

# The Trentonian

Think Before you Donate to a Museum

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Artwork by Mark Kostabi Circa 1986

Nonprofits spend considerable amounts of money and time working on attracting new donors. But, they often overlook the importance of building relationships that will ensure their existing donors keep giving.

There is a lot of evidence to support the unfortunate fact that many people do not trust some nonprofits to use their donations wisely. The public often thinks that nonprofits spend too much on overhead, or many are really scams, or that they pay their staff too much. The staff of a non profit must really like donors and be committed to providing them first-class service. If donor relations is a chore to your museum, your employees should try another career.

Sometimes museums forget that donors are their customers, their partners in philanthropy, and members of their organizational family. They deserve the best care that one can give them, not just to keep them coming back and giving more, but because of their generous spirits and commitment to the museums cause. Donors can come in all walks of life. The rich, the not so rich, a volunteer, or a community advocate can masquerade as a donor. Donors recruit other donors. If an organization upsets one donor, the likelihood they upset more than one donor, is quite likely.

So, how does one become a more effective donor? How do you know who to donate to? You should always put thought into every donation you give whether it's ten dollars or ten thousand dollars to a museum. As donors, always give with purpose, always putting extra thought into where your charitable contributions are distributed.

When people donate it can be a very personal act, and people give for many different reasons. When you donate you should only ever donate to high performing organizations, where it can make a real difference. Sometimes this is hard to do because of an emotional connection one may have to the organization. Your charitable donation should always be viewed as an investment in the causes and organizations you care about, remove your emotions. As a donor you can ensure your investment will be put to good use just by putting some thought and investigation into your selection.

In 2013, charitable giving in the USA exceeded 316 billion dollars, about 2% of GDP. Seventy two percent came from individual donors, 15% from foundations, 7% from bequests and 6% from corporations. So, any museum or non profit that ignores or treats individual donors in a poor unprofessional manner will cease to exist as a non profit or a museum.

Donors today are much more informed. The internet has made the job of investigating a nonprofit much easier. As a donor, if you go to the internet and find 990's unavailable for a non profit that has been in business for 5 years, this is a huge red flag. If you go to a non profits web site and they have false and misleading information on their web site that does not coincide with their 990's, more red flags.

When selecting where to donate, one must understand how an organization spends their money. You can obtain this information from their 990's as well as their donor packets. If any organization willfully hides information from donors, if board members willfully withhold information to other board members or the public, this is a problematic organization. You can use tools like [www.guidestar.org](http://www.guidestar.org) and [www.charitynavigator.org](http://www.charitynavigator.org) to assist you in assessing organizations.

As donors, research whether or not the museum is grounded in an understanding of what's happening outside their organizations and have meaningful personal and intellectual connections with the world around them. Are they connected with the communities they serve or are they ignoring certain cultural networks that could otherwise help their organization grow due to their own prejudices? If an organization cannot demonstrate to you that they have strategic plan, and are executing on that plan, then they are not an organization worth investing in.

It's imperative that organizations have the right people, systems and infrastructure in place in order to succeed. Building a high performance team is no easy task. As a donor you can never 100% assess whether or not an organization has all its data and technology intact. However, there are indicators that allow one to determine the excellence of an organization.

The museums need to make their donors their best friends. Museums need to find ways to include their most reliable donors in their inner circle. Invite them to serve on your board, but only if they are qualified to do so. Museums must provide their donors with opportunities to volunteer their expertise, consult them on big changes. Allow for their input. Any organization that does not allow their donors or volunteers to give input and ostracizes them for it, will eventually close their doors.

A happy donor is a repeat donor. It is not enough to just send out an acknowledgement of each donation. Donors must be well informed and reminded frequently that they are important to your organization. Send out thank you letters and notes, make a thank you telephone call, and send newsletters either through the mail or by email. Know that they donated. Thank them for the exact amount. The worst thing your organization can do is to take your donors for granted. They will notice and donate elsewhere. Always remember as donors; invest wisely, take your time and evaluate where you put your money.