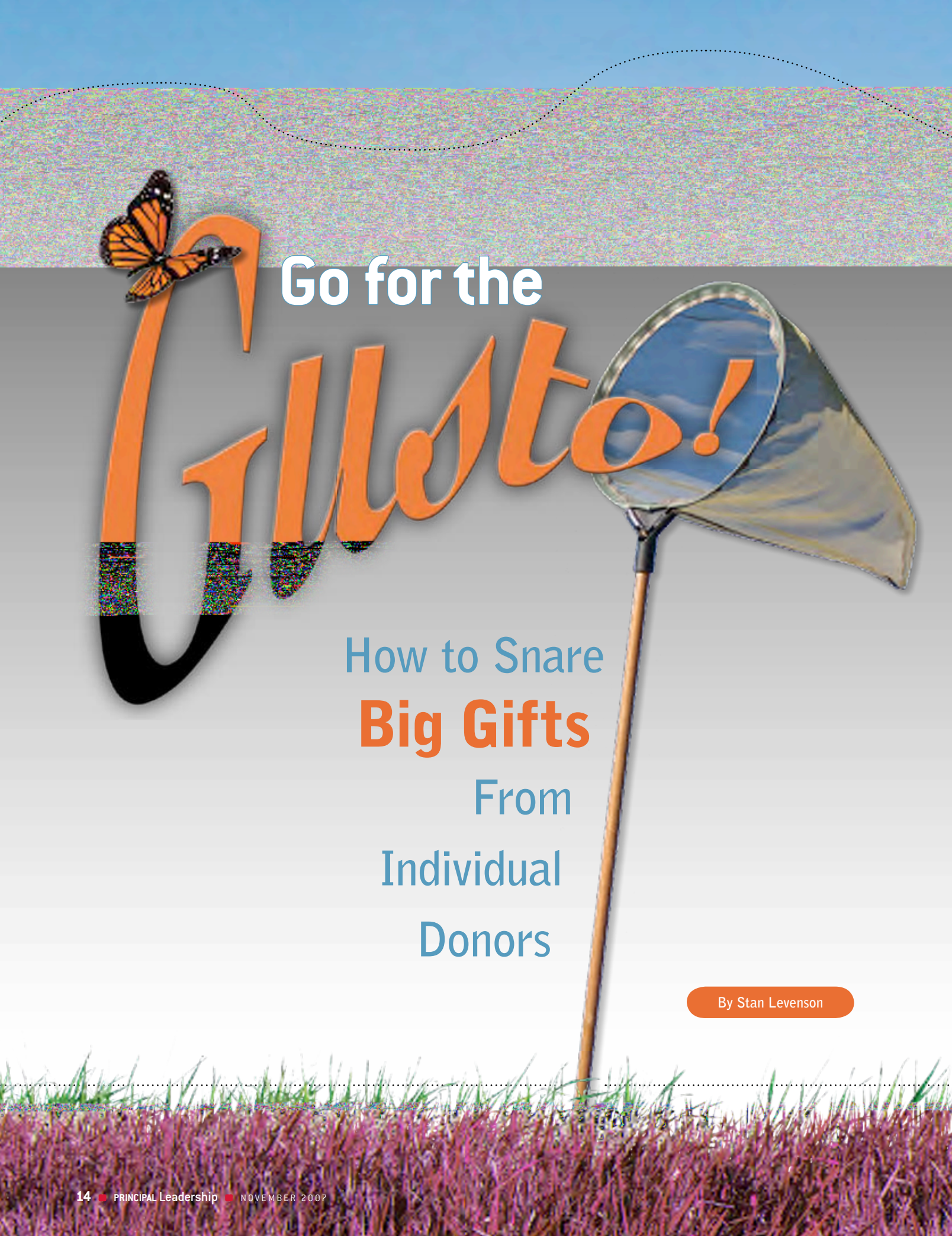


Go for the Gusto!

How to Snare Big Gifts From Individual Donors

By Stan Levenson



PREVIEW **Convincing people that donating to schools is worthwhile is a major function of fundraising.**

Research potential donors to learn about their interests and priorities before you ask for a donation.

Be sure to acknowledge volunteers and donors for their contributions.

There are thousands of caring and financially capable individuals across the United States who want to experience the joy and elation of donating to a worthy cause. Many of those individuals want to invest in causes that change people's lives, not just give their money away. There are few causes more worthy and life-altering than giving to the public schools. Your task as a fundraiser is to help people understand that their gifts can change the lives of students for generations to come. Learning how to ask for such gifts will reap major rewards. Colleges, universities, and private schools have been doing this for years. Now it's time for the public schools to get their fair share of the fund-raising pie.

Cash Gifts and Noncash Gifts

Everyone knows what cash gifts are. Noncash gifts are a different breed. They include gifts of stocks, bonds, shares in mutual funds, a home or farm property, vacant land, vacation or rental property, commercial property, life insurance, art works, and collectables. Because of the size and potential impact of such gifts, donors should be advised to consult with an attorney or a tax professional before completing the process. In addition, school districts and school foundations should contact their legal advisers before implementing a donor program that accommodates noncash gifts and develop a policy for accepting or rejecting them.

Defining Big Gifts

Although schools can designate any amount as a big gift, such gifts are usually worth $25,000 or more. Big gifts are usually solicited for endowment purposes, scholarships, buildings, grounds, equipment, and any other program or facility that needs a large infusion of money. Schools usually ask for such gifts infrequently, and donors can spread out payments over three to five years. You can

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acquire big gifts by building healthy friendships with potential donors, involving them in your school, and eventually meeting with them in person to make the "big ask." Solicitation on a person-to-person basis is the most effective way to raise serious dollars.

Researching Potential Donors

Before embarking on a fundraising campaign, it is important to do your homework and learn as much as you can about potential donors. Research their educational and business backgrounds, their financial backgrounds, their family backgrounds, the organizations to which they belong, their social affiliations, and the causes they are known to support or avoid. You should also determine whether any member of a donor's family attended or is attending your school or another school in the district, whether the potential donor is involved in any school activities or functions, and whether the family has given monies to the schools in the past. Discover your potential donors' interests and hobbies. Are they golfers, tennis players, or thespians? Are they members of the local symphony or a local band? By doing comprehensive research on potential donors, you will be in a better position to connect with them and evaluate their ability to give.

Some Cultivation Techniques

Once you have a list of potential donors, your fundraising committee should rate and evaluate each one's ability to give and prepare to involve them in school or district activities. Following are some cultivation techniques:

- Invite potential donors to tour the school or district facilities and meet the superintendent, the principal, and other key personnel
- Invite potential donors to serve on or chair a committee or serve on a board
- Ask potential donors for advice on a particular education issue in the school community
- Invite potential donors to give you their insights on their children's education and to offer suggestions for improvement
- Learn what interests the potential donors about improving education in the school or district and invite their participation
- Explore potential donors' views and interests regarding sports, the arts, music, academics, philanthropy, and so forth
- Honor potential donors at school or district events
- Introduce potential donors to people who have already given major gifts to the school or the district
- Feature potential donors in your education publications
- Invite potential donors to write an article, give a talk, or conduct a workshop in their area of expertise
- Ask potential donors to host a fundraising activity
- Celebrate potential donors' birthdays and other special events.

Judging a Potential Donor's Readiness to Give

The readiness of a potential donor to give is individual. There is no specific formula or timetable that will tell you the right time to ask for a gift, but many factors will help you determine whether a potential donor is ready to donate, such as:

- The potential donor has given at lower levels before and shows interest and assumes leadership roles in fundraising campaigns in the school or the district
- The potential donor has been honored by the school or the district
- The potential donor has expressed an interest in giving to the school or the district but has not indicated an amount
- The potential donor's behavior shows that he or she has a distinct interest in giving a major gift
- The potential donor's friends have already given big gifts.

20 Steps to Securing a Major Gift

1. Recruit volunteers in your community to work on the fundraising committee for your school. Include prominent citizens



who are well-known and well-thought-of. Invite these people to an orientation meeting with some of the key people in the school, including the principal, vice principal, department heads, teachers, and community leaders. Invite the superintendent and several school board members to the meeting. Answer all questions and concerns in a forthright and efficient manner. Ask participants to make a commitment of time and money before the meeting is concluded.

2. Using a group processing technique, have the fundraising committee prepare a two- to five-page case statement that is clear, concise, and compelling. The case statement should indicate what you need the money for and highlight the staff's competence and ability to deliver.
3. Ensure that the volunteers contribute their gifts before approaching potential donors. This will give them boasting rights and demonstrate to potential donors that the cause is so worthy that the volunteers have already made contributions.
4. Use the services of a good fundraising consultant if at all possible. Ask the consultant to provide a comprehensive training program that involves role playing and is videotaped. Use prepared scripts for handling such situations as overcoming objections, asking for gifts, and deciding how much to ask for. The training program should be mandatory for all members of the fundraising committee.
5. Before you identify potential donors, set up a database to keep track of mailings, phone calls, meetings with potential donors, pledges, and gifts. I cannot overemphasize the importance of maintaining accurate data. The last thing you want to do is to identify and court a potential donor only to find out later that someone else on your team has already approached that person.
6. Develop a potential donors list in cooperation with the fundraising committee. Decide as a group how much you plan to ask each person to give. Identify volunteers who are personal friends of potential donors. The potential donors list should include the names of parents, grandparents, teachers (including retired teachers), administrators, staff members, friends, alumni, business people, politicians, other retirees, and others who are part of the school community or who live close by.
7. Use teams of two to approach a potential donor. The team might comprise a principal and a volunteer, the superintendent and a volunteer, a board member and the superintendent, or a teacher and a volunteer.
8. Visits (not appointments) with potential donors should take place in a quiet, peaceful atmosphere and not be disturbed by telephone calls, interruptions, and extraneous conversation and noise. The potential donor's home or office are obvious choices. Other options include a meeting room at the school or a district office.
9. Visits should be scheduled for 30–45 minutes and no longer. If additional time is needed, let the potential donor decide to extend the meeting.
10. Break the ice by talking about areas of mutual interest that you have discovered in your research. For example, if the potential donor plays tennis, you might say something like, "I understand that you are a tennis player. How often do you play?"
11. Don't ask for money during the first visit. This is the time to get acquainted and be a good listener so you can discover the potential donor's needs and greatest joys. You will also learn about his or her concerns about the schools. The first visit is also the time to establish rapport and show your energy, commitment, and enthusiasm for your cause. The second or third visits are the time to ask for money.
12. Explain why you are visiting with the potential donor. Impress him or her with the importance of your cause and the school's ability to reach its goals. Mention the outstanding educators on staff and any additional staff members you intend to hire. Give the potential donor a copy of the

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case statement. When presenting your case, listen attentively and pay close attention to his or her reactions. Watch for signs of approval or disapproval and body language that might indicate discomfort.

13. Treat objections as questions, rather than attacks on your program or credibility. Never let an objection lead to an argument. Hear the objection out and respond with solutions or convert the objection into an answerable question. You might say, "I realize that you are concerned about the district's math and science programs. Would you be interested in participating on the district's math or science committees?"
14. When making the big ask, always request a little more than you expect to receive, then remain silent. You might say, "To help us meet our campaign goal of $500,000, we hope that you will consider making a leadership gift of $50,000. We are suggesting this amount because, as you can appreciate, a campaign of this magnitude requires a certain number of leadership gifts at significant dollar levels." Pause and let the request sink in and observe the potential donor's behavior.
15. Not asking for a large enough gift could lead to receiving a smaller gift than anticipated or not receiving a gift at all. People with money usually do not get upset if you ask them for more than they are considering. In fact, they might feel flattered that you think they are wealthier than they really are and surprise you with a gift that is larger than you expected.
16. Do not accept a gift that you think is too small. It is better to arrange for another visit to further explore opportunities for giving a large gift. You might say, "Let us leave the materials with you so you can study them and then we'll get together again in two weeks and answer any questions that you might have."
17. If you receive a gift pledge from a potential donor that you are happy with, express your appreciation enthusiastically and ask the person to complete and sign a pledge card.
18. Continue to cultivate potential donors who did not make gifts the first time they were approached. Analyze why they did not make a pledge, and approach them again in three to six months. Keep careful records for each potential donor. Maintain records for those people who did contribute to your cause, so when you return and ask for an additional gift in the future, you will have a history of their giving at your fingertips. You should always be looking for larger gifts in the future.
19. Acknowledge all the people who contributed to your fundraising campaign by sending them personal thank-you notes. The volunteers can help you with this task. Also, do not forget to recognize the volunteers themselves by thanking them publicly at a luncheon or dinner celebration. You might want to have the superintendent personally thank major donors at a black-tie reception. By doing all of these things, you are helping ensure that participants will support your programs in the future.
20. Be a good steward of all monies, gifts, and bequests your school receives by investing with an investment banker or certified financial planner. A certified real estate management company should manage gifts of real estate. It is essential that all companies and individuals that help the school district or the school foundation be reliable and conservative in their investment approach. The foundation board or the school board should monitor the investment program of all grants and gifts on a continuing basis.



By employing all of these strategies, your school or school district can successfully snare big grants and gifts from individual donors to bring about meaningful change. PL

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