

Join the Club: Starting a High-Dollar Giving Circle for Your Land Trust

You see many of your land trust's supporters writing \$50 checks, and you know they are fully capable of donating \$1,000 per year. How do you encourage them to make the leap to a more substantial gift? It may be as simple as tapping into the basic human desire to belong to something important, exclusive and effective – in this case, a special giving club or society. Many land trusts are using this strategy to turn smaller-dollar donors into major givers, while creating a renewed sense of community and dedication to land conservation.

At Mississippi Valley Conservancy in western Wisconsin, 21 percent of their members increased their giving in 2010, from a total of \$31,900 to \$99,700. How? In part, by launching a giving club called the Bluffland Guardian Society. Rather than sending a typical direct mail letter suggesting different donation amounts, they asked certain members to join a new exclusive group at the \$1,000 level – and it worked.

Giving clubs offer the social cachet that comes with being listed publicly alongside people you know and respect socially. According to David Landsdowne in his book, *The Relentlessly Practical Guide to Raising Serious Money*, “psychology has always played an incalculable role in fundraising,” and the reason giving clubs work is purely psychological. “They fulfill a host of human desires and needs, not the least of which are our need to feel connected and our desire to be treated special.”

Members typically enjoy special “member-only” perks. A special dinner is common, along with special mementos and recognition in each issue of the newsletter. Be creative. Make it fun!

The benefits to your land trust are significant too. Giving clubs encourage larger unrestricted gifts, giving your board increased discretion over how funds are spent. There's also an expectation that the gift will be renewed each year much like a membership fee. If you nurture the club over time, you can create a dependable source of revenue for your land trust to cover the administrative expenses that are typically more difficult to fundraise for.

When starting a giving club, keep in mind:

- Board members should lead the way by joining the club. (If board members cannot, even with a monthly payment plan, they should still attend all club events).
- Let donors already giving at the \$1,000 level know they have been automatically inducted as founding members.
- Hold off on starting the club until you have at least 8-10 people donating at the \$1,000 level.
- Create a list of additional likely members and assign board members and/or the executive director to send personal invitations to join the club as “charter members.”
- Studiously maintain a list of current members, making it visible on the website and in the newsletter, and share it regularly with members of the club. (Being seen on it is a reason for joining!).

You can raise more money from your members just by systematically *asking* for more money. Giving clubs provide a simple and fun structure that makes asking for gifts of \$1,000 and more much easier.

Take It To The Next Level

Already have a giving club at the \$1,000 level? Go to The Learning Center Forums – Governance (Dave Allen's post), and learn to expand your club's impact through branding.

HOW TO GET THESE GIFTS RIGHT

Giving club membership donations should be:

Individual membership gifts (not business or foundation) and completely unrestricted – no exceptions.

Made as a single giving decision.

Even if paid in installments. For example, someone can decide to join the club, but pay \$83.33 per month to reach the \$1,000 total.

Made by a single donor or couple. Gifts matched by a corporate program do not count.

Cash or liquidated immediately to cash. In-kind gifts do not count, unless the gifted item, such as stock or a car, is immediately sold.

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