



T: 919.857.4699
F: 919.833.8819
19 E. Martin Street
Suite 300
Raleigh, NC 27601

www.ncconservationnetwork.org

NC Conservation Network Tip Sheet #2: How to Find Major Donor Prospects

Created by: Mike Crum, TMC Consulting, mike@tmconsultingservices.com and Heather Yandow, NC Conservation Network, heather@ncconservationnetwork.org for the NC Conservation Network's 2010 Annual Conference

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How to Find Major Donor Prospects

Before you begin to look for new major donor prospects, there are a few questions that your organization needs to answer:

- *What is a major gift?* Do you consider \$100 a major gift, or is it \$500? How do you treat gifts of merchandise, land, or stock?
- *How do you treat major donors differently?* Do they get special attention from the Board? Letters from the Executive Director? In person meetings with staff once a year?
- *How do you store and leverage data?* What records do you have on existing donors? Can you easily access and manipulate those records?
- *What's a realistic workload of prospects?* How much staff time can you devote to building your major donor program? Is it just your Executive Director? Are there Board members or other staff who will help?

Sources of Major Donor Prospects

Once you've answered the questions above, it's time to start looking for a few good major donor prospects. These are people who *might* be interested in donating. Typically, we want to look for folks who have some combination of the three C's: capacity to give, care about our issue, and connection to our organization.

The top four places to find new prospects are:

1. Current Donors. You are seven times more likely to get a gift from someone who has previously donated to your organization than from a new donor. To determine the best prospects, you can look for people who have recently given a significant gift, those who have given a significant amount over their lifetime as a donor, and/or those who have given a number of times over their lifetime as a donor.

2. Donors to sister organizations. Look at the websites and annual reports of similar organizations. If there aren't other environmental organizations working in your area, find the donor list of the YMCA, local arts center, or other similar community-building organizations. You are looking for some combination of care about your issues and capacity to give.

3. Trustees of family foundations. There are thousands of family foundations across North Carolina. You can find those in your area using Foundation Finder (<http://foundationcenter.org/findfunders/foundfinder/>). Once you find the name of a local foundation, you'll want to take a look at pages 6,

10, and 11 of their IRS Form 990 to get the critical information about how to apply and to whom. For more information on how to become a 990 sleuth, check out Mike Crum's video: <http://mikecrum.com/2010/03/10/990-sleuthing-the-basics/>.

4. *Fall in your lap prospects.* I hate to even mention these, but it does happen from time to time. Organizations do receive checks in the mail for \$100 or even \$1,000. These 'unprompted' donors should become prospects for larger gifts.

Putting it All Together

Now that you've got a huge list of names, what do you do? You need to determine their capacity to give, their connection to your organization, and their contact information.

Capacity: One of the best ways to determine capacity is to look for the level of contributions your prospect has already made. You can review donor lists, annual report, or public records of political giving (<http://www.opensecrets.org/indivs/index.php>).

Connection: Find out if your staff, Board or current donors know your prospects by providing them with a list of names. This is also a great tool to help them brainstorm additional people who should be on your radar.

Contact information: Start with the phone book, or in the internet age, whitepages.com. If someone isn't publically listed, but you know the county they live in, try the public tax record look up (<http://indorgs.virginia.edu/portico/assessors.html#nc>) or the State Board of Elections look up (<http://www.sboe.state.nc.us/VoterLookup.aspx>).

Use these criteria to create a list of your top 20, 40, or 200 prospects and then begin to systematically contact them. Good luck!

Additional Resources

For more information on this topic and other fundraising questions, check out:

- Mike Crum's blog: <http://mikecrum.com/>
- Grassroots Fundraising Journal: <http://www.grassrootsfundraising.org/index.php?topic=resources>
- Institute for Conservation Leadership: <http://www.icl.org/resources>

If you have any ideas for future Tip Sheets, please [email](#) Nicole Stewart, NC Conservation Network.