

Donor Honor Rolls: Benchmarking Research

Wednesday, May 27, 2015

In addition to the feedback below, there have been sessions at conferences and webinars hosted on why Donor Honor Rolls are no longer considered a best practice. Most of the institutions that I have spoken with that still do donor honor rolls are either phasing them out or in discussions with leadership about doing so. Most agree that print honor rolls are a way of the past and waste of resources. Those that are online still dedicate weeks to months of staff time to get the information ready for online publication.

Institution	Online	Print	Comments
Lynne Wester, Donor Relations Guru, University of North Carolina	Dropped	Dropped	<p>This article "Why Honor Rolls of Donors are the Most Wasteful Donor Relations Practice Possible" (see page 4-5) is written by Lynne Wester for Academic Impressions. She states, "Eliminate all honor rolls. All the time." This was also published in her recent book on Donor Relations. She is also a consultant and was previously at Yeshiva University in NYC. She has been featured in The Washington Post, CURRENTS magazine, The Chronicle of Philanthropy and other industry publications.</p>
Penelope Burke, author of Donor Centered Fundraising	Recommends dropping	Recommends Dropping	<p>I'm weighing in on this issue because I am the one who was the first to question the usefulness of publishing donors' names (whether in print or electronic form) some 15 years ago when I conducted my initial research on donor recognition. In our first all-US research study, 70% of American donors said that having their names published had no impact on their decisions to give again or give more generously. (FYI, our study of Canadian donors had a more dramatic finding with 80% expressing negative views or indicating that publishing their names had no bearing on giving decisions.) Additionally, "graded" lists where donors were categorized by gift value or within gift value levels were similarly dismissed as ineffective in sustaining their loyalty or influencing more generous giving. (As loyalty and gift value are the two critical measures against which stewardship activities can be assessed, donors' opinions on the seeming ineffectiveness of publishing their names was quite notable.) Also, among the 70% of American donors who were not positively influenced, approximately one in seven said that having their names published produced a negative response. Those donors stopped giving because of this unwanted recognition.</p> <p>My practice is to use surveying to gain insight into where donors appear to be leaning on an issue, and then to follow that up with controlled testing to produce evidence-based information that fundraisers can rely on. Unfortunately, we cannot put donors' views on having their names published into a controlled test situation. That would require us to publish, say, half the list and leave the other names off. You can imagine the reaction. So in my book, "Donor-Centered Fundraising" (2003) I simply let readers know where the weight of statistical opinion lay, but could not assure them that if they stopped publishing these lists, there would be no negative repercussions, such as outright loss of donors or negative reaction from donors that interfered with relationship-building.</p> <p>Sometime after publishing the book, I began hearing about not-for-profits who had read my book and dropped their published lists. This included universities and colleges where it is reasonable to assume that their published lists might carry significant weight with their alumni/donors. I followed a group of twelve such institutions for a year. In that period of time, no donors stopped giving because the published list no longer existed; no donors gave less because gift clubs or levels no longer existed; in fact, no donors even inquired about where the lists had gone.</p> <p>This brings me to the most important point. The issue is not whether publishing donors' names is a good or bad thing or whether it is right or wrong. The real issue is that fundraising resources are scarce and precious and that professional fundraisers and managers need to spend their time and budget doing <u>the things that are most effective at securing</u></p>

sustainable profit. Therefore, shifting costs out of publishing donors' names and into activities that are truly effective is a smart business move.

Finally, donors live and give in a world that is constantly changing, so I am entirely open to the possibility that donors' opinions can change on any issue at any time. That is why our research on what inspires loyalty and increasingly generous giving is being constantly updated. Over the last 15 years, we have engaged more than a quarter million donors on this subject. Last year, I drew donors' attention once again to the issue of having their names published. *Only donors who had had their names published by at least one NFP they supported within the previous year qualified to answer the questions.* Here are the results of that research:

- 88% said they would have made the gift at the same level whether their names were published or not;
- 9% would have still given but perhaps at a more modest level;
- 3% would not have made their gift had they known beforehand that their names would not be published.

You might also be interested to know that, in the same 2014 study, 13% of respondents said they chose to give anonymously when offered the opportunity to have their names published. And, BTW, the reason is not to keep their names from other NFPs attempting to build their own prospect lists. The majority of these donors gives anonymously for very personal, philosophical reasons tied to their preference for giving as selflessly as possible.

I hope this information is helpful to you and to other fundraisers who participate in the important conversations via this listserv.

With best regards.

Penelope

Penelope Burk

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Her follow-up comment:

While I was not surprised at how forceful donors' views have become on this subject, you might also be interested to know that we queried them on donor walls and on naming rooms and buildings in capital campaigns. Naturally, the more prominent/generous the gift, the larger the percentage of donors who are positively influenced by name recognition. BUT, even among lead and major donors who give huge gifts to capital campaigns, the majority still said they would have made the gift at the same level with or without the name recognition. Fascinating.

Debbie Myers of University of Maryland and formerly with Carnegie Melon

Dropped

Dropped

At our last giving societies focus group meeting, we ended up discussing the honor roll – specifically, it's effectiveness as a donor recognition tool. Consensus was that we stop producing it because:

1. For the ROI (which has yet to be demonstrated), it is not worth the staff time it takes to create it.
2. The recent security breach is still a sore subject and on-line lists of names might not be well received.
3. As we phase out our current recognition societies, ending the honor roll now would help the transition.

Great. End the honor roll. So what do we do instead? Create an image that can be mailed and emailed. The theme is "with your support, without your support." On the left show a class room with 2/3 of the

			<p>students Photoshopped out, on the right show the full class. On the left show half a professor, on the right show the whole professor. Or student playing a violin with no instrument, then one with the instrument. An athlete throwing a ball (nothing there), then one with the ball. You get the idea.</p> <p>Execution:</p> <p>4. For Maryland Society, Founders Society and Colonnade (OLD RECOGNITION CIRCLES) donors – while not referring to them as such – have students hand write a thank you note, with potential text provided by marketing.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Include only donors who made cash gifts the previous FY For Colonnade, exclude athletics-only donors <p>5. For donors whose giving falls below \$1,000:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Email to everyone with an email address Mail to those with no email address: depending on number, potentially \$100 and up? <p>We discussed an impact piece, but folks, you heard it here first. I think the next trend is just plain ol' gratitude. Graciousness. Appreciation. I'm a student sending you a thank you note. I'm here. I'm proof that your gift worked. Now it's time to thank you. Other pieces will show impact. This is a year-end thank you, so what we need to do is THANK.</p>
Skidmore	Dropped	Dropped	"We dropped our print version a number of years ago and went electronic. No one voiced displeasure. A year or two we stopped the electronic version. The silence was deafening. Good luck eliminating yours!"
John H. Taylor Consulting	Dropped	Dropped	<p>From CASE message board:</p> <p>Quite honestly, you might want to ask how many of us have completely done away with annual donor lists, PERIOD?!</p> <p>For many institutions, these are long a thing of the past. The amount of time and effort to produce them - either on paper or online - and get them right far exceed any possible benefit. And, based on numerous donor relations surveys, these listings just aren't that important any more. Here are a couple of related blogs/articles written by my friend, Lynne Wester:</p> <p>http://www.donorrelationsguru.com/#!/blog/cltka</p> <p>http://www.academicimpressions.com/news/why-honor-rolls-donors-are-waste-time</p> <p>BTW, we eliminated these at NC State well over a decade ago without any donor relations repercussions.</p>
Simon Fraser University	Dropped	Dropped	"it could be used as a prospect research list for our competitors. "
UC San Diego	Dropped	Dropped	<p>UC San Diego went to a web-only version 4 years ago, last year (FY14) we stopped the honor roll altogether. Very few grumbles from Development, not a peep from donors.</p> <p>We presented the ROI vs COST (staff production/maintenance time and outright expense to produce), we also presented how many web visits to the honor roll website over a year's period of time.</p> <p>It was easy to defend dropping the honor roll project and implementing other stewardship/impact projects for the same or less time and expense.</p>
Wellesley College	Dropped	Dropped	Wellesley College dropped the donor list several years ago with little if any negative feedback.
Umass Boston	Dropped	Dropped	We stopped doing the listing at UMass Boston for the first time this fall and absolutely no one has voiced noticing it (except UA staff, who voiced relief). it has freed up countless productive hours to not do one!

Washington Hospital Center Foundation	Dropped	Dropped	"It seems as though no one misses it, or maybe they never noticed it in the first place! "
University of Central Florida	Dropped	Dropped	"zero feedback, negative or positive."



Donor Honor Roll - Lynne Wester Article

11th March 2014 Why Honor Rolls of Donors are the Most Wasteful Donor Relations Practice Possible

There are many things I believe we do in donor relations that make absolutely no sense. Top of my list is the honor roll of donors. I hope you read this post and share it with as many others in the nonprofit world as humanly possible.

In all my time in donor relations, I have never heard of a donor who gave an organization a million dollar gift because their name was in a textual list of donors. Yet I must get asked at least once a week what I think of honor rolls and their place in donor recognition and stewardship.

I think they have no useful purpose, they provide opportunities to make costly mistakes, they are a huge waste of human resources, time, money, and they are otherwise foolish.

Why Honor Rolls Don't Provide Any Benefit

Time and time again, we have asked donors what they want and how they want to be recognized, and the three things that appear most often in their answers are:

- Access
- Information
- Experiences

Donors want handwritten notes from students. They want to meet those that benefit from their philanthropy. They don't care about your honor roll, only you do. Just because you have always done them does not make honor rolls a great idea.

"A list, a list of names, does not tell a story. If an image is worth a thousand words, a donor honor roll is silence."

Why Honor Rolls Actually Hurt Donor Relations

In major cities, honor rolls are passed around from research office to research office, basically telling your competitors where the money is.

Talk about a privacy violation!

"From the donors' perspective, you might as well put a blinking neon sign above each of their heads that says 'I give money away!'"

What You Should Do Instead

If we took the time and effort that goes into producing monstrously ineffective honor rolls, and pooled those resources instead into a piece on the impact of a gift, the story behind the gift, and the story behind the donor, then we would be much more effective in recognizing the people behind the gift. Those people and their stories are what truly makes philanthropy possible.

I have yet to hear a person who works at an organization that produces an honor roll say, "It's so easy, I just push a button and *voila!*" or "I've never heard a complaint."

So I ask you in the clearest, most relevant way I can to *stop it*.

Stop doing them.

Eliminate all honor rolls, all the time.

I've helped to eliminate honor rolls at many institutions. Every single time, we have saved money, staff time, and other countless hours of grief. Every time, the honor rolls went away without a complaint. In their place, we have been able to build robust and meaningful donor relations programs, with tangible ROI and with storytelling that is meaningful to donors.

I'd love to discuss this with you, and I'm open to a civilized debate. Please email me at lynne@donorrelationsguru.com [mailto:lynne@donorrelationsguru.com] for more information about discontinuing honor rolls and replacing them with more meaningful forms of donor recognition.

I originally wrote this post for my friends at Academic Impressions. You can view it here [<http://www.academicimpressions.com/news/why-honor-rolls-donors-are-waste-time>] .

Posted 11th March 2014 by Donor Relations Guru

 17 View comments



Anonymous March 11, 2014 at 9:10 AM

Amen! At one institution I worked at, a major donor was not included in an honor roll because he had not given during the fiscal year and, though we had done nothing "wrong," he asked us to send a letter signed by our VP to his classmates informing them that he had been left out of the honor roll by accident. It was one of the more interesting letters I ever had to write.

Reply

Replies



Donor Relations Guru March 11, 2014 at 3:46 PM

That's a good story for cocktail hour!

Reply



Anonymous March 11, 2014 at 11:29 AM

however, does it encourage friends of donors to give or at least inquire about the organization?

Reply

Replies



Donor Relations Guru March 11, 2014 at 3:47 PM

I think the mission and message of the organization is a better reason than the honor roll.

Reply