

# Protecting Your Greatest Asset

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In the popular 1995 film *Rob Roy*, actor Liam Neeson—portraying the real-life Scottish folk hero Robert Roy MacGregor, who was made famous in Sir Walter Scott’s 1818 novel—is scolded by his wife for not remembering an aphorism that he had recited to their sons many times. “Honor,” she reminds him, “is a gift a man gives himself.” That notion still resonates. (Although today, of course, the gender reference would be neutral.)

The idea of honor seems somewhat dated these days. It has lamentably receded from everyday conversation, except in a few notable spheres, such as the military. However, the concept actually lives on in other parts of your vocabulary. Perhaps without even knowing it, you tend to substitute for “honor” the words “integrity” and “honesty” and slightly broaden their meaning into something that resembles honor.

Each of these words—honor, honesty, integrity—relates to an individual’s adherence to widely accepted

principles of ethics and morality. They also directly relate to you because they are foundational to your career as a fundraising professional. If properly tended, they will help you maintain your most precious asset: your reputation.

It is common knowledge that a reputation can be a difficult thing to manage. It is easily sullied; it is tremendously difficult to recover. Prospects—people who rely on you to be above-board in every aspect of your life (and not just your professional life)—expect you to adhere to high moral and especially ethical standards, and very often their gifts are at least minimally tied to the trust they put in you. With that in mind, here are six reminders that will keep you and your reputation in good stead with donors and prospects.

**1. Be more than merely honest.** There is more to honesty than merely telling the truth. You should be forthcoming with your donors about the state of your project and organization and provide them with information that will help them to better assess their interests and their willingness to donate. Put plenty of information on the table. Encourage them to ask questions, and answer them honestly. Respect your donors’ intelligence, and expect that they can spot problems. Perhaps they will even be able to offer valuable solutions. Accurately explaining your organization’s current state—its successes and its challenges—is critical.

**2. Do not omit information.** Omitting important information can be very harmful. The failure to provide donors with the complete picture of your project and organization will eventually haunt you. No one expects a conversation or even a proposal will be fully comprehensive, but at the same time, no one expects the most salient details to be left unrevealed.

**3. Provide adequate detail.** Increasingly, donors want to know what is happening at your shop. As you are often reminded, the days of “checkbook philanthropy”—when donors simply signed a check and walked away only to return next year to do it again—are nearing their end. Information is a powerful thing, and sharing it with your donors will not only comfort them but also increase the perception that you are expert in your knowledge about your charity. And knowing what

you're talking about, in plentiful and accurate detail, is crucial to garnering your donors' respect. (*Nota bene*: If, for instance, a donor asks about the annual fund, you do not need to have a full report at the ready. Nevertheless, you hopefully will know enough to speak with authority on the subject. If that is not the case, for goodness' sake, do not try to fake it! Simply let the donor know that you will get back to him or her with the information—and then make sure you do, promptly.)

**4. Respect the limits of your relationships.** It is virtually impossible to build a donor relationship over time and not become friends. Nearly every fundraiser of experience has, at one time or another, befriended a donor, and there is nothing wrong with it. Presumably, your personalities mesh well, and, as demonstrated at least by charitable interests, you share some common likes and dislikes. That being said, there are lines that should not be crossed. Consider these questions: Is it really a two-way friendship, or are you exaggerating the donor's feelings toward you? In the event a family squabble crops up (a common situation when money is at stake), will you be in danger of appearing biased? Will your friendship prevent you from doing the work your organization expects you to do? Asking friends for donations, as many already know, can be more difficult than asking strangers.


**5. Do not gossip, and do not blame others.** Gossip is always a bad idea, but you should be especially wary of engaging in it with your donors. We all know that there is a certain variety of donor who enjoys being an “insider” with your charity, and that is a good thing! It indicates interest, concern and loyalty. However, avoid discussing office shenanigans with your donors. After all, mentioning your colleagues in other than a good light only makes you look small and petty, and giving a donor insights into the underbelly of your organization could make it seem dysfunctional. Word of any betrayals will inevitably get back to your office. As for blame, simply

try to follow the old saying that it should be accepted quickly and assigned reticently.

**6. Do not be too quick to respond to criticism.** Defensiveness can quickly end a relationship with your donor. The longer you know someone, the more apt you are to be criticized. And the criticism may not always be levied with tact. Should a donor hurl an insult in your direction or correct one of your errors—one that was, in fact, not an error—you must let it go. If you cannot let it go, do not respond immediately. Bite your tongue; deliberate on it for a while; and then devise a plan to deal with it gently. Your donors talk to lots of other donors, and if you become known as a difficult personality, your reputation will suffer. (A mentor of mine used to be fond of saying, “The donor is right only twice: when the donor is right and when the donor is wrong.” That is worth remembering!)

While these tips relate to your interactions with donors and prospects, it is equally important for you to maintain a good reputation in your office as well. How? First, by abiding by many of the rules you have just read. A number of them will apply nicely to office situations. Another bit of advice I wish I had taken very early on in my career is to never work for shady organizations or bosses. If they become shady, leave.

A reputation is a two-way street, after all, and aligning yourself with a characterless charity will inevitably drag you down. Determining an organization's reputation via its leadership and its financial standing, among other parameters, will require some investigation on your part, but it will be worth the effort.

Your reputation, in the end, will ultimately determine your success as a fundraiser and, more importantly, as a person. 

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