

WOMEN AS DONORS: THE HIDDEN CONSTITUENCY

BY **ABBIE VON SCHLEGELL & KATHARINE E. HICKEY**

Several years ago – but recent enough to still cause embarrassment – a certain institution received the largest gift in its history. The donor was a woman.

The institution's leaders wanted to thank her by recognizing her contribution in some public way, so they put her name on a wall. Rather, they put her husband's name on the wall. "Mr. & Mrs. Major Donor," the sign read. There was only one problem: the woman and her husband were divorced.

On one level, this cautionary tale points to the importance of knowing your prospects and donors well. On another level, it speaks to a common and troubling attitude in development: an almost institutionalized ignorance about the potential of women as philanthropic forces in their own right. In fact, often times women are simply not being asked to give – even though they command considerable access to

wealth and actively participate in many organizations.

BREAKING WITH TRADITION

Traditionally, development professionals sought men as donors because they controlled their families' and the nation's wealth.

It's a practice that can't afford to be perpetuated – not with institutions reaching the limits of their donor bases. Women now represent a growing source of new and increased contributions. Demographics tell why: women are now better educated, increasingly independent and more affluent than ever before.

Not every organization has neglected the woman donor, however. Since women's institutions and organizations were in part responsible for this turn of events, it should come



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counsel in advancement

as no surprise that women’s colleges and universities, political action committees for women candidates, and foundations that support women and girls have been early beneficiaries of female philanthropy. EMILY’s List, which stands for Early Money Is Like Yeast (it makes the dough rise), gives money to women candidates early in their campaign to boost their chance of success. Established by a woman and funded almost exclusively by women, EMILY’s List raised millions of dollars for female candidates in 1992. Donors to EMILY’s List were inspired and motivated to “make a difference” and to fund the change.

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women’s values, images, and roles as both mothers and professionals.

- Women like the collaborative process.

Organizations that have tapped into women donors know to be flexible when discussing the ideas, concepts and goals of the program they would like women to support.

Development professionals should ask the female prospect for her ideas and consider them when soliciting the gift. That will enable

the donor to conceptualize her role and opportunities for giving.

- Women are less status-conscious and more receptive to solicitor from different socio-economic or cultural backgrounds. Peer pressure is therefore probably an inappropriate tactic to use in soliciting a woman donor.
- Women want to know the big picture, but they also want to know the specifics. Women need

ATTRACTING WOMEN DONORS



In recent years, a growing number of co-educational institutions and other organizations not historically associated with women have also met with success

in soliciting women donors, thanks to savvy development officers who realized that the way women communicate, lead and express personal values suggests they have particular and unique standards by which they participate in philanthropy. Here’s what they capitalize on:

- Taking a lesson from major advertisers, who discovered that women consumers couldn’t be reached by imitating techniques that worked with men, organizations are appealing to



Erika Hegewisch, *Newspaper*, 1993
Courtesy Worthington Gallery, Inc.

detail about a project before making a decision and they may want to assume more responsibility for how the gift is attributed to the project. Giving them this information may make the difference between a major gift and no gift at all.

- One of the primary reasons women contribute is because they want to make a difference. They give to support specific results rather than the general concept of “charity.” They want their money to work.

- Women are more likely to have volunteered for an organization before committing to a major gift. This is how they learn about the cause and see how funds benefit the organization. But unfortunately, there's another reason: women are less likely to be invited to serve on a not-for-profit's board. A lower-level volunteer role may be the only way women have an opportunity to make a personal impact on issues they care about before considering their role as a donor of charitable dollars.
- Some women also have a strong sense of personal responsibility to give, which stems from their upbringing. We suspect women remember their mothers contributing to the "war effort" or other good causes and they grew up with a sense of charitable obligation.
- As already noted, indications are that women like to see their money work primarily for institutional charge—which explains why not-for-profits that bring about a change for women have been rapidly growing over the past decade. Women's operating foundations, women's colleges and female colleges and female political candidate have reaped the rewards of women donating to women. The 1992 Senate races of Carol Mosseley Braun and Barbara Boxer were overwhelmingly founded by women, many of them out-of-state contributors who could not even vote for the candidates.

A recent study of more than 75 women donors by the Women and Philanthropy Program at UCLA confirmed a profound difference in the

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philanthropic behavior of women and men. The study, a series of focus groups, demonstrated that women's philanthropic behavior is more about "relationships," while men are more inclined to consider the recognition benefits of making a gift. Men also tend to be competitive about giving. They are more likely to ask who else has given to a not-for-profit, and want to know about the sizes of the other gifts. Men are also more likely to be tied into an "old boys" network and therefore to participate in reciprocal giving. (Keep in mind, however these contrasts at the social and business level may begin to blur as women become more involved in professional and leadership positions.)

Organizations that have been successful in recruiting women donors have done more than tap into their pocketbooks. They've also utilized and shown appreciation for their talents as gift solicitors, providing them with training and empowerment traditionally reserve for male volunteers. Women who have been active philanthropically can motivate others to make substantial contributions.

GETTING STARTED



here should an institution start? Certainly, recruiting women to serve in leadership positions on boards of directors and as major gift solicitors makes a clear statement about their priority as participants in an organization's philanthropic goals. Many not-

SIX STEPS FOR STARTING A WOMEN'S DONOR PROGRAM AT YOUR INSTITUTION

1. Review background information about your current or potential constituency of women and assess how your development program responds to them.
2. Gain the support of institutional leaders who have agreed on the need to focus on women donors.
3. Look at program models and adapt for your institution.
4. Consider program within your institution that already benefit women and girls, or use an anniversary or important event to frame your new effort.
5. Involve women informally to test, discuss and refine your goals, and establish a realistic timetable to accomplish them.
6. Form a council or steering committee of women to run a pilot program.

for-profits augment or precede these actions by setting up focus groups of women donors. Such groups can then evolve into a women's council or other high-level (but not an auxiliary model) group.

Colgate University, for example, recognized it was not providing its women graduates with the proper backing or incentive to actively support the institution. Colgate had only begun to accept women as undergraduates in 1970, and administration and leadership positions on campus were still dominated by men. In anticipation of celebrating its 25th anniversary as a coeducational institution, Colgate set out to look at how women have influenced the University and to recruit the participation of alumnae in its programs.

Taking the lead from successful women's programs at Penn and Cornell, Colgate also conducted focus groups of alumnae to learn about their motives for giving and attitudes about cultivation and recognition. The groups resulted in new goals which are addressing issues related

to special academic offerings, women's athletics on campus, increased numbers of women in leadership donor clubs and increased average gift size from women. This information also helped the development staff to start matching the interests of women to specific giving opportunities.

Despite their new access to wealth and active participation with not-for-profit organizations, the stereotype of the donor as the "philanthropic widow" (a widow who contributes money her husband earned) or as "bake sale fund raiser" still persists. But not-for-profits have too much at stake to remain unresponsive to the unique opportunity women donors present for fund raising. The potential that exists from women donors is astounding. Initiating a process that will attract women to become influential donors and philanthropic leaders for an institution begins with educating the development staff. Understanding women's giving patterns will be a strategic asset, and programs to involve more women donors will become critical to the growth of philanthropy.

A PROFILE OF THE AMERICAN WOMAN



Sources: “Women: The Cutting Edge of Philanthropy” by Sondra C. Shaw for St. Louis Chapter of NSFRE, *Working Women*, May 1992; *Women as Donors, Women as Philanthropists*, co-edited by Abbie von Schlegell and Dr. Joan M. Fisher, Jossey-Bass 1994; and *Inc.* magazine, November 1993.

- Women outlive men by seven years.
- Sixty percent of the wealth in the U.S. is owned by women.
- In the past 10 years, more women than men earned bachelor’s degrees.
- Women make up half the work force.
- Women are starting businesses at three times the rate of men.
- In 1992, women-owned businesses for the first time employed more of the U.S. population than the Fortune 500.
- Of 3.3 million Americans classified as top wealth holders by the IRS in 1986 (more recent figures), 41.2 percent are women.
- Half of the top 12 colleges in per-student (size of institution/percentage of alumni gifts) alumni contributions were women’s colleges.
- Women’s funds that make grants to women’s and girls’ programs have grown from 14 in 1985 to 62 in 1991.

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