What To Do When A Great Prospect Goes Quiet

They're in your campaign gift table for six or seven figures and all signs point to "go."

The giving trend is consistent; the relationship history is all love; and your research tells you they're capable of something much bigger.

But all of a sudden, you can't get a response from them.

Every therapist in America will us tell us we're "not supposed to catastrophize," but when was the last time they were responsible for raising $50 million?

In truth, unexplained donor silence is no real surprise at all. Quite the opposite – it's common enough that you need a playbook.

Your Donor Silence Playbook

When communications dry up, you have plenty of plays to call and angles to try. We've pulled together our favorites here, arranged in roughly ascending order of "level of reaction."

You won't need them all, and your relationship instincts will tell you where to start and how to progress through them.

1. Make no assumptions. Ok, maybe the therapists were right: don't fill in all that silence with any big mental story about how you lost this donor's faith, how some little interaction at a recent event put them off, or whatever else our vivid imaginations might cook up. **This is all just very normal, and it's rarely the end of the story.** Most often, no response just means "not right now" or "not the right moment"— especially at the major gift level.

2. Look and listen for things that might be pulling them away. Are there milestones you've heard them mention in previous conversations (weddings, graduations, etc.) that might be taking all their energy right now? Are they involved with other organizations that might have a gala or other "big lift" activity taking up their volunteer/donor time? Did they recently retire, take on a new job, or go through a merger? You probably have a few natural allies you could ask discreetly enough, and **you might learn something that gives you a nice peg for highly personalized outreach when the moment seems right.**

3. Review the tape. Are there clues in your past engagement with them that tell you what might work or not work? Has one communications method worked better than another? Have they only ever *really* responded to one specific person? Do they not seem to want to engage unless you have a specific project or opportunity for them? Oh and...have you only reached out to them when you need something?

4. Remember that they're probably still listening/reading. Most prospects—especially those you have a good relationship with—still see what you're sending and read along even if they don't respond. That doesn't mean you should spam them with more-than-usual outreach, but it does mean you can **keep sharing updates and stewardship communications across a decent-sized gap in responsiveness** without thinking much of it.

5. Try a different channel. Who among us isn't drowning in email? It might be time to pick up the phone and leave a message in your actual human voice. Or look for a natural chance to run into them somewhere (easier in some mission spaces than others). Or send them a good old-fashioned thank-you note or hand-written card tucked in with your next issue of the magazine or annual report.

6. Ask them directly how they'd prefer to be engaged. We can go an awful long way on assumptions when we could just ask outright. You might handle this yourself or through the staff relationship manager if that's not you, or you can call in a natural partner (board member/volunteer, someone else in leadership). **Asking conveys respect and often yields a bit more information beyond the immediate question.**

7. Call in an ally. Ideally, this is a peer or community leader that your donor respects and has some rapport with. They're more likely to get a response for the simple reason that it's harder to politely ignore someone who isn't being paid to contact you. And if there's some issue or question they're hesitant to share directly with staff or leadership, this person might be able to suss it out and establish a next step that your donor is comfortable with. That said, this could also be your CEO/Executive Director if they have a solid relationship with the prospect.

8. Ask for something easy. If you're getting the "not now" signal on the *big* ask, don't stall out the whole dialogue—find a way to keep the string of yeses going with simpler asks. Maybe it's asking for an event sponsorship, an introduction to someone in their network, or a smaller gift to a special project on a shorter timeframe. Maybe it's just agreeing on a next step—a meeting with your leadership, an invite to a special experience, their feedback on an early draft of the case for support. Anything that keeps the line open and gives you another chance to say thank you or share something interesting.

9. Invite them to something special. We're not thinking of your gala here (though we're sure it's very special) – this should be something more intimate. Ideally, this is a small-group experience or high-touch gathering with a carefully curated invite list and some sort of hook: a memorable location or a revered host, a special behind the scenes/VIP element, a sneak peek at plans that aren't public yet, a genuine invitation to give feedback and shape something important. **This takes planning, but can be well worth it if it allows you to energize multiple key relationships at once.** For your frozen prospect, it can be just the thing you need to bring your organization back to top of mind and reopen the lines of communication. The invite should feel personal and ideally come from a friend. And if you're in a campaign, the best of these experiences are *repeatable*: build out a stellar program once, then run it multiple times as an early cultivation and qualification experience that makes your 200+ prospect list a little more manageable.

10. Move on for now. Pull this lever last of course, but at some point it's time to focus your limited time and staff capacity on more promising prospects. **This usually doesn't mean forever.** Consider moving them into a more stewardship-oriented communications cycle that keeps information and gratitude flowing, and then try knocking on the individual cultivation door again in three to six months with a fresh approach and perhaps a new messenger. If you strike out again, it might be time to start thinking of them as a high-level annual giving prospect for the foreseeable. Unless they tell you definitively, don't write off their future potential entirely: Any number of circumstances could put a major gift back in play (retirement, life and family milestones, seeing other peers step up with major gifts, etc.).

You've Got This

Even in the most uncomfortable silence, you still have options.

So take a beat, put your heads together, and re-assess the situation. Try some things you haven't tried before, and change up what might not be working.

Call some plays and see where things go.

Everything You Need.

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