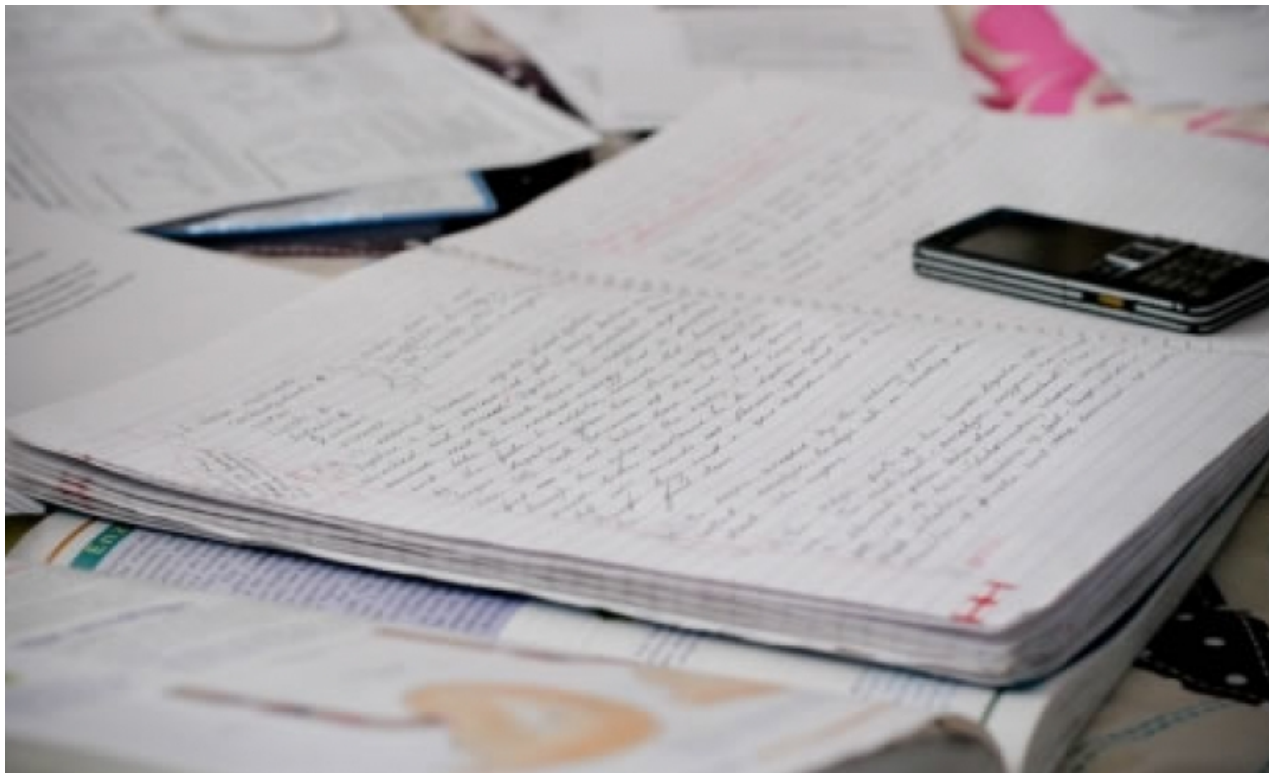


## Donor retention starts at home



03/02/2017 - 17:25



What makes a good donor retention? Danielle Johnson-Vermenton shares her knowledge with us through this opinion article.

### Danielle Johnson-Vermenton

Submitted by iwth.org on Fri, 03/03/2017 - 09:18

**Description:**

Speaker, blogger, author and passionate fundraiser. She is a Principal Consultant at Blackbaud and has helped hundreds of organizations in the US and Canada raise millions online.

**Vertical photo:**



Square photo:



Twitter: [@DJVermenton](https://twitter.com/DJVermenton)



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Year after year, report after report we know that investing **time, talent and money** to retain your supporters has better returns than spending that same time (and a lot more money) finding new supporters.

Where does **retention** start? Does it start with a great "thank you" letter or email? Is it a phone call from leadership? Maybe it's a written down process with giving levels and timing. To ensure the best chance of success, a solid donor retention strategy needs a few key ingredients.

## **First ingredient – You**

Donor retention starts at home. It starts with the staff, leadership and board. From the top down and bottom up, organizations need a culture of stewardship with an eye on retention. **Everyone has to believe in the mission**, in the services, and in the organization for the stewardship effort to be successful. That passion is what will fuel a great plan, enable staff to cultivate moving stories and stay committed to the effort.

Now let's talk about the plan - the nuts and bolts for making this happen.

## **Add a sprinkle of recognition**

Retention is influenced by several things. First you need a process that can quickly **recognize** and track that a donation has been made. For most organizations that is a thank you communication within 48 hours. That isn't always possible depending upon resources, but a donor should wait no more than a few days to get an **acknowledgment** that their gift was received. Wait, I am not done with the acknowledgement, the content of the TY is not a receipt. That is secondary, it is assumed there will be a receipt. The recognition that a gift has been made should be a personable and sincere thank you. Even if it's a form letter or email, it should acknowledge the investment in the mission and that the donor is making a difference. It doesn't matter what your mission is, every organization can craft a compelling and moving 2-3 sentence story. If you don't have one, spend time meeting with program staff to get one.

Finally, don't forget to include an easy call to action. While the donor is feeling great about their donation, give them a next step. It could be an offer to learn more by watching a video, to follow your organization on social, or check out the events calendar.

## **Add two cups of stewardship**

Let's talk about **stewardship**. It is different than recognition. Stewardship is the process by which you are going to communicate and educate your supporter about how their gift is being used and how else they can get involved. It's the opportunity to understand the impact and do something else for the mission.

Stewardship should come in many forms and on many channels. If someone has given a gift online and they want to receive email communication, then implement a donor welcome series. If it's a major donor, invite them on a tour or to grab a cup of tea or coffee. For organizations that have international donors, have a conference call or a live Facebook video. Whatever it is - invite your supporter to have a mission moment through personal interaction, that is the difference between recognition and stewardship.

Stewardship is the long, thoughtful process between the gift and the next gift. It is tangible, it needs to bring the supporter closer to your mission with stories, interaction, and actions so that the next gift is not far around the corner.

With so many choices for how you can recognize and **steward supporters** - write the plan down. Figure out what actions happen and when, who on the staff will handle the tasks and how you'll track and measure success. You've got a full plate of work to do inside and outside the office, writing the plan down helps everyone stay on track and plan accordingly.

I could get into the numbers about why this investment of time, staff and money makes sense. I could provide a report, but I don't need to. This is common sense and it's the right thing to do if you're in the business of relationship raising. In order to grow the mission, you need a **sustainable pipeline of support** – that comes from

people, and just like any business you need a plan to recognize and steward their support so they will give again and again.

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