follow other individuals and organizations with similar causes and missions.
- Remember that social media is a place to create conversation. It is not a bulletin board for you to only post information. Include questions, surveys, polls, and other content that will encourage response and cultivate a relationship rather than thinking of it as a megaphone for you to make announcements to the world.
- Consistently post engaging content, respond to others’ comments, and note active responders in your donor management documents or software.
- Once you’ve begun posting consistently and gaining engagement, periodically share a link to your online giving page and a reminder to sign up for your electronic communications.

For more on how to make your social media accounts a source of fundraising revenue, check out our eGuide 6 Simple Ways to Turn Your “Likes” Into Donations.
Nonprofit Review Platforms

The online world is vast, and many times individuals come across our organization through other websites and platforms. When you’ve received your 501c3 status from the IRS, be sure to visit the following platforms to claim your profiles and begin building strong ratings:

- **Candid’s Guidestar**
- **Charity Navigator Encompass**
- **Great Nonprofits**

By keeping these platforms up-to-date, you will gain credibility and position yourself for future giving.

**Participate in Giving Days**

Many geographic regions have established giving days to promote giving local. Find out what is happening in your area. Check with your local or regional community foundations to see if they have established portals for giving days and ongoing local giving— and if they allow the regional nonprofits to keep a profile year-round. Depending on your cause area, you might also find collaborative opportunities to be profiled on web platforms or in newsletters.

#GivingTuesday, which takes place on the Tuesday following Thanksgiving, has become a global day of collective generosity. While not all organizations see huge success on #GivingTuesday, if you are a new organization working to find your first 100 donors, participation in #GivingTuesday can be a great way to raise awareness and gather support.
Host Special Events and Fundraisers

Fundraising is more than hosting a fundraiser. But for many young organizations, an event can be an effective method to grow your donor base.

Fundraisers are not all created equal. Some raise awareness while others provide a quick influx of cash. Some are quite large and require extensive resources to pull together. Still others are a simple gathering of friends. Each one can be effective, but you’ll want to consider what you hope to get out of it before you begin planning.

To create an influx of cash, you’ll want to draw a crowd. Some attendees at your event may participate simply to enjoy the event and will not likely support you beyond that event and that’s okay! The more you raise awareness of your organization, the more donors you will naturally bring in.

Think:
- 5k, music festival, family carnival
- Profit-share collaboration with a local restaurant, comedy venue, theater, etc. or through the sale of swag like t-shirts where the portion of proceeds go to your nonprofit.

To raise awareness about your organization in your community, you’ll want to design an event that allows you to share your vision with the audience. Attendees will leave with a very clear idea of your organization’s mission, the problem you are solving, and how they can help.

Think:
- Gala or dinner parties
- Conference or workshop
- Luncheon, fashion show
To meet individuals who you believe are likely to give a large gift to your organization, you might consider a **smaller, more intimate gathering**. You don’t sell tickets or gather sponsorships, you don’t need a full program of entertainment, you simply invite folks to hear a “pitch” about your cause and ask them to support it with a monetary donation.

Think:
- House party
- Pre-work breakfast or midday lunch

Regardless of the type of fundraising event you host, you’ll want to consider a few important questions to ensure that you’ve optimized the monetary benefits:

- **How much time and resources go into hosting this event – and how much do you make in return?**
- **Will you have an opportunity to ask for a direct donation during the event (call for cash, fund-a-need, raise the paddle, text-to-give)?**
- **Do you have a clear method for capturing contact information to send thank-yous and to follow up with select individuals to cultivate a stronger relationship between the individuals and your organization?**

So much of the magic of fundraising events happens AFTER the event when you ask folks if they enjoyed the event, if they’d like to learn more about your organization, or if they’d like to become more involved. One of the biggest mistakes many nonprofits make is NOT planning for how you will follow-up with attendees beyond the transactions of the event to cultivate authentic relationships.
Expand Your Reach

Peer-to-Peer and Crowdsourcing

If you have a group of committed stakeholders and supporters, invite them to raise funds on your behalf. You’ve likely seen birthday fundraisers on social media where someone invites their friends to donate to a cause they care about in lieu of a birthday gift. You’ve probably seen GoFundMe-style pages where people launch a fundraising campaign to support a friend in need.

You don’t need to wait for a birthday or a tragedy. You can proactively invite your board members, volunteers, or your friends and family to fundraise on your behalf. You can provide images, graphics, and the language they will need to share with their circles.

While fundraising on these social media platforms can be easy to use and effective in getting the word out, before you dive in, be sure you understand exactly how they work. Ask yourself key questions:

- How much are the transaction fees and cost to use the platform?
- Will you receive the reports you need to track donors and donation amounts?
- Can you download the name and contact information of those who give?
- Will you be able to thank donors in a timely manner?
- Do you need to raise a specific dollar amount before you receive your funds?
- How long will you need to wait to receive the funds raised?

Meta (formerly Facebook) provides numerous options to help you raise money and engage your community through their platform. Check out their Social Impact website to get started!

Petition sites

If your mission is related to advocacy or raising awareness about a critical issue that needs a wider audience, consider creating an online petition. Oftentimes, the petition platforms offer an opportunity to raise funds in connection with that advocacy campaign.
Make Giving Easy

Philanthropic giving is often impulsive.

Be sure that you’re making it easy for those who want to donate. Incorporate as many elements of modern technology as you can. Make use of online giving platforms, text-to-give software, and QR codes that lead to donation pages. Incorporate video and text messaging in your communications plans.

At the same time, don’t forget that tried and true methods of fundraising, like direct mail and phone-a-thons, work too. Even a donation jar or envelopes for those who want to give cash on-site is important!

Is your mailing address clearly visible on your website and is your website clearly visible on all your printed materials?

Never make it difficult for someone to support your cause.
Cultivate a Culture of Gratitude

While your focus in the early stages is all about acquiring new donors, you’ll want to establish very clear practices for how you will thank and steward your donors as they come.

Thanking donors is critical to keeping them engaged so they become loyal stakeholders in your mission. The 2020 statistics are startling:

- Less than 20% of first-time donors give a second gift.
- The average retention rate for donors each year is about 43%.

To ensure that more than 20 of your first 100 donors give again – and keep on giving – you’ll need to understand the difference between a transactional and relational thank you.

Most nonprofit professionals understand that it is important to send a receipt with a thank-you message when someone makes a gift to their organization. The receipt listing the donation date and amount is a transactional thank you. Often these are form letters that feel very business-like and contain the IRS required language indicating no goods or services were received in exchange for the donation. Ideally, this receipt is sent within 48 hours of a gift being received.

But your gratitude cannot stop there.

Instead, you’ll want to think about how you can incorporate the relational thank you into your fundraising efforts. You’ll want to create a pattern of sharing impact reports or updates of how a donor’s gift is making a difference to the individuals or causes impacted by your organization. Ideally, a donor will receive three or four thank-yous, impact updates, or tokens of appreciation (a handwritten card, a photo or phone call) before they are asked to give again.

Everyone expects a transactional thank you. You’ll want to discover ways to thank and appreciate them when they least expect it. In this way, your first 100 donors are more likely to stick around for a while.
Conclusion

Finding your first 100 donors can feel like a daunting, overwhelming task. The trick is to start small, stay steady, and be grateful.

Fundraising is a marathon, not a sprint – and you’ll hear “no.” Don’t worry. “No” does not mean you’ve failed. You can’t take it personally. Continue to amplify your message, share your vision, and offer everyone within your circles an opportunity to support your worthy cause.

Most of all – have courage, keep calm, and fundraise.

As a growing nonprofit, getting new donors is just one part of the puzzle as you strive to engage your community and achieve your mission. At Network for Good, we have resources to help you on every step of that journey.