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Developing Evidence-based Practice within Donor Relations and Stewardship

By Anne Manner-McLarty

The evidence-based practice model has been applied in a number of fields, including health sciences, human resources, management and governmental policymaking. Evidence-based practice is characterized by the synthesis of knowledge coming from an expert practitioner; the values and preferences of the constituent, in this case the donor; and evidence provided by research from the field of practice. This article explores the translation of this model for the purposes of donor relations and stewardship practice, considers current impediments to realizing a model of this sort, and provides an overview of applicable research methods that could be used to build a library of research evidence appropriate to donor relations and stewardship. The author calls for an iterative design process for donor relations and stewardship programs and the open sharing of research findings as an ethical obligation of the nonprofit industry.

This article points to the need for sufficient relevant research to advance donor relations and stewardship as an evidence-based practice. This research should focus on the efficacy of donor recognition and stewardship strategies in motivating donor support and the efficiency with which those strategies are carried out. Evidence-based practice within donor relations and stewardship would use research to inform the design of the programs organizations use to attract, motivate and retain donors.

Content:

- Evidence-based practice in terms of donor relations and stewardship
- Factors impeding the development of evidence-based practice
- The importance of sharing of evidence within the nonprofit sector
- Creating a framework for evidence-based practice
- Research and evaluation terminology and methods
- The role of program evaluation in an iterative design process

Glossary:

- Evidence-based Practice: Combining best evidence found in relevant research that has been conducted using sound methodology with the practical expertise of the professional and the values, expectations, concerns and preferences of the donor or group of donors. (Derived from the common definition of evidence-based medicine accredited to Sackett, et al used in clinical healthcare fields)[1]

- Iteration: Repetition of a practice or innovation as a means of obtaining successively closer approximations to the solution of a specific problem. Refinement of an idea by trial, evaluation and revision.

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Introduction

Organizations dependent on philanthropic support develop, implement and sometimes improve a program of activities, products and services to motivate donors to continue giving and to give to their fullest potential. These programs, known generally as donor relations and/or stewardship, are intended to build strong and productive relationships with donors and thereby increase the donor's philanthropic commitment to the organization and its mission.

Most organizations understand that building and maintaining strong donor relationships is a responsibility shared by leadership, service providers, staff and volunteers to the organization. In some organizations, there is a specific person or group assigned to concentrate on the donor relations and stewardship program — the deliverables intended to thank, inform and engage donors. As this specialization has become more commonplace, the designation of donor relations and stewardship professionals has evolved. The argument for evidence-based practice presented here applies equally to those organizations where there is a titled role and those where the responsibility is less well defined. The benefits of generating, evaluating and applying evidence to the design and implementation of donor-focused programs are the same regardless of organization size, type or staffing.

The bottom-line performance measures of any donor relations and stewardship program success have been established: donor retention figures and average gift value.[2] Retention rate and average gift value are quantifiable and easily compared across time periods. They are measured using information readily at hand in most institutions and are inherently specific to the donor population of the institution. These metrics are directly related to fundraising, as is appropriate. Donor relations and stewardship is intrinsically part of advancement strategy, and advancement for nonprofit organizations requires fundraising.

Explaining trends in retention rate and gift average — or more important, proactively designing the donor relations program to positively influence these measures — requires detailed analysis of the individual components of the program and a study of the values and preferences of the specific donor community. Program refinement, defined as any improvement or focus on activities that best align with an organization's resources and donor base, requires study of specific practices and the outcomes that follow changes or trials in practice.

Research can be fraught with challenges for a number of reasons. Organizations are not used to conducting research of this type, specifically in areas related to donor satisfaction and engagement. The scale of the research within larger organizations may make the task seem insurmountable. The lack of data management and analysis expertise within the advancement team can be another factor. However, many organizations are now initiating research, often at a limited scale. If this research is shared, a library of evidence can build to inform practice across the field. If the benefits seen in other fields prove similarly effective for donor relations and stewardship, more evidence may lead to better decision-making, and better decisions can contribute to more philanthropy.

Translating the Concept of Evidence-based Practice from Other Professions

The concept of evidence-based practice is garnering attention in a number of fields, including health sciences,[3] human resources,[4] management[5] and governmental policymaking.[6] Evidence-based practice models balance intelligence coming from three sources: an expert practitioner; the values and preferences of the subject(s) served by the practice (in the case of a nonprofit, the donor) and evidence provided by research from the field of practice. Debate continues as to the requirements of an evidence-based model, with a general consensus that the origin and quality of the evidence is a key factor in the success of any evidence-based practice.

A quick overview illustrates how the evidence-based practice model works. It is based on a specific paradigm known as the Five A's of evidence-based planning.[7] This approach emphasizes the importance of clearly identifying the problem to be addressed and the issues affecting the situation prior to identifying appropriate research.

- *Assess* the problem to determine pertinent issues.
- *Ask* a clear, answerable question to be pursued.
- *Acquire* appropriate information from research, which may take a number of forms.
- *Appraise* the viability of the information gathered based on the specific circumstances.
- *Apply* the evidence to the subject or group.

Further clarification of the three sources supplying intelligence within the evidence-based practice may help translate the model for application in terms of donor relations and stewardship.

1. The Expert Practitioner

Twenty-five or more years of common practice in donor relations and stewardship has lead to a set of practitioners adopting various forms of the title "donor relations and stewardship professional." Practitioners have varied titles and responsibilities, but in general are trusted to deliver the various products and services intended to recognize, inform and engage donors with the institution. While no formal educational track or credentialing system yet exists, the Association of Donor Relations Professionals (ADRP), an international organization dedicated specifically to the practice of donor relations and stewardship, is well-established. Parameters of the profession are being defined,[8] and there are agreed-upon standards of practice and commonly held understanding about the goals of this work. ADRP has codified best practices.[9]

Peer-to-peer networking, professional education and on-the-job experience have created a similarity of practice by which donor relations and stewardship professionals can justifiably claim to have specific expertise. Other professional development organizations dedicated to professional fundraising include education on donor relations or stewardship in their offerings. Even in institutions were there is no job titled "donor relations" or "stewardship," the concepts are addressed as key concerns for those responsible for fundraising, development or institutional advancement. Most institutions have donor relations and stewardship responsibilities in the job description of at least one individual, with larger institutions having teams of multiple individuals assigned to various donor relations and stewardship tasks. Given the universality of the concept of donor relations and stewardship as a critical aspect of fundraising, it is now reasonable to assume that most institutions have an expert staff person able to assess a problem specific to donor relations and stewardship, determine the pertinent issues and ask a clear, answerable question in the pursuit of gathering information and evaluating specific aspects of the organization's practice. Organizations are ready to enact the Five A's paradigm of evidence-based planning.

2. The Values and Preferences of the "Subject," the Donor or Donors

Many institutions are now regularly conducting surveys or otherwise gathering qualitative feedback from their donors. These activities provide valuable feedback from groups of donors within a specific community. Advances in constituent relationship management systems provide fundraisers with better reconnaissance for specific donors. Quantitative and qualitative data of this sort provides the intelligence regarding donor values and preferences required for evidence-based practice, and advances in this area will likely continue as new technologies are developed, new methods for data gathering are devised and more institutions invest in this type of data management.

Even for organizations where little information from individuals or groups of donors specific to that institution is known, there is a substantial volume of information available from longstanding investigation into donor values. Three overarching goals of donor relations and stewardship activities have been identified: building donor trust, strengthening relationships, and delivering the messages that keep donors informed and engaged.[10] Penelope Burk and her firm, Cygnus Research, have delineated donor priorities regarding interaction with the organizations they support: Donors want to be thanked promptly and meaningfully for their gifts; they want to see their gifts designated or assigned to a specific project, program or initiative; and they want a report, in measurable terms, on what has been accomplished in that program before they are asked to give again.[11] The annual Burk Donor Survey repeatedly points to these donor values as the primary drivers in a donor's decision to give again to the same organization.[12] These values can be considered universal and are suitable to inform at least the initial effort to develop evidence-based practice.

3. A Sufficient Volume of Appropriate Research to Provide Evidence

What's missing is a sufficient volume of quality research regarding the impact of specific donor relations and stewardship tactics on donor behavior beyond those generically identified by Burk's work: a timely acknowledgment, some form of thank you and an impact report. Organizations assume, often based on the notion of best practice, that their donor relations and stewardship programs are effective in motivating donors to give, and give to their fullest potential. This is faulty logic wherein common practice is mistakenly representing best practice and there is as of yet insufficient evidence to define best practice, even within a single institution.

Organizations lack concrete detailed evidence as to what program components are most effective at motivating donors. In the past, there was excessive reliance on anecdotal feedback from donors. With recent improvements in gathering donor opinion, there is a larger volume of information about donor values and preferences. Yet there is still a lack of sufficient evidence about how donors behave over time in response to the products and services provided in the name of donor relations and stewardship. However, research in these areas has begun.[13] This type of research is more complicated to conduct, takes longer and often requires more expertise to analyze and report but it promises greater financial returns. Fundraisers are focused on maximizing the lifetime giving potential of each donor because doing so is more effective in total dollars and cost per dollar raised than acquiring new donors.[14] Evidence-based analysis of this sort is aimed at moving donors toward larger gifts, giving through multiple channels and planned gifts. Because these approaches focus on existing donors rather than new prospects, there is substantial overlap with donor relations and stewardship. That overlap provides other opportunities for evidence gathering pertinent to donor relations and stewardship.

Benefits Provided by Evidence-based Practice

Drawing from the benefits associated with evidence-based nursing,[15] organizations should anticipate the following outcomes from adopting an evidence-based practice model for donor relations and stewardship:

- Lead to the highest quality donor engagement
- Better meet the expectations of an informed donor population
- Improve consistency in the delivery of programs to donors
- Reduce donor relations and stewardship program costs
- Increases staff empowerment and role satisfaction
- Reduce staff turnover rate
- Reduce complication in record-keeping as data management systems improve

Factors Impeding Evidence-based Practice for Donor Relations and Stewardship

There are a number of factors that contribute to the lack of evidence available to practitioners and limited use of the information at hand. These circumstances stem from individual and institutional habits and the misapplication of practices from other business models to the practice of donor relations and stewardship.

- Practitioners may have a natural inclination to turn to their peers for understanding and insight over the use of research tools.

  The American Journal of Nursing has published articles examining the challenges inherent in introducing evidence-based practice to the field of nursing. This research may point to similar challenges to be faced by the advancement field.

  A 2005 article by Pravikoff, et al gathers research to explain nurses' reticence to seek out research. They quote a number of research projects, which found that many nurses recognize the need for information; however, their most frequent source of that information was a peer or colleague. When decisions must be made, nurses trust a real person — a colleague, clinical specialist or supervisor — more than they do printed and electronic resources. The authors go on to conclude that nurses in the United States aren't ready for evidence-based practice because of insufficient information literacy, limited access to quality information resources and, above all, a lack of value placed on the importance of genuine research. In the early stages, the introduction of evidence into the practice of donor relations and stewardship may result in similar impeding factors.[16]

- For many years, donor relations and stewardship was conducted as "art" rather than science, and study was focused on volume and variety, not outcomes.

In its early years, donor relations and stewardship practice was characterized by phrases like, "It's the right thing to do." It was a nicety, a luxury added to the donor experience in hopes of encouraging greater giving. Measures of success were based on volume, variety and creativity, not outcomes. Initially, basic logic indicated that crafting a positive experience for donors would make them more likely to give again. Donor engagement is too important to solve with best guesses, as retention is at stake. With attrition rates unsustainably high, fundraising institutions are now looking to donor relations and stewardship as a strategy to keep fundraising at the levels required to meet the organization's mission.

Engagement is a complicated concept. Kevin Kelly, co-founder of *Wired* magazine, has coined a term that stresses the importance using big data, research and information sharing in relation to complex concepts. "We're susceptible to what I call 'thinkism,'" Kelly says, "which is the idea that thinking about things can solve problems, that if you had an AI that was smart enough you could solve cancer because you could think about it. But we don't know enough. We don't have enough data, we don't have enough experiments. You have to actually do a whole lot more experiments … before you can solve it."[17] Luckily, motivating donors to continue giving is not as complicated as curing cancer but it is a complex topic that can be better served through sector-wide evidence-based research. The key lies in the nonprofit sector's willingness to share the findings of their research, and when necessary, to collaborate on research initiatives.

- Donor surveys have caused a distraction from research about specific practices and the effect of those practices on donor giving behavior.

Donor research is frequently conflated with the surveying of customers. There are numerous advisors recommending that donors be surveyed frequently and for a wide variety of reasons: to gather demographic data, get feedback on specific events or programs, or ask for opinions about what donors did or didn't like or might or might not do in the future. The logic seems to be that the more that is known about donor opinion, the better informed donor relations and stewardship activities will be. But information and proof of efficacy are not synonymous. It is important to incorporate the experienced gained from those who have been conducting customer surveys, especially opinion surveys, for decades.

There have been volumes written on the drawbacks of surveying, including well-known studies demonstrating that almost all surveys have a relatively low response rate;[18] surveys typically gather information from the very positive and very negative ends of the spectrum, corrupting any straightforward attempt to establish an average or norm;[19] and the answers received are skewed by the very process of asking.[20]

The ubiquitous use of surveys has likely been the number-one factor in postponing actionable research into the efficacy of donor relations practices. Gathering donor feedback from within each institution has been promoted as "donor-centered research" when in fact, for the most part, organizations could rely on the extensive donor opinion research already in the field. What is needed is research that advances the practice of donor relations and stewardship by reporting on the effectiveness of specific donor recognition practices.

- Advancement teams are resistant to the inherent risks in variant testing.

Variant testing is any experiment in which two or more variations in practice are tested in a randomized population of donors. This type of research is used for testing behavior in response to the variations, not opinion about the set of options. Because test subjects act in response to only one variant, the effectiveness on behavior of each variant as compared to the others is measured.[21] This type of testing is best suited to situations where there is little or equal risk involved in offering one variation over the other to the donor. Some institutions have been reticent to alter current practice for testing purposes. There is a fear that "not doing what's always been done" could damage the relationship with those donors who are presented with the new untried variant, when in fact neither variant is tried and true without testing. Luckily, budget constraints led some organizations to begin variant testing, as they look for cost savings in direct mail and other solicitation tactics.[22] Those experiments have demonstrated a tolerable level of risk in this type of testing,[23] thereby paving the way for experimentation in terms of donor relations and stewardship.

- More complex research has been launched so recently that the findings are inconclusive or still in development.

In recent years, the volume, variety and complexity of research has expanded in an effort to find predictive models that help focus fundraising efforts. This new research is most often donor-focused and well-structured. However, all research requires verification through peer-review and repetition. It will take time to confirm the findings through broad application.

- New evidence of successful donor relations and stewardship practice may be guarded as a competitive edge.

Fundraising has become a competitive business. Advantages gained through predictive data analysis and improved practices theoretically lead to more dollars raised and fewer donors lost to other nonprofit causes. As with all science, the accuracy of the analysis improves with an increase in tested evidence. To that end, it is to the benefit of all nonprofits to find a balance between sharing the findings of their research without disclosing information about specific donors.

- Research is being conducted by commercial entities that consider both the method of investigation and some or all of the findings a proprietary business secret.

New models for developing evidence appropriate to fundraising and the practice of donor relations and stewardship are often conducted by paid professionals who have a commercial motive in maintaining proprietary rights over both the methods used and the findings. While this is standard practice in for-profit business, it is not in keeping with the nature of philanthropy.

- There is no central repository for the dissemination of research specific to donor relations and stewardship.

  Traditionally, clinical trials in the medical field were reported in medical journals. Today, there is a centralized government website, www.clinicaltrials.gov, available for the dissemination of evidence gathered during clinical trials although there is no regulation requiring participation. Fundraising, donor relations and stewardship would benefit from a central repository for the cataloging of evidence gathered through research, especially in terms of donor behavior. Such a repository would provide a primary resource for comparative research and inform evidence-based practice across the nonprofit sector.

Before donor relations and stewardship can legitimately claim to be an evidence-based practice, organizations must overcome a number of factors in order to build a reliable volume of appropriate evidence. Organizations will need to conduct research focused on donor engagement and giving behavior in response to specific donor relations and stewardship practices. The findings of this research must then be shared for confirmation and to serve as evidence available to other practitioners.

Creating a Framework for Evidence-based Practice

Access to reliable and appropriate evidence is required for evidence-based practice. Yet for the work of donor relations and stewardship, there is an issue larger than access that must first be addressed: There is a limited volume of research in the field. In order to generate more evidence, nonprofit organizations must demonstrate a willingness to conduct and share research, develop a basic understanding of research methods and allow time for a meaningful volume of evidence to build.

Institutional Willingness to Conduct and/or Share Research

There are specific factors that may be limiting an organization's willingness to conduct and/or share research. According to Steve McLaughlin, author of "Data Driven Nonprofits," "Any strategy or plan to use big data is likely to be devoured if the culture of an organization is not supportive. As it turns out, culture plays an important role in the ability for nonprofit organizations to use data to their advantage."[24] McLaughlin stresses the importance of having an organization that supports data and technology as well as behaviors, habits and mindsets that facilitate the integration of measurement and analysis.

Figure 1: Data-Driven Culture Types

Type	Characteristics
Culture of Champions	There is support from the organization's leadership and motivational members of the staff that embrace being data driven.
Culture of Testing	There is a belief that measurable improvements can be made through iteration and testing throughout the organization.
Culture of Change	There is a natural curiosity to try new things and take calculated risks to adapt to changing conditions in the nonprofit sector.
Culture of Sharing	There is a willingness to share data and collaborate to achieve better results and a disdain for creating or maintaining data silos.
Culture of Growth	There is a focus on continuous improvement where success is measurable and visible across all levels of the organization.
Culture of Agile	There is empowerment of people to interact and collaborate that allows them to adapt and respond to a changing environment.
Culture of Data	There is a high value placed on data and it is a fundamental driving force to support and validate decisions at the nonprofit.

Of the seven types of cultures McLaughlin identifies,[25] three are most conducive to evidence-based improvements in the practice of donor relations and stewardship: the culture of testing, change or sharing. The culture of testing naturally puts faith in the idea that improvement is possible, and integrates the review, revise and retry pattern inherent to the iterative design process. The culture of change assumes that outside circumstances will change and adaptation will be required. The culture of sharing values collaboration and avoids segregating data or the findings of specific research.

Commitment to Program Evaluation and Iteration

Unless there is a willingness to evaluate the donor relations and stewardship program and possibly make changes, there is no reason to conduct data analysis or donor analysis. Program evaluation and evidence-gathering regarding donors go hand-in-hand. Evidence about donors is used to design program changes and further evaluation is a part of any iterative design process.

As stated by the National Science Foundation, "Evaluation is not separate from, or added to, a project, but rather is part of it from the beginning. Planning, evaluation and implementation are all parts of a whole, and they work best when they work together."[26] Evaluation is a means of deciding if current practice is actually effective. One does not measure just for the sake of measuring; one measures in order to better manage the donor relations programs, to make the program better. Changes in the program are successful if donors are more confident in the organization, better informed about the impact of their giving and increasingly engaged with the organization in ways that lead to additional giving. As long as there is room for improvement, there is a call for further iteration.

The Basic Tools of Research

This article provides only a basic overview of research concepts. The assistance of a well-trained analyst may be warranted for more complex research projects. Larger institutions employ researchers and data analysts on the advancement team, although their work may be focused on fundraising strategy more than donor relations and stewardship. Some organizations choose to hire a consultant or research firm, especially for more complex projects. An expert researcher will be invaluable in designing the research method, managing large or complex data, conducting an objective analysis and constructing the resulting findings report. The researcher may be able to suggest transferable research methodology from other fields and provide avenues for presenting the research for peer review and publication.

The Importance of the Hypothesis

Brett Lantz, data scientist in the University of Michigan Office of University Development, provided an overview of data analysis from the perspective of development operations as a part of the "Analytics Cookbook" webinar.[27] When asked what research method he would emphasize for stewardship purposes, he said, "I would suggest starting with understanding statistical hypothesis testing and experimental design," citing examples from public health epidemiology and the social sciences. "In a statistical study, the hypothesis informs how the experiment is designed, which implies that it is very important to have a hypothesis about the outcome before testing an intervention," says Lantz. The hypothesis may be an assumption with a loosely defined outcome. For example, a hypothesis can be as simple as, "The new tactic (you fill in what it is) will lead to a change in something else (you don't have to know exactly what)." Despite beginning with a hypothesis, one should avoid presumptions that the hypothesis is true. If the research is prejudiced about the implications of the findings — to the positive or the negative — the prejudice alone can affect interpretation of the evidence.

Understanding Research Models

Research requires a preliminary understanding of which donors will be studied, what about those donors will be measured and what data collection techniques will be used. Many of the terms presented in this article and others in this book are defined in the Glossary on the Journal website, www.journaldrs.com. Additions and comments are welcomed.

It is important to understand the type of data to be gathered and how the research will be conducted. These factors affect the design of the research "instrument," the format in which the hypothesis is tested. The instrument structure influences the way the results are scaled and reported.

Measurement, at its most basic, is the assigning of numbers or symbols to characteristics of "objects," the individual data points identified through formal research. These assignments are made according to rules established ahead of time and typically maintained over time.

Objects can be divided into three broad categories:

- Information that has no statistical importance, such as the name and address of a donor
- Information that may be used as supplied in order to quantify, map or scale the object, such as graduation year or gift amount
- Information that is assigned a number or symbol in order to quantify, map or scale the object, such as a preference stated by a donor

The process of placing objects on a continuum with respect to an assigned number or symbol is called scaling. Scales are an effective means of providing comparisons and reporting on the comparative measurement of multiple objects. Quantitative data, like gift amount or event attendance is relatively easy to scale, even in large quantities. Qualitative data must be assigned a number or symbol for analysis.

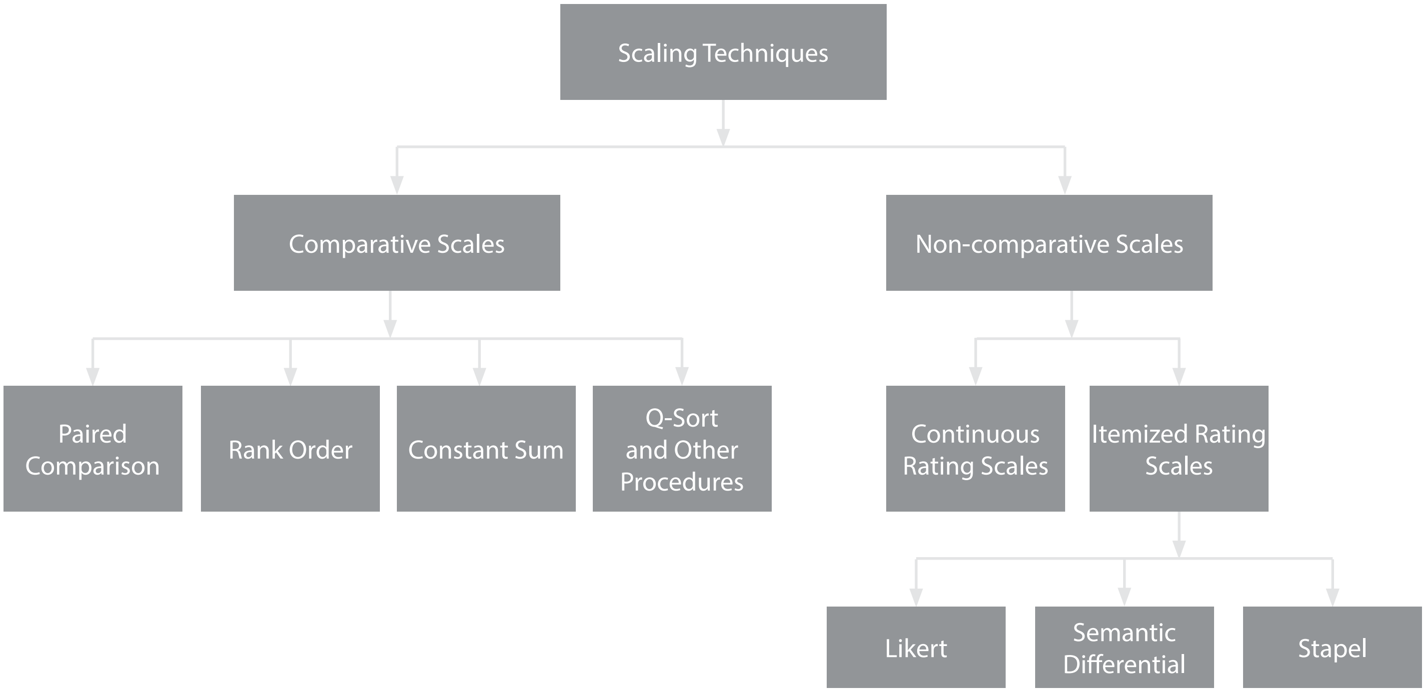
Scaling techniques are divided into two categories: comparative and non-comparative. A paired comparison test, like a taste test, is easily understood and requires fewer theoretical assumptions. A constant sum scale asks respondents to allocate a constant sum of units, such as 100 points total, to the attributes of a product, service or experience. This is especially effective for scaling relative preference or other subjective data with multiple aspects.

Figure 2: Scale Types

Scale Type	Nominal	Ordinal	Interval	Ratio
Definition	The simplest scale. It does not express any values or relationships and is often referred to as a categorical scale. The numbers involved have arithmetic properties and serve only as labels.	Involves the ranging of items along the continuum of characteristics being scaled. This is a frequently used scale for satisfaction and attitudinal research.	May be a number or semantic and allow for the calculation of averages and dispersion, since the attributes are measured in numerically equal distances on the scale.	The properties of an interval scale together with an absolute zero point, allowing for a fixed ratio. For example, the number of donors making a gift in the last year is a ratio scale because it can be compared to any other year.
Purpose	Identify and classify objects.	Indicate relative position of objects.	Indicate differences.	Indicate ratios.
Permissible Statistics	• Percentage • Mode	• Percentile • Median	• Mean • Range • Standard deviation	• Geometric Mean • All
Advancement-Specific Examples	• Donor ID • Gender • Age • Degree	• Quality • Value	• Total gifts to date • Preference	• # Gifts/Period • # Events/Period

Another method often used for rating opinion is the continuous rating scale (worst to best, for example). The Likert Scale uses "strongly disagree to strongly agree" language. The Stapel Scale presents a single concept at the center of a scale ranging from -5 to 5 and is helpful in avoiding semantic issues and inherent bias.

Figure 3: Scaling Techniques



Research Techniques

There are many ways that data can be gathered and then measured, reported and evaluated. Depending on the goals, resources and skill level of the research team, there are a number of tools that may prove useful. These are listed here, not as a how-to guide, but as an indicator of the considerations that will need to be put into play as the research plan is constructed.

Figure 4: Terminology Frequently Used in Donor Relations and Stewardship Research

Model	Description	Likely Uses
Gathering Objective Donor Data		
Census	A count of a population and its characteristics *Often be conducted via reporting from donor records*	• Quantifying any number of demographic data points
Mapping	Diagramming data points across conceptual plane or landscape to indicate data concentrations *Often conducted via reporting from donor records*	• Locating alumni on a geographical map • Diagramming the correlation between grateful patient giving as compared to total patient population by service line
Poll	Querying respondent choices from a set list of choices *Requires donor participation*	• Asking donors to select a preferred date and time for an upcoming event • Asking donors to state a preferred method for receiving information from the organization
Datagraphic Survey	Gathering objective data by means of a standardized set of questions asked of donors and/or prospects. Questions typically have a multiple-choice or fill-in-the-blank format. Long, free-response questions are not appropriate for a datagraphic survey. *Requires donor participation*	• Updating of donor demographic information, such as email address, mailing address, communication format preference, preferred salutation or recognition listing • Avoid asking questions that indicate a lack of awareness of the details of a donor's giving history or previously stated preferences or information. Asking for information the donor perceives as already on record undermines personalization efforts and erodes trust in the organization. Asking for confirmation of the record is a better approach.
Gathering Donor Opinion		
Opinion Survey	Gathering subjective preference or opinion by means of a standardized set of questions asked of donors and/or prospects. Question format may vary, depending on the scoring model. Long, free-response questions may be included, but they require more effort to score and analyze. *Requires donor participation*	• Defining of donor preferences and values. Beneficial in gauging preference for specific activities or methods of delivering information. • Structure of the questions should be informed by the various scaling models. • Question format can greatly affect the reliability of the answers received. Malcolm Gladwell compiles a number of interesting findings; watch at www.youtube.com/watch?v=964va3YwPms
Anecdote	Short narrative delivered by an individual to convey a meaning greater than the story itself. An anecdote is often unsolicited feedback that is likely to have influence on decisions made regarding the deliverables for some or all donors. Anecdotes are not technically research but can lead to good research topics. *Requires donor participation*	• A single anecdote is not research. However, anecdotes are worthy of careful record-keeping. • Feedback from the donor should be recorded in the donor record as a contact report. • Similar feedback from multiple donors is an indication that formal research on the topic may be warranted. • Examples include - "The event is too long." - "We've been asked to give again too soon." - "We'd rather receive the information by email." - "The luncheon is the best way to recognize donors."

Model	Description	Likely Uses
Interview	Any methodical process of gathering measurable information from multiple individuals, usually through one-on-one meetings. The data gathering conversation must be structured so that the answers remain comparable. A hypothesis should be in place with the circumstances, question-asking and record-keeping controlled. In many situations, a trained interviewer is used to keep the interview process objective. Answers given during an interview are not anecdotal. They are feedback that comes in response to a specific question in a controlled situation. If the answer does not apply to the question, it is still part of the answer, although it may be scaled or evaluated differently. *Requires donor participation*	• Used for improving the quality of responses, especially for complex questions • An interview has the potential to serve as a stewardship interaction. Many donors appreciate the investment made in soliciting their feedback in a more formal, interactive way. • Examples include - defining donor expectations for stewardship and donor relations - identifying donor values - gathering donor feedback for program improvements
Focus Group	Any methodical process of gathering measurable information from a group. Groups may be planned based on shared characteristics. The data gathering process must be structured so that the answers pertain to the research hypothesis. Careful record-keeping is required. In many situations, a trained facilitator is used. *Requires donor participation*	• Used for improving the quality of responses, especially for complex questions. The facilitator works to ensure all participants have equal opportunity to contribute. • Focus groups may be questioned multiple times during the evolution of a complex program change. • A focus group might - set baseline response to a specific question - convey awareness of and reaction to a change in practice or policy - provide feedback on possible next actions
	Donor Attitude Testing	
Aided Recall	Questions asked through any format that are intended to gather subject response by mentioning the issue under evaluation. Care must be taken to ask the question without any suggestion of the appropriate response.	• Measuring donor response to a specific event or activity • Example: "Please rate the usefulness of the annual report."
Unaided Recall	Questions asked through any format that are intended to gather subject response without the aid of mentioning the issue under evaluation. This tests the relative awareness of the research issue as well as the attitude toward the issue.	• Measuring donor awareness of and response to a specific event or activity • Example: "Please identify the last publication you received from us and rate its usefulness."
Perception Mapping	A multi-step process for identifying what aspects of a brand, program or issue are important to your constituents, followed by performance evaluation specific to the top priorities of those donors. Often compares the ranking of multiple program components against one or more donor values.	• Used for providing contextual insight into complex issues, like impact reporting, recognition or engagement

Model	Description	Likely Uses
Measuring Donor Behavior		
Direct Engagement	Objective measures of donor behavior that are easily quantified and directly reflective of interaction with the donor	• Event attendance
Indirect Engagement	Objective measures of donor behavior that are easily quantified but indirectly reflective of interaction with the donor	• Social media
Proxy Behaviors	Objective measures of donor behavior that are considered reflective of supposed affinity (or lack thereof) with the donor	• Attendance at a third-party event in support of the organization
Predicting Donor Behavior		
Predictive Scoring	A single measure that is used to predict donor giving behavior	• Capacity: the donor's wealth and therefore ability to give • Affinity: the donor's known relationship with the organization and therefore likelihood of giving
Predictive Models	Multiple measures layered into a research model. The layering identifies donors with high scores in multiple predictive models, thereby increasing the likelihood of an accurate prediction.	• A scoring model that combines affinity, capacity and engagement measures • See Mark Koenig interview, Layering Multiple Measurement Methods to Build the Donor Pipeline in the *Journal of Donor Relations & Stewardship Book 2: Measurement,* pages 151-167.
Profile	A profile covers basic demographic information, such as age, gender, level of education, area of study, donor status, geography, income and past giving history. Profiles may be used for analyzing variables within otherwise similar groups of donors.	• Identification of top donor prospects or candidates for key volunteer roles
Avatar	An avatar is a detailed profile of an imagined, ideal donor. This profile includes the demographic information and incorporates giving and engagement behaviors. As more information is available, an avatar is also assigned preferences or behaviors typical of this type of donor but not directly related to their philanthropy. The more detailed the avatar, the more effective it is as a predictor of actual donor behavior.	• Often focused on the highest giving levels, seeking insight into longterm giving history and engagement preferences • With the advent of online giving, avatars help guide strategies for other donor categories, especially those where there is little personal interaction.
Journey Mapping	Journey mapping tracks customer or donor experience by plotting theoretical interactions between the individual and organization to better understand the opportunities to manage those interactions.	• Used in recording moves management for key stakeholder groups

Model	Description	Likely Uses
Product and Service Testing		
Variable Testing	Also known as AB Testing, variant testing is any experiment in which two or more variations are tested in a randomized population of donors. This type of research is used for testing behavior in response to the variation, not opinion about the set of options.	• Identifying the relative effectiveness of first-time giver letters to first-time giver phone calls
Maximum Difference Scoring	Questions designed such that participants rank a supplied list of products, services or features	• Situations where the mean and/or average preferences of a group are required, such as the relative placed on a group of individual events
Evaluation of Programs, Products or Services		
Program Evaluation	Determining the value of a collection of projects by looking across projects, and examining the utility of the activities and strategies employed. Frequently, a full-blown program evaluation may be deferred until the program is well underway, but selected data on interim progress are collected on an annual basis.	• Review of the donor relations and stewardship program for evaluation in terms of efficacy and/or efficiency
Project Evaluation	A focus on an individual project under the umbrella of the program. The evaluation provides information to improve the project as it develops and progresses. Information is collected to help determine whether the project is proceeding as planned and whether it is meeting its stated program goals and project objectives according to the proposed timeline. Ideally, the evaluation design is part of the project proposal, and data collection begins soon after the project is funded. Data are examined on an ongoing basis to determine if current operations are satisfactory or if some modifications might be needed.	• Review of the printed honor roll to fully understand process and resources invested for evaluation in terms of efficacy and/or efficiency
Formative Evaluation	An assessment of initial and ongoing project activities for the purpose of identifying effectiveness and implementing possible improvements.	• Review of a new mailing to assess process, resources invested and initial response rates
Summative Evaluation	An assessment of the quality and impact of a fully implemented project.	• Review of donor response to a invitation-only lecture to assess donor engagement

Taking Action in Response to Evidence Gathered

Improvement in the donor relations program, the products and services delivered to donors to enhance their philanthropic commitment, is the goal of research, not the data itself. Evidence-based research should lead to action and be a crucial step in the iterative design process. Research is conducted to provide evidence about what works and to understand why. Lantz explains that actionable results from the analytics exercise combine pure analysis (measurement, reports and statistical models) with pure synthesis (brainstorming, speculation and productive storytelling).[28] Together, analysis and synthesis provide an evidence-based narrative that people can understand, affirm and agree to act on. That narrative provides the basis for informed decision-making and a multifaceted forecast based on an understanding of why the data is what it is. Evidence-based narrative informs the iterative design of the products and services used to motivate greater philanthropic support.

One should always be open to surprises in the research, both in terms of data and interpretation. As stated by the National Science Foundation, "Evaluation frequently provides new insights or new information that was not anticipated. What are frequently called 'unanticipated consequences' of a program are among the most useful outcomes of the assessment enterprise."[29]

In the case of donor relations and stewardship, there are three concepts that inform the way in which evidence is applied to a specific problem: segmentation of the findings, preparing for rapid response and the creation of highly efficient distribution channels.

1. Segmentation

Segmentation of the constituent population is not a new concept. Within donor relations and stewardship practice, it often implies subdividing the population by age, geography, area of study, gift type or gift amount. Given the variety of circumstances presented by individual donors, it is also important to define the population for which the evidence is true.

True of All Donors — the qualities, values, preferences and behaviors considered typical of donors regardless of status, age, gift amount or type of organization supported. This research demands evidence from as many sources as possible. A well-known example is the findings of the Burk Donor Survey, which has been conducted annually since 1997.

True of All of Our Donors — the qualities, values, preferences and behaviors considered typical of all donors to a specific institution.

True of Donors Like This — the qualities, values, preferences and behaviors considered typical of a defined subset of donors; may be applied to one institution or institutions demonstrating similar characteristics. This logic is used in creating profiles for predictive modeling.

True of This Donor — the qualities, values, preferences and behaviors of a specific donor. This information is stored in the donor record and used to develop specific engagement and stewardship activities for this donor.

2. Rapid Response

Many institutions now claim to be data-driven. This is a broad claim that can have any number of implications. While there is a move toward dynamic (or real-time) data gathering and analysis, in most situations research is conducted on an infrequent and irregular basis. No matter what the circumstances, it is important that the institution be ready to act quickly on the evidence that they find or generate.

One reason is obvious: Quick action reduces the possibility that circumstances will change before the evidence can be applied. A second reason is more specific to the situation of the donor relations and stewardship professional. In most instances, the donor is aware that data is being gathered. Once a donor has been asked for his or her values, preferences or opinion, the organization should be ready to report and act on the findings in a timely fashion. The research process contributes to the donor's experience with the organization, so care should be taken to make sure that their experience is a positive one.

3. Distribution Channels

Evidence should be efficiently shared across the institution and, when appropriate, with other institutions. Doing so provides the most effective and consistent relationship with the donor and improves the ability of all members of the organization to support the donor experience. Evidence-based research is ultimately about providing practical benefit to donors and the institutions and missions they support. Borrowing words from Harlan Krumholz, a cardiologist and the Harold H. Hines Jr. Professor of Medicine at Yale School of Medicine, "We have a moral imperative to share what we learn [through research]. We need the systems in place that guarantee researchers adhere to the final step of the scientific method and share what they find."[30]

Forecasting the Future

When asked, "What do you imagine being able to do in terms of stewardship analytics a decade from now and what will make that possible?" Lantz answered, "Organizations are compiling more data about individual donor interactions getting better at understanding the data. I am hoping that we will be a great deal more nimble in the future with regard to testing and measuring our impact. This hope is based on the trend toward 'micro' transactions, which create more frequent interactions between donors and organizations, as well as the fact that we're getting much better at collecting data and meta-data (data about data). Everything seems to be becoming much more granular, which will give us more opportunities to experiment and see the immediate impact of our experiments. This is an exciting future from my perspective!"[31]

Conclusion

As a profession, donor relations and stewardship has evolved to the point where the efficacy of the work is accepted on a conceptual level. Most fundraisers agree that a better donor experience — confidence in, affinity for and engagement with the organization — leads to additional giving. Now, assessment of individual tactics in preparation for iteration and further planning of the donor relations program is required. Furthermore, there is significant opportunity to create shared knowledge based on research evidence to inform donor relations and stewardship program planning. Organizations should benefit from the principles of evidence-based practice used in other fields, especially those that involve interaction with a specific constituency. Evidence-based practice balances the expertise of the practitioner, the values and preferences of the donor and appropriate evidence gathered through research to better inform decision-making.

Fundraising organizations implement, maintain, evaluate and improve the practices used to keep donors appreciated, informed and engaged. As such, donor relations and stewardship practitioners should focus measurement and assessment activities on those practices that correlate to donor behavior more than donor opinion. Donor behavior should be studied in correlation to the deliverables of the donor relations and stewardship program. Practice may be informed by the findings from other organizations or paid resources that would be true of all donors, yet care must be taken to identify the characteristics specific to donors to the subject organization. Advancement teams must collaborate with other areas of institutional advancement to make the best use of their research and analysis efforts and provide frequent and timely access to information. This coordination of efforts will contribute to a more comprehensive and actionable analysis of donors, and the programs of products and services designed to engage and motivate them.

Given the volume of donors, available technology and commitment of so many practitioners, nonprofits are able to measure with more efficiently and accuracy than ever before. Yet, as designers of the donor experience, organizations must acknowledge that research is not the ultimate goal. Research is merely a tool for providing knowledge that informs action.

Endnotes

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