

If Art Can Do It, Why Can't Public Radio?

Giving Naming Opportunities to Donors and Raise Operating Revenue Too

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A few months ago we were having breakfast with the Development Director of the local art museum. She was describing how she raised operating funds from major donors for an upcoming exhibit. The exhibit consisted of a small traveling collection of antiquities that would be supplemented by works from the Museum's permanent collection.

As fascinated as we were by her description of the upcoming show, we were even more interested in how she raised the funds to pay for all the expenses that arise when a traveling exhibit is brought in. For this exhibit she had identified \$100,000 in the museum's operating budget that could be said to be the expenses for this exhibit.

She was in the midst of approaching donors to fund "Treasures from the Vault" and now had two donors, one for \$50,000 and one for \$25,000. She was approaching two more donors – one for \$15,000 and one for \$10,000. Each donor would be acknowledged in a variety of ways during for the six months that the exhibit was open. The \$50,000 donor would have his name on the main gallery, the only naming opportunity. This donor was guaranteed that his would be the only name placed on the wall along with the name of the exhibit. The other donors would be included on all the signage, advertising, brochures, and catalog, depending on the size of their gift.

How could this be used in radio?

KPBS-FM, San Diego, has done it. Since they are part of the San Diego State University system, the model they used was the endowed chair, but they wanted much more flexibility than that. Jeff Wergeles, Director of Gifts and Grants, wanted to give donors something tangible to invest in, but wanted to make sure that the station maintained control of the mission and strategic direction of the station, a legitimate concern.

KPBS solved this problem by creating radio reporting funds that reflect the beats that reporters are already covering. The first fund established was a health care reporting fund, to which \$50,000 has been committed for three years. The station then set up an education reporting fund, which has been funded. Both of these funds were funded by a single donor. A third fund, an environmental reporting fund, has been a little harder to fund. \$15,000 has been raised so far. Other funds are being established, including arts and culture, border issues, and classical music.

All of these funds support existing reporting positions and activities and are in the station's operating budget. Since the funds are finite in duration, KPBS is not bound indefinitely to funding something that may change in the future.

"We're just trying to match donors with their interests," Wergeles says. "We're saying, 'Here's a room you can put your name on. Here's an endowed chair. Here's a naming opportunity.'" In almost all instances, the donors to the reporting funds are already donors to the station.

KPBS caps each fund at a designated amount, and the target amount is reached, the fund is no longer offered. “If someone wanted to contribute to a closed fund, we would redirect them to something else they are interested in.” Wergeles says.

As the first step in establishing the funds, the major giving officer had to win over the news department. “Collaboration is critical,” Wergeles says. “Development could not do this without help from the news staff.”

The news department was originally cautious, but was won over by careful ground rules. “We are adamant about editorial integrity. We make it clear to prospects that we are offering them an opportunity to fund beats, not stories.”

The news director helps to design the structure of each fund so that they represent the news department’s reporting priorities. He accompanies development officers on calls to donors, not to ask for funds, but to convey what this kind of reporting allows the station to do for the community.

Only once has a prospective donor tried to influence the content. “As hard as it was, we walked away,” Wergeles said, “because we knew it would not be a good relationship.”

KPBS did try doing a direct mail campaign to existing major donors for contributions to the elections fund last year, but it didn’t work very well. Wergeles sees this vehicle primarily as personal fundraising for truly large gifts.

Presently the station offers on-air recognition for a contribution of \$5,000 – the highest level of the major donor clubs. They are considering raising this club level to \$10,000.

The KPBS radio reporting funds raised \$155,000 in the fiscal year just ended, and the station expects to increase that next year. “The has a very big future for KPBS,” Wergeles says. “We are giving our donors what they want – things to buy, something tangible for their investment.”

Will this work at another station? The answer would depend several factors: the local definition of truly major gifts, the size of the station’s donor clubs, the extent to which it has cultivated these donors, and whether the news or programming operation can be structured to take advantage of this opportunity.

At KPBS it seems to be working. The station has the ability to direct the use of funds to activities that are an important part of the station’s strategic goals and donors are funding the areas of the station that are important to them.

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