

# The Seven Donor Types

This document augments *Boards on Fire*, page 87

By Susan Howlett

What if you were a donor who was motivated by statistics, outcomes and deliverables, and a nonprofit that was cultivating you kept on telling you stories about “touchy feely” stuff? What if you wanted human interest and all you got was facts and figures?

Different types of donors respond to different motivations, and we need to take that into consideration so we can approach them on their terms. Results from research on donor motivation were published in a fascinating book called “The Seven Faces of Philanthropy” by Prince and File. Their interpretation is at the end, but here’s my take on their seven categories.

**Altruist** – Altruists give because it’s just the right thing to do. Whether they benefit or not, they give unselfishly, without thinking about it. It just what they do -- it’s in their DNA.

**Communitarian** – Communitarians give because they want “their community” to benefit. They may not even benefit personally, but they want the people they live among and care about to thrive. I heard a woman say one time that her kids went to a parochial school, but she still gave to the neighborhood school’s PTA because her kids played with those kids and she wanted them to thrive too. It’s incumbent upon us to listen carefully to how they define their people – do they belong to the LGBT community? The African-American community? The conservative community? The Gen Xers? The oppressed? A particular neighborhood? Or profession? Or religion? We must listen, and then tell them that their people will benefit from their support.

**Devout** – Devout donors give out of devotion to a particular cause or group. Again, we must watch for what they’ve indicated devotion TO, through their volunteerism, their prior giving, etc. Different generations have manifested devotion in different ways. The World War II generation gave devotedly to one organization their whole lives: their alma mater, their church or temple, The Humane Society, or the Cancer Society. Baby Boomers give devotedly to an issue or a cause, such as the environment, or the arts, or social justice, or education. Younger donors give to organizations where they are physically involved as volunteers, advocates, bike builders or Habitat hammerers. When we approach devout donors, we must acknowledge their devotion to the mission.

**Dynast** – If you think of the most famous philanthropists in our country’s history, you’d probably come up with names like Rockefeller, Carnegie or Ford. They were dynasts, but it doesn’t necessarily take that much money to BE one. Dynast donors may come from families where philanthropy has been practiced for generations, but regardless, they want to have breadth

of impact and leave a legacy that lasts beyond their time. Picture Carnegie’s libraries in towns all over the country. More recent dynast donors are the same: Bill and Melinda Gates want to have the same breadth of impact on world health that Carnegie had on access to information.

**Investor** – Return on investment summarizes what investor donors want out of their relationship with a nonprofit. While they’re not looking for a benefit to themselves, they use the words “return” or “ROI” in their day to day conversations and they want to know that their money is making a difference. They want to see a strategic plan or an audit. They ask about deliverables and metrics and costs per person served. They want to hear which statistics and research we used to make our decisions. And they expect us to say, “It costs less to engage these low-achieving youth **now** than it will cost to have them incarcerated or on public support five years from now.” If we don’t speak to them on their terms, they probably won’t support our work.

**Repayer** – Repayer donors contribute to organizations that have benefitted them or someone they know or care about: schools; youth development programs like scouts or Boys and Girls Clubs or summer camps; hospitals and hospice programs; health-related organizations (like heart, lung, kidney, cancer); pet or child adoption groups, etc. Repayers are expressing their gratitude for service.

**Socialite** – Socialite donors like to contribute in public. Somewhere where they can be seen with the right people in the right venue, where they might get public recognition or see their name or photo in print afterward. They usually don’t convert well to mail or phone or workplace donors, because they love giving while having fun. In my experience, these are expensive donors to attract in the first place, and expensive donors to renew, because they require events, which cost more in expenses and people time than other methods. So watch whether you’re unwittingly attracting donors who aren’t the most sustainable type by basing your fundraising strategy on events. There are much less expensive ways to raise money!

**The Point** -- We need to understand what the donor types are so we can watch and listen for clues, and meet the other person’s emotional needs as we approach them for support. Use words and methods that suit them, rather than using a one-size-fits-all message and approach.

Here’s what the authors of the original research said about each type, in order of occurrence:

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|-----------------|-------|------------------------------------|
| • Communitarian | (26%) | “Doing Good Makes Good Sense”      |
| • Devout        | (21%) | “Doing Good is God’s Will”         |
| • Investors     | (15%) | “Doing Good is Good Business”      |
| • Socialite     | (11%) | “Doing Good is Fun”                |
| • Repayer       | (10%) | “Doing Good in Return”             |
| • Altruist      | (9%)  | “Doing Good Feels Right”           |
| • Dynast        | (8%)  | “Doing Good is a Family Tradition” |