

Updating your stewardship and donor relations strategy: Determining a strategy that works for an organisation of any size

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the University of Tennessee, Knoxville's stewardship and donor relations strategy and how University of Tennessee (UT) creates unique donor stewardship through creative events, technology, segmenting stewardship and elevating personal touches. The examples included can be adapted for the needs of any size organisation.

Keywords

donor relations, stewardship, donor engagement, strategy, partnerships

INTRODUCTION

A one size fits all strategy is not the best way to steward donors. The line that all donor relations professionals walk is how to appropriately steward donors while also managing staff bandwidth. How does an organisation make custom and impactful stewardship for donors with limited resources and staff? The answer is prioritising and segmenting. At the University of Tennessee, Knoxville (UT), the stewardship team has been growing, but the campus team still only numbers a total of five staff members. As most would agree,

stewardship is everyone's responsibility whether on the stewardship team or serving as a fundraiser. This paper will look at unique donor stewardship that can be applied to different size teams to create personalised stewardship for donors.

UPDATING YOUR STEWARDSHIP AND DONOR RELATIONS STRATEGY

Step one in creating effective stewardship is to audit. There are two components to the audit. First, audit what stewardship is

currently being done in the organisation. The audit must include what is being done at all levels in the organisation. At UT, the audit looks at what is currently being done at the campus level as well as within each college and/or unit. An audit of current stewardship practices will provide the opportunity to create a stewardship baseline for the organisation. The complete audit should result in a document that summarises what is being done, what is working, what is not working and areas for growth/improvement.

The second part of the audit is focused on the organisation's stewardship team members and the team's bandwidth. The team's capacity is an integral consideration when updating a stewardship and donor relations strategy. An important factor in the audit is to ensure the team can succeed, rather than overextending the team and being unable to achieve the strategy in place.

The goals of the two-part audit are to find ways to be more efficient and effective while still providing personalised and unique opportunities for the donors to feel thanked. The other goal is to ensure that the stewardship team is able to accomplish the initiatives set in place in the strategy and help manage the team's time and goals.

Once the audit is completed, the results allow the organisation to have a better idea of how to improve and grow. The following explains how UT creates unique donor stewardship through creative events, technology, segmenting stewardship and elevating personal touches.

The use of events at UT creates opportunities to thank donors in a meaningful way depending on the donor's needs. Whether these events are in person or virtual, the pandemic has shown that

the connection between the donor and who or what is impacted by the donor's support is the most important part for continued giving. Events can focus on creating a culture of philanthropy among students, providing exceptional stewardship to donors during key initiatives, or connecting those who receive private support with the donors who support them. In any case, the goal is to show donors the organisation's appreciation and the impact of giving back.

UT has created a lot of custom stewardship through technology and the primary technology used at UT is ThankView. The University of Tennessee adopted ThankView early on and has used this vendor for over four years (www.thankview.com). ThankView is a platform that allows an organisation to send custom videos, collect, record and store videos, and track e-mail metrics such as total sends and open rates.

UT currently sends all stewardship video messaging through this platform. ThankView allows UT to send a generic video to large groups or customised videos to individuals.

The industry average open rate is 22.7 per cent as reported by ThankView, but at UT the average open rate for ThankView is 54.7 per cent. Since partnering with ThankView, UT has sent over 186,000 video messages. The easy-to-use platform can help make any organisation's stewardship and donor relations strategy more robust even with a small team or restricted bandwidth. Just receiving a thank you in a different format can make all the difference with donors.

As a partner with ThankView, UT was also able to utilise ODDER (On-Demand Digital Endowment Reports) and sent the annual endowment reports digitally through this platform. With the new digital endowment report

process, UT is becoming more adaptable and able to meet the needs of donors as many express interests in receiving less mail. Times are changing and the use of technology can help meet the changing needs of each organisation's donor base.

Segmenting is an easy way to reach donors with unique messaging while still managing time and resources of any size team. Applying segmentation to stewardship allows each organisation's stewardship and donor relations strategy to match the needs of the donor segment. Start small and prioritise the organisation's donor segments to determine who to focus on — a good rule to follow no matter the organisation's size. This concept of segmentation can be applied to different donor groups depending on the organisations priorities, and increased donor retention is the result.

Another aspect to look at is elevating personal touches. Many organisations fall into the rut of giving away items that are useful, but not necessarily meaningful — pens, coasters, or mugs. While this sort of swag has an appropriate time and place, organisations should prioritise choosing thoughtful gifts donors will appreciate and that are meaningful to them. Use a gift as an opportunity to tell a donor that they are seen by providing a gift that connects to the donor's passion.

Read on to learn about some initiatives implemented at UT that can be adapted to any size organisation to update the stewardship and donor relations strategy for each of these areas of focus.

CREATIVE EVENTS

Thank a Donor Day

The University of Tennessee seeks to educate students about the importance of

philanthropy while also giving students an opportunity to thank donors directly each year. Each fall, UT hosts Grateful Vol Day, which is UT's annual Thank a Donor Day. This event is a campus-wide, one-day event that thanks donors who supported UT. The donors thanked at Grateful Vol Day includes all previous fiscal year and current fiscal year to date donors, which allows UT to connect students to a large donor segment annually and the donors, in turn, receive an additional unique thank you.

A regular Grateful Vol Day includes a large tented area in the middle of campus with tables set up for students to come by to write two thank-you notes each to UT donors. Students are provided stationery and a script and in return receive some Grateful Vol Day swag. Students also get to interact with the alumni team while in line and learn more about philanthropy and UT donors. The student notes are reviewed by staff before being mailed directly to the donor. The notes are directed to a specific donor segment such as planned giving donors and donors with a lifetime giving at a certain threshold.

The rest of the donors receive an all-digital experience, with each video message focused on how the donors give so that the thank-you video is specific and unique. For example, faculty and staff donors will receive a student video with language referencing the connection to UT as employee. Another example would be major giving donors — lifetime giving of US\$25,000+ at UT. Major giving donors received a video that recognised the donor's leadership at UT. These videos are also from UT students.

In 2019, UT thanked more than 23,000 donors through either personal handwritten thank-you notes from students or through a student video. Over

1,400 students chose to participate in Grateful Vol Day, a record-breaking year for participation.

In 2020, COVID-19 caused a shift in practices that allowed UT to focus on a completely digital strategy for this special day. This was an exciting opportunity to find new ways to engage and educate students about the importance of philanthropy. Through open collection of video submissions from students, not only could every student participate whether the students were on or off campus, in or out of isolation, but a custom video compilation of submissions was created to send to all donors who supported UT over the past eight years during the Join the Journey campaign, which had just ended. To see this video go to tiny.utk.edu/RTuGz.

Day of Giving

At UT, as with many universities, there is a strong partnership with the annual giving team. This partnership is highlighted especially well through UT's Day of Giving called Big Orange Give.

While Big Orange Give is focused on a money goal (in 2020 UT raised over US\$2.5m in 24 hours), the stewardship strategy is just as important. This day focuses largely on annual giving donors. Using targeted stewardship on this day of giving allows the organisation to make all donors feel appreciated during such a focused campaign.

Reflecting back on how to manage team bandwidth, the stewardship strategy for this day should reflect the capacity of the team. Again, do the stewardship well rather than overextending and disappointing donors. At UT, the stewardship strategy includes several prongs and can be adjusted depending on an organisation's size.

The first stewardship priority at UT is day-of stewardship. As this giving campaign focuses heavily on a specific date — UT's stewardship associated with this day also reflects that emphasis. As gifts are received, donors receive thank-you videos on an hourly basis. Donors who make a gift under US\$1,000 receive a generic thank-you video that is prerecorded. With the staff size at UT, there is also capacity to film personal thank-you videos for donors at a certain threshold — as of now custom videos are created for donors of US\$1,000+. The custom videos address the donor by name and acknowledge the area of support. Each custom video is filmed throughout the day for a timely and personalised thank you to the donor. In 2020, UT sent 4,400+ thank-you videos, up by over 750 from the previous. Of those videos, 250 were the customised videos for the US\$1,000+ donors. As mentioned, stewardship is everyone's responsibility so staff across campus also reach out to donors as gifts are received and thank the donors directly throughout the day.

After Big Orange Give is over, the stewardship does not end. It is important to continue to show appreciation even after the gifts are received and the day is over. At UT, the strategy includes sending an additional acknowledgment to first-time donors to reinforce the gratitude felt for a donor choosing to support UT for the first time ever. All Big Orange Give donors receive an impact piece within 3–6 months following Big Orange Give. The impact piece highlights how much money was raised, how many allocations/areas were supported, and specific examples of how private support impacted specific priorities on campus.

Gratitude lunches

Gratitude lunch is a fun name given to meetings at UT that include a donor and the people who have been impacted by the donor's generosity. By far, this is the easiest and most scalable of the events shared. While a gratitude lunch is usually during the lunch hour, this event concept can also be applied as a meet and greet or dinner. Almost always gratitude lunches are hosted on campus or at a location directly next to campus to ensure students can participate. In the times of COVID-19, gratitude lunches have been adapted to a virtual format as well to accommodate the travel and gathering restrictions in place — and a meal is not shared during the interaction.

The most common type of gratitude lunch is a meeting between a scholarship donor and the scholarship recipients. The meeting provides an opportunity for the donor to interact with students who have been directly impacted by the donor's support. One of the most compelling interactions a donor can experience is seeing the direct impact being made on future generations. Gratitude lunches can also connect donors with programme leadership, programme participants, professors and faculty depending on what the donor supports.

A good tip to remember is that gratitude lunches always include at least one development officer to help facilitate conversation between the donor and the recipients.

USE OF TECHNOLOGY: THANKVIEW

Valentine's Day

UT sends a 'Happy Valentine's Day' video to donors on an annual basis. These videos are segmented by college

so that donors to a specific college will receive a message of gratitude from a student in that college. If a donor supported the College of Architecture & Design, the video will be from an architecture student. This fun holiday is an easy opportunity to reach out to donors and show further appreciation and share a message from the organisation in a unique way. A February message is also a good idea because at this time of year there is usually a lull in engagement.

National Public Radio station

WUOT is the National Public Radio (NPR) station that is associated with UT, and partners with the stewardship team to use ThankView to thank WUOT donors in a unique way. WUOT's ThankViews are videos recorded by show hosts in the studio. Donors who give more than once will even receive different host messages of appreciation. The videos are prerecorded at the beginning of the fiscal year and do not take a lot of time to get set up and ready to use.

Student engagement during COVID-19

Once again, 2020 allowed UT's stewardship and donor relations strategy to focus on digital stewardship because of COVID-19. At the start of the pandemic, UT had 65+ telefund student callers who were employed but who were no longer being asked to call and ask for gifts due to the uncertainty of the pandemic.

With that in mind, UT created a great opportunity to have the student callers record personalised stewardship videos instead. Over the course of three months, the student callers recorded over 4,000 personal thank-you videos to donors. In the videos, students thanked donors by

name and offered a message of gratitude in relation to the donor's way of giving. UT's pivot was necessary and helped educate student callers on the importance of stewardship. One donor segment that was thanked included donors to the Student Emergency Fund. Student videos provided a timely personalised message of gratitude along with an update on how many students had received assistance so far from the fund to mitigate the financial strain the pandemic caused. Other segments included faculty/staff donors, Loyal Vols (monthly recurring donors) and donors who had a lifetime giving of 40 or more years.

ODDER: Endowment reports

ODDER is a new partnership between ThankView, Lynne Wester (Donor Relations Guru) and MSP. Digital. ODDER was announced in May 2020 as a timely and great opportunity to explore using technology to send endowment reports digitally.

At UT, over 2,200 donors receive an annual endowment report based on UT's fiscal year ending on 30th June. The endowment reports include letters from campus leadership, financial information specific to the donor's endowment and impact for the endowment. Traditionally the reports have been sent via mail approximately six months after the close of the fiscal year. With the adoption of ODDER, now endowment reports can be e-mailed directly to donors. With the metric feature in ThankView, organisations can view who has opened the report or not, which allows for further engagement and follow-up. By expanding into this digital delivery system, endowment reports can now include a video component. At UT, the video features the Chancellor as well as the Dean of the

college the endowment is housed within. The video messages focus on the importance of endowment support at UT and the impact of private support on students, faculty and staff.

SEGMENTING STEWARDSHIP

First-time donors

One donor group that always appreciates a little extra love, and is hard to retain, are first-time donors. When planning a first-time donor strategy, remember this is the donor's first impression of the organisation and the goal should be to make that a positive experience. Positive first impressions can help retain this donor group until the donor makes another gift and becomes a part of a bigger donor segment and ultimately a loyal donor.

With good first impressions in mind, UT created a segmented approach to steward first-time donors. The plan boosts the stewardship a first-time donor receives to more than just the standard gift confirmation and tax receipt.

Each first-time donor at UT receives the following:

- Postcard/e-mail: received by donor within one week of donor's gift. Includes first-time donor-specific language.
- Welcome packet: received by donor one month after the gift is made. The welcome packet celebrates the donor joining the UT donor family.
- Impact e-mail: received by donor six months after gift is made. The e-mail highlights the importance of private support and provides examples of impact during the current year.
- One-year anniversary: received by donor one year after gift is made. A fun

touch to recognise the anniversary of the donor's first gift to UT.

First-time donors may also receive acknowledgment from the college/unit the donors supported at UT — further boosting the number of thank yous first-time donors receive in the donor's first year.

Consecutive years giving club

Tennessee True is UT's consecutive years of giving recognition club that recognises donors who give at least two consecutive years. Tennessee True donors receive additional recognition for being 'True to Tennessee'.

Tennessee True donors qualify for additional special event invitations including invites to fall football alumni tailgates — a free and fun reception experience prior to home football games. An annual mailer is sent to this group to thank each qualified donor for being Tennessee True and includes two removable Tennessee True decals that can be put on a car or windows. Branding this programme as 'True to Tennessee' further emphasises the importance of UT donor loyalty and that each donor is a part of the larger UT donor family.

Monthly recurring donors

Loyal Vol is the term used at UT to describe donors who give monthly. These donors may currently be receiving a thank-you note every time the donor gave that says the same exact message. At UT, Loyal Vols are segmented out to receive quarterly touches instead of monthly to ensure Loyal Vol donors receive consistent gratitude, but also that these donors receive different messages each time. The quarterly touches are as follows:

- Quarter 1: Thank you for being a Loyal Vol postcard and welcome! Includes a fun UT branded coaster
- Quarter 2: Special message of gratitude and UT update from Chancellor
- Quarter 3: E-mail to all Loyal Vols that includes a message of gratitude and a digital download (fun UT backgrounds, picture frames and more!)
- Quarter 4: Special ThankView from a UT student with a message of gratitude to Loyal Vols.

Reactivated donors

As with many organisations, UT has donors who give in year 1, do not give in year 2 and give again in year 3. At UT, these donors are called reactivated donors. On top of the regular acknowledgment that these donors receive, reactivated donors also get a special thank you for joining the donor family again after missing a year of support. The messaging for this group is geared towards a 'Welcome Back' theme. By segmenting this group, the organisation can recognise that the donor was missed and the donor's return to the donor family is greatly appreciated. Once again, the goal is to reinforce donor loyalty within the organisation's donor base by making each donor feel appreciated.

ELEVATE PERSONAL TOUCHES

Birthday

Help celebrate a donor's birthday! Decide what works best for the donor based on what is known and appeal to the donor's interests. At UT, top donors receive a personal birthday video. Ask some of the staff, faculty and students who benefit from the donor's support to submit a short message and send on to the

donor to celebrate. For milestone birthdays, think of something even grander. Would the donor appreciate handwritten notes? Collect the number of notes for the number of years from the people who benefit from the donor's support and send the fun package to the donor to help celebrate the milestone year. No matter what the gift is, make sure the gift connects with the donor's passion.

Unique gifts

Looking to elevate the organisation's gifts from swag to wow and still provide a physical token of appreciation? Find ways to use things unique to the organisation. A custom gift can elevate the donor experience especially if the gift is meaningful. One custom gift created at UT was a 3-D printed Smokey statue — which highlights the mascot at UT and included a plaque for donor recognition. Another example done at UT is a custom blown glass ornament. Order more than one ornament to send to an entire family that supports the organisation.

Impact tour

Not sure what to give to the donor who has everything? Invite the donor for a visit. Experiences are extremely impactful and grant the organisation interactive opportunities a flat gift may not be able to provide. During the donor's visit, set up meetings with people who benefit from the donor's support and tours of areas that benefit as well. Whether the visit includes a gratitude lunch with the donor's scholarship recipients, a tour of the college the donor supports, or a demonstration in a lab whose research the donor supports, creating a unique experience can help build more connections between the donor and the people at the organisation the donor is passionate about.

CONCLUSION

Again a one size fits all strategy is not what organisations need any longer. Use the tools and ideas listed here to think of creative ways to boost stewardship at any organisation. Adapt to the team's capacity and implement.