



Mid-Level Donor Growth Guide

A toolkit to help you identify, manage, and upgrade middle donors into long-term supporters

Introduction

When's the last time you thought about your middle donors?

Many small nonprofits spend a lot of time campaigning for new donors and cultivating major gift prospects. It makes sense, right? Bring in more support, and look for the people who have money to give.

But what about people in the middle—those who already support your nonprofit, and maybe even volunteer, but don't have the means to be a major donor?

The truth is if you're not paying attention to your mid-level donors, you're missing out on a huge opportunity for increased revenue and long-term support. Middle donors tend to give a higher percentage of their income to charity and generally have a higher retention rate than lower-level donors. While they may not have the means to become major donors, their commitment and support make them a fundamental building block for the future of your nonprofit.

The goal of this kit is to help you identify and communicate with your middle donors to grow them into bigger, long-term, recurring donors. We'll show you who they are, why they matter, and what you can do to build a lasting relationship with them. Along with tips for creating a middle-donor growth campaign, at the end of this guide you'll find a worksheet to help you put your plan into action.

Middle Donors: Your Largest Untapped Resource

According to the [Chronicle of Philanthropy](#), between 2006 and 2012, Americans who earned more than \$200,000 reduced the amount of their income given to charity by 4.6%, whereas Americans earning less than \$100,000 donated 4.5% more of their income during the same period.

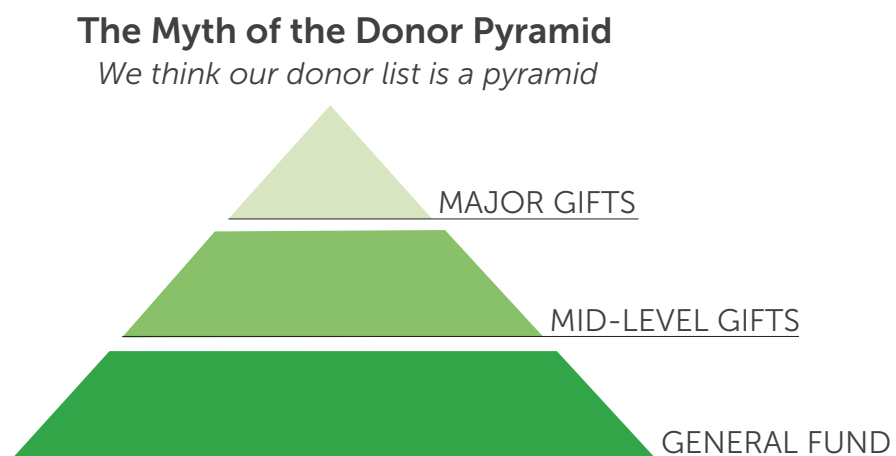
Why should you care about creating a middle-donor program?

[Barbara O'Reilly](#), CFRE, says middle donors are worth cultivating for a number of reasons, especially because they are most likely to become your future major donors. Maybe they don't have the resources to give more yet, but building those relationships now could lead to bigger donations in the future. Also, their retention rates are generally higher than those of smaller donors. Imagine middle donors' [potential for growth](#) with a little more personalized communication.

How to Identify the Missing Middle

Who exactly are your middle donors, and how do you identify them?

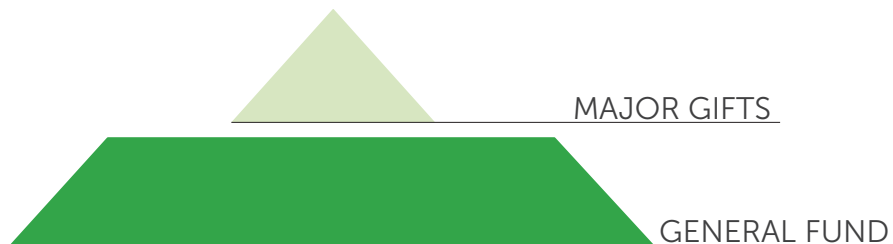
Rachel Muir of Pursuant says that to find your middle donors, you'll need to [rethink the conventional donor pyramid](#).



You've probably seen the donor pyramid a million times and think your donor files look like this: a strong base of general fund donors, a solid but somewhat smaller core of mid-level gifts, and a few major donors on top. What we've learned, however, is that the pyramid isn't really a pyramid at all. In reality, it looks more like a sombrero: many people giving small amounts and a few people giving large amounts, with very few mid-level donors.

What it really looks like

Most donor lists are more like sombreros than pyramids



This missing middle isn't because of our donors' behavior. It's because of ours. We have prospects for every level hiding in our general fund, but most nonprofits don't have an intentional mid-level strategy. These folks need to be identified and given more love and attention to encourage them to move up to mid-level and eventually major gifts.

Who Are Your Mid-level Donors?

Like we said earlier, mid-level donors are sort of like the forgotten middle child—the Jan Brady of donors. They might look like low-level givers. They could be volunteers or event attendees. They've probably engaged with you but just haven't made a gift. Thing is, these prospects are very likely to give on the first ask—but they need personalized attention to get there.

Most major donors actually begin at the bottom of the pyramid. Annual fund donors are strong prospects for moving up to mid-level giving. These are your future major donors, so it's worth investing your time and resources in moving them up.

ABCs of Identifying Prospects

There are opportunity costs associated with cultivating donors in terms of time and money, and we have an obligation to be good stewards of our nonprofit's resources. This means learning the ABCs of prospecting:

- **Access:** People we already know or with whom we share a solid connection.
- **Belief:** People who share similar interests or already believe in our mission.
- **Capacity:** People with the ability to move up the giving pyramid.

Effective prospecting begins with Access—prospects we already know. Unfortunately, we often skip ahead to Capacity and start with who has money. And that's where we get into trouble. Capacity does not equal interest (Belief), nor does it equal generosity.

If you don't have Access to a big donor, or if the big donor doesn't already have interest or Belief in your mission, then despite their Capacity, pursuing them may come at the expense of missing the "millionaires next door" already in your files.

Prospecting Tips for Greater Giving

When identifying and cultivating general fund donors to move up to the next level of giving, consider these factors:

Longevity: How long has the donor been on your files? Long-term giving could mean moving a donor into planned, recurring, or major gifts.

- How does your nonprofit identify a long-term donor?

Cumulative giving: Be sure to look at cumulative giving, not just the amount they give each year. A donor who gives \$2,500 four times per year tends to be more receptive than one who gives an annual lump sum of \$10,000.

- What amount of cumulative giving does your average middle donor give?

Engagement: This is huge. Are they volunteering? Are they reading your emails and newsletters? How involved are they in your organization? People who

are investing time in your nonprofit are great candidates for moving up the pyramid.

- What types of engagement could you easily search for in your database?

Referrals: People who were referred to your organization by another donor, especially major donors, meet the Access requirement right off the mark.

- How have you been following up on referrals? Is it effective? How can you improve?

Remember: Donors give for their reasons, not ours. For greater success, start with the folks you already know.

How to Communicate with Middle Donors: Segmentation

Once you know who your middle donors are, how you communicate with them matters. Your goal is to get them to increase their giving amount, and it's not enough just to send a mass email to your entire list of prospects. You'll be much more effective by sending more targeted messages to smaller, more specific groups of donors. This is called segmentation.

You'll want to segment your middle donors into smaller groups based, for example, on giving level, volunteer participation, or length of their relationship with your nonprofit. This should be fairly simple using the search filters in your donor management system (DMS). The customer filters feature makes it easy to create specific lists of donors and email them directly.

Segmenting like this allows you to create more targeted appeals. For example, if you're writing specifically to donors who have volunteered with your nonprofit but haven't donated in the past six months, you can thank them for the difference their service has made and ask them to consider becoming a monthly contributor. Effective emails need to be clear, specific, and personal—and for a large list of contacts, segmentation makes this possible.