

# Destinations, Not Maps:

## Turning Your Strategic Plan into a Visionary Case for Giving

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### Introduction

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**There's a big difference between a road map, a journey, and a destination—but it's easy to lose sight of when you're the mapmaker.**

After all, when you've spent months head-down in the painstaking work of cartography, it can be hard to look back up. And you know what it all means, anyway: the soaring mountain each squiggle represents, the wondrous city behind each tiny black dot.

That doesn't mean the map is meaningless: you can only get somewhere if you know the way, of course. But if you're trying to sell someone else on the trip? You don't start by showing them the map. You need a guidebook. A travel brochure. A vision you can paint—and a story you can tell.

All of this is a long, indirect way of saying what we in the nonprofit sector all know but too rarely appreciate: while your strategic plan and your case for support may be closely related, they're also strikingly distinct. As distinct as a road map and a guidebook. And if you want to raise the big gifts that move your organization and your mission forward like never before, you can't focus on the map: you need to invite your donors on a journey and sell them on a destination.

So let's dig in on what it means to turn your strategic plan into a case for strategic giving—and your big ideas into bigger gifts.

### Why does it matter?

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Your strategic plan is important. It may even be transformational. But if you can't bring donors in, you won't turn that plan into reality. And as much as donors appreciate clearly defined plans and a rationally sound case, it's ultimately big visions, human impact, and the opportunity to make a real difference that drive bigger giving.



If you can translate your strategic priorities into a compelling case for support, you can:

- **Elevate your plans**, turning dry reading into a vivid vision that people can understand, remember, share with others, and feel inspired to support.
- **Drive larger, more flexible gifts** that bring your boldest aspirations to life—and take your impact to a new level.
- **Foster deeper relationships** by telling a story that links past generosity to future goals—revealing how every piece fits together and deepening commitment to your mission.

## What makes it different?

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If a strategic plan is your road map, a case for support is all about the journey and the destination. Instead of “What are we going to do, and how?”, you need to start by asking:

- **What’s the why?** Shifting from strategic plan to case for support means shifting your emphasis from the what to the why. Why is this work important? Why is it necessary? Why is it urgent? Focus first on the big ideas, bold aspirations, and real-world needs that give each strategy and each tactic its impetus, urgency, and significance—and *then* bring donors into your plans.
- **What’s the difference?** Before knowing how you’ll get there, donors need to know where you’re going. A good case for support is about impact, impact, impact: what your strategies add up to, how they advance your mission, and most of all, the difference they will make in the world beyond your organization.
- **Where’s the donor?** A strategic plan is all about what *you* will do; a case for support is about what *donors* can do *through* your organization. Make philanthropy an explicit part of the story and each donor a partner in your plans: Why does your plan require outside funding, rather than only internal operational shifts? What new work or new horizons can philanthropy make possible? What opportunities are you offering donors to meet a need, actualize their values and passions, and create lasting, transformational change?

## How do you do it?

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Done well, translating a strategic plan into a case for support requires more than edits or rewrites; it takes a process. So take a beat, step back, and make sure you’re putting as much thought and care into your case as you put into the strategic plan it will help fund.

- **Start with your audience—and the people who know them best.** What motivates your donors to give today? What excites them most? What giving opportunities inspire the greatest investment? What do they struggle to understand—and where will you need to bring them along or introduce new ideas? Make sure you talk with and strategize alongside your gift officers and relationship managers—and get the unique insider/outsider perspective of board members and close funders—before putting pen to paper. Let their insights guide you.



- **Make program staff your partners—and don't be afraid to push a little more.** The colleagues who will implement each piece of your strategic plan know it most intimately—and it's up to you to unearth the gems in the landscape they've laid. What does each piece of the strategic plan mean in practice? Can they share stories or examples? Which priorities represent different aspects of a single stream of work, and which are truly distinct? What does success look like, and what difference will each activity make on the road to success? What would they do with an extra \$100,000? \$1 million? \$10 million? Bonus: by bringing program officers and staff leaders into the case development process, you'll help them understand and own the case for support—and prepare them to be better advocates and storytellers in future donor engagement.
- **The substance is the same; the story doesn't have to be.** When you're ready to write, bring a fresh perspective to the substance of your plans, keeping the donor audience front of mind and holding yourself accountable to the story you're shaping, rather than the plan you're drawing from. Lead with the major themes and big ideas. Foreground vision and outcomes, and include plans and strategies only as they support the big picture or provide inroads for donors. Don't be afraid to reorganize your work around donor interests, rather than sticking to your strategic pillars. Lift up the signature projects—the ones that show your multifaceted plans in action, stick in donors' minds, and can galvanize investment—and find ways to roll up smaller items into bigger opportunities. Consider grouping related tactics as an Initiative, Fund, Program, etc. for donors to invest in, and emphasize the major impact these flexible funds make possible, more than the constituent elements. And of course, make sure your donors see themselves—and philanthropy more generally—in the story.

Your strategic plan provides a critical road map. **Equally critical is the case for support's call to hop aboard.**

By understanding the difference between the two and taking the time to translate your thoughtful strategic plan into an irresistible case for support, you can inspire donors to join you on your journey—and power the movement you need to drive your mission forward toward a better world.



#### About the Author

An experienced writer, facilitator, and big-picture thinker, [Pat Chesnut](#) works with nonprofit organizations to clarify their visions—and to shape the ideas and messages that help advance them. Since 2010, Pat has worked with hundreds of clients across the country and throughout the nonprofit sector, bringing his enthusiasm, creative mindset, and commitment to flexible, genuine partnership to each engagement.

A native Midwesterner and longtime Chicagoan with a degree in American History and Literature from Harvard University, Pat now lives, reads, hikes, explores, and works from his home in Cumberland, Maine.

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