

R.I.P. Donor Pyramid?



The modern model is more like a vortex — an energized circle where everyone is equal. People move in and out as needed, and your job is to keep the energy flowing.

NOTE: My article on the topic of moving away from the donor pyramid model for donor acquisition, cultivation and major gift solicitation recently resurfaced on social media dialogue, so I thought it was time for a reprint.

Why do we always think of donors with pyramids? The pyramids were built in Egypt. On the backs of slaves. It took a very, very long time. The cost, in human terms, was untenable and unsustainable.

That's why you don't see many pyramids being built these days.

Except in nonprofits, where building the donor pyramid is still the holy grail. Get 'em in. Move 'em up. Acquire through direct mail. Convert to monthly donor or sustainer. Acquire through events. Convert to mail. Up, up, up ... to the pinnacle of major and planned gifts!

Except for one tiny thing.

It doesn't work.

Pyramid building is so 2630 BCE. Nobody's got 100,000 workers (aka direct-mail donors) building a solid pyramid anymore. Many so-called pyramids really look like hourglasses. Or upside-down pyramids. Or plateaus. Even the pyramid-shaped ones are resting on shaky foundations of donors who move in and out, in and out — eight out of 10 newly acquired bottom-of-the-pyramid donors leave — making the "foundation" more like a river than a solid, secure slab of mortar. The days of the donor pyramid model are gone!

Digital toppled the donor pyramid. Actually, it crumbled it ... slowly, surely ... until there was nothing left but an empty frame. A triangle on paper. The donors no longer fit inside of it.

R.I.P. donor pyramid. You had a good run.

The donor pyramid (sometimes call the donor ladder) was a great model for linear thinkers like me. It was neat and orderly. Engage folks from the bottom up, level by level, one step at a time. It was stable.

Or so we thought, until research from Adrian Sargeant and Elaine Jay, ("[Building Donor Loyalty: The Fundraiser's Guide to Increasing Lifetime Value](#)"), Penelope Burk's [Cygnus Applied Research](#) and the Fundraising Effectiveness Project, with data from the [AFP Foundations for Philanthropy](#) and a host of [participating firms and donor database platforms](#), showed we were losing up to 80 percent or more donors before they ever moved up the ladder.

Here's the problem: Pyramids are forced. They're where people go to die (yes, remember the pyramids were built as tombs). Why are we forcing people up to the top? Just to get them there and hope they'll expire so we can get their planned gifts? That sounds like the antithesis of a donor-centric strategy. It sounds totally self-centered — kind of like a pharaoh!

So what's the solution? A vortex.

What about a model that's free, active and filled with room to breathe? One that focuses not just on the strength of the dollars given, but on the love and engagement freely offered? One driven not by fundraising, but by [philanthropy \(i.e., "love of human kind"\)](#)? **A fundraising model fueled not by singular transactions, but by transformative interactions that lead to deep, lasting relationships!**

I'm thinking of a vortex — an energized circle. Everyone is equal in a circle; just at times some folks have more energy than others. People move in and out, giving and getting, as the time and spirit move them.

In the energized circle/vortex model, donors are not categorized solely by their money. They're people, first and foremost. Sometimes, when things are going well for them, they become donor-investors helping other people. Sometimes, when other things in life take precedence, they may become recipients of philanthropy.

I've known an awful lot of people who at one time were charity beneficiaries and then went on to become philanthropists. Sadly, the reverse is true as well. But that's what the circle — the circle of life — is all about. The vortex enables folks to freely enter and exit from various points on the circle. Here are some things to consider about the nature of the new model:

1. **There's no fixed entry or end point.** The vortex continues to swirl. It's ongoing, rather than start and stop. People may swoop in with a shared tweet, acting as your ambassador. They may jump in with a peer-to-peer crowdfunding initiative, acting as your fundraiser. They may dance around

on Facebook or Twitter trying to get a petition signed, acting as your advocate. They may make a small online special appeal gift ... attend an event ... purchase an auction item ... take a tour ... or sit down with your executive director and end up making a significant donor investment. People can move easily between points of engagement within the life cycle.

2. **All prospective and current donors are similar points of energy on your circling vortex.** As the energy builds up, some are swooped toward the center of the vortex and stay there. They're the ones whose energy (and values) match yours most closely. They're the ones where the chemical reaction (or, as Yoda might say, "the force") is so strong and the energizing experience of the circle (your community, your family) is so potent they simply can't resist you. These become your hard core of loyal supporters — the ones you continue to stoke with lots of energy so their fire burns bright. The donor's needs — not your organization's — are at the center of the engagement.
3. **Everyone else gets energy too.** The folks engaging with you online are just as important as offline. They may be clients, members, staff, friends of constituents or just people who care about your cause. Whatever motivated them to engage, they must be responded to so the energy keeps flowing. Some of these folks have so much energy themselves they'll spread your message like wildfire across lands, and networks, you'd never otherwise be able to travel — if you let them. So, let them. Play with them. Invigorate them. Catalyze them. Give them breathing room — rather than trying to force them into rungs on a ladder, points in a funnel or levels on a pyramid.
4. **Inbound marketing and social media fuel your vortex.** Digital communications — social media, mobile, email, crowdfunding, online donating — have permanently disrupted the traditional donor-engagement process. People get information online, network online, and make purchase decisions online. A person's engagement footprint can expand or contract in ways are unique to and driven by the individual. It's not all within your control, but you can definitely help it along.
5. **Entry points are increasingly complex.** Between increasing mobile usage, texting, QR codes, apps and ever-evolving social media platforms and levels of engagement — there's a lot for your typical nonprofit to wrap its arms around. Yet wrap you must. There's no going backward. Change is change. You adapt or die.

Fundraising and marketing integration in a vortex world

How people become aware of you, and what they encounter when they find you, is not something fundraisers should leave solely in the hands of marketing staff. I've been a broken record for years on the essential [need to integrate marketing and fundraising](#). It's never been as crystal clear why this is important since the explosion of digital. Your

donors only know one organization. And, increasingly, they know what they see about you online.

Embrace social media fully. Smart nonprofits have always known to let donors know they're valued for more than their money. The vortex model makes this happen.

Influencers, advocates and ambassadors are valued contributors — and sometimes they influence donations well beyond what they themselves are able to contribute.

If you can provide value to prospects who use social media (the lion's share), and make it snappy, they'll be all over you like a cheap suit (yes, even those major donors who tend to wear expensive suits). Give folks what they want and you'll be amazed at the results. And these days a lot of folks — across age and income ranges — want quick, real-time connections via Twitter, LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, and even texts. Your messaging must resonate with what's top of mind. You've got to meet folks where they are.

Stop thinking outbound

You'll know you've got the wrong fuel for your vortex if you're always asking these types of questions, and accordingly checking tasks of your list:

- What's going on in the organization we can *push* to our mailing list? Check!
- What do we have to *tell* them? Check!
- What's on our agenda to *send* out this month? Check!
- What can *they do* for us (e.g., buy a ticket, make a donation)? Check!

Those things aren't bad, per se, but they're not likely to get you a long-term supporter relationship. They're too much you looking in a mirror and admiring yourself. If you don't start looking out a window to see what your supporters care about, you'll get what drives most nonprofit marketers — a one-time transaction you can cross off your list. Check, and done!

But you *shouldn't* be done!

You're never done in the vortex model.

You're not after mere actions. You're after interactions that build community. That's what builds up your energy. Every entry point into the vortex offers a pathway to deeper engagement.

Accept the fact this is a nonlinear, nonorderly, downright messy process. Folks can interact with you in multiple ways. They aren't confined to a single level. Some call this a "surround sound" experience — one that uses various channels in people's everyday lives and increases opportunities to both introduce and reinforce messages. The only constant is energy, which ebbs and flows. The vortex model:

Here are some ways to adopt the vortex model:

1. **Begin by changing the way you've traditionally done fundraising and marketing.** In silos. In segments. In "low touch" at the bottom and "high touch" at the top strategies. Boundaries are blurring. You've got to integrate all online and offline communications functions across your entire organization.
2. **Use social media to provide folks with continuous energy.** Digital not only enables you to do this with minimal investment, it also enables supporters to respond in kind. Then you respond back, and so forth. This means putting the strategy of digital engagement on everyone's plate, then hiring or designating a manager to coordinate your efforts. Speak to donors where they're most comfortable; shape calls to action to maximize engagement and impact. Continue to come up with asks throughout the year — not just for money, but for energy, influence and impact. Have periodic trainings for all staffers so they can learn your messaging and how to engage folks online.
3. **Reimagine the concept of donor "lifetime value."** It's no longer simply a combination of average gifts, future capacity and attrition rates. Now it must encompass factors such as the size of a person's network and their propensity to use that network. In other words, the "connectors," "mavens" and "salesmen" of whom [Malcolm Gladwell](#) wrote in "[The Tipping Point](#)" become very desirable constituents.
4. **Connect with your most engaged fans and followers.** Stuffing donors into a pyramid model leads to a culture of building relationships only with the folks at the top. A lot of potential is missed. It's always been thus, but the digital revolution has shined a beacon on this because it's so much more evident who your influencers are. Before the digital revolution you didn't know when your \$25 donor was telling 100 of their friends to give to you, so you didn't lavish attention on them. Today, you can see who your real fans are via social shares, Yelp reviews, comments on your blog and more. Recruit them!
5. **Make harnessing the power of potential influencers a primary goal.** Continue to ask for gifts, of course. Simply also ask supporters to share your email appeals with their personal networks and post information about your organization's efforts on social media. These tasks require minimal effort on the part of your supporter but can reap tremendous benefits by (1) introducing you to a broader constituency and (2) making your supporter feel they are having added impact. It's a win-win.
6. **When you rank the potential forces on a donor's decision to give, family, friends and peers rank higher than anything else.** According to a survey by [Georgetown University's Center for Social Impact Communication](#), 39 percent of Americans get involved with causes because they've affected someone they know; 36 percent are motivated when it's an important cause to family and friends. These reasons for involvement far outweigh having time or money, or feeling an urgency to

help people in need.

7. **Stop treating your supporters — any of them — like bottom feeders.** No one is at the bottom of anything if they support your cause. They're the "tops" in my book! Stop forcing them to build your pyramid. Stop forcing folks to go where you think they "should" be. People who make repeated small gifts are just as likely to leave bequests as those you force up to the top of your pyramid. Ditto those who engage with you actively and continually online.

Closing Thoughts

The pathway into the digital future is not going to be a linear journey up a pyramid. Make your circle a strong, compelling magnet. Clarify your mission. Simplify your case for support. Stop trying so hard to explain what you do; *show* people. Use [images](#). Tell your best [emotional stories](#). Use compelling testimonials as [social proof](#). This will invigorate your circle.

The best way to work the donor vortex is actively. Keep compelling content flowing. Build yourself a [content calendar](#), and put someone in charge of donor-centered communications. Watch the circle begin to spin and build momentum.

The energy will do the work for you. Just concentrate on being the magnet — and rotating.

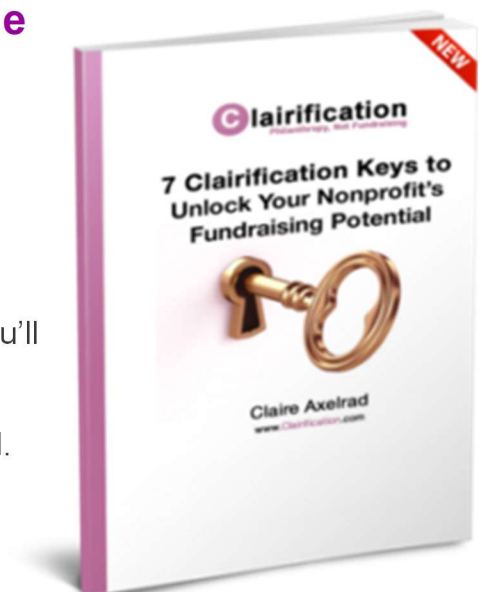
Note: This post was inspired by the brilliant work of Julie Dixon and Denise Keyes, whose winter 2013 article "[The Permanent Disruption of Social Media](#)" in Stanford Social Innovation Review nicely sums up the benefits of the vortex model. I encourage you to read it.

If you're interested in more ways to reframe how you've always done fundraising...

Tips, Tools, Templates, Exercises, Worksheets And Checklists Galore!

Please check out my [7 Clairification Keys to Unlock Your Nonprofit's Fundraising Potential](#). Through a series of clarifying worksheets and individual and group exercises, you'll learn how to:

1. **Clairify your Values** and lead from passion, not need.
2. **Clairify your Stories** and share them; make your donors heroes.
3. **Clairify your Brand** and listen for offers; seize opportunities.



4. **Clairify your Social Channels** and meet folks where they are.
5. **Clairify your Support Constituencies** and be accountable.
6. **Clarify your Engagement Objectives** and measure.
7. **Clairify your Resources/Systems** for creating positive customer experiences.

All Clairification products come with a 30-day, no-questions-asked, 100% refund guarantee. Don't forget to log in if you're a [Clairification School](#) student; you always receive a discount!

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