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MYSTERY MONEY

The growing challenge of anonymous & non-responsive donors

April 8, 2026



Introductions



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Overview

Anonymous and non-responsive donors shape more fundraising revenue than you may realize, especially in planned giving. In this session, we'll unpack what's driving the rise of "mystery money," from shifts in donor privacy expectations to the unique dynamics of legacy giving. Drawing on sector insights and real-world examples, we'll explore why so many legacy donors never formally self-identify and how this growing trend is reshaping the way nonprofits think about stewardship and donor engagement.

We'll also examine the practical implications for fundraising teams, including the risks anonymous and unreported gifts create for forecasting, stewardship planning, and donor recognition. Most importantly, you'll leave with practical strategies to navigate this reality: honoring donor anonymity while still building meaningful connections, engaging silent supporters, and building stewardship systems that respect donor privacy while strengthening long-term relationships and revenue.

Agenda

1. Anonymous giving by the numbers
2. Why donors choose anonymity?
3. The unique challenges of anonymous planned gift stewardship
4. Stewardship strategies that honor anonymity
5. Strategies for non-responsive donors
6. Best practices for stewarding anonymous donors

Housekeeping

1. This session is being recorded
2. The recording will be available here later today
 - Later this month, we'll add it to the Learning Hub (accessible in your Partner Portal)
3. The slide deck can be downloaded below
4. This session is CFRE-approved for 1.0 continuing education credit



Anonymous giving by the numbers

Anonymous planned giving by the numbers

- In the world of planned giving, there are two ways to define "anonymous": **donors who never tell the charity while they are alive, and donors whose names are withheld from the public after they pass.**
- Only about **30%** of bequest gifts are known in advance, meaning roughly **70%** are effectively anonymous or uncommunicated until they are received.
- Roughly **66%** of users on FreeWill users opt-in to share their contact information, likely because the "ask" is integrated into the workflow.



Understanding anonymous donor motivations

What do anonymous legacy donors hope to accomplish?

- **64%** make a positive impact
- **32%** support an org that helped them or someone close to them
- **23%** align philanthropy with their personal values

Planned giving pipeline context:

- **65%** of anonymous legacy donors had previously engaged with the org
- **26%** say they will NEVER share their identity, regardless of what you offer



Anonymous planned giving by the numbers

Why did anonymous donors include a gift in their will?

- **40%** want to continue supporting the nonprofit's mission
- **39%** are confident in the organization's long-term impact
- **24%** have a personal connection to the nonprofit
- **20%** want to make a lasting impact on the nonprofit's work
- **6%** want the nonprofit to be honored in their legacy



Understanding anonymous donor motivations

What would make anonymous donors comfortable sharing their identity?

- **40%** guaranteed no future solicitations
- **36%** ability to remain publicly anonymous
- **26%** nothing - will NEVER share their information
- **23%** when they are older and less likely to change their will

What this means for stewardship:

- Build systems that work even when donors never identify themselves
- Solicitation fear is the **#1** barrier - a genuine “no more asks” promise matters most



Another anonymous donor in the portal...

FreeWill partners sometimes ask:


Why do I have so many more anonymous FreeWill bequest donors, than other bequest donors?

The answer is:

You don't.

With FreeWill, you actually see bequests that donors would otherwise not tell you about. You know they exist even though the donor didn't "self-identify"

There aren't necessarily MORE anonymous bequests - there's more VISIBILITY into the 70%

VALUE	DESIGNATION	DONOR 	LOCATION
\$10,000 (... Percentage)	Acme Corporation Sports Department	Anonymous	SDF, FL
\$10,000 (... Percentage)	Acme Corporation Area of Greatest Need	Anonymous	Evanston, IL
\$5,000 (e... Percentage)	Acme Corporation ACME Subprogram 2	Anonymous	Dublin Ohio, OH
\$150,00... Percentage	Acme Corporation Area of Greatest Need	Anonymous + Anonymous	Astoria, CA



Anonymous giving by the numbers

Takeaways:

- ~70% of your planned gift pipeline is invisible until realization
- Most anonymous legacy donors were already engaged with you - they just didn't tell you they were planning a gift
- Privacy and solicitation avoidance are the top reasons donors stay silent - rational choices, not rejections
- Over 1 in 4 anonymous donors will NEVER share their identity
- Your stewardship must reach ALL donors - including those you can see and the many more you never will





Why do donors choose anonymity?

Privacy & self protection

Top reasons why donors chose to remain anonymous:

- **43%** Privacy concerns (top reason)
- **38%** Desire to avoid future solicitations
- **36%** Preference against public recognition
- **25%** Other personal or logistical reasons



Values-based motivations

- Religious or spiritual conviction - many faith traditions explicitly encourage anonymous charity (see next slide)
- Humility and selflessness - focus on the cause, not the credit
- Pleasure from giving itself, not from being thanked
- Embarrassment about wealth level, especially inherited wealth
- Effective altruism mindset - focus on impact, not image



Faith traditions for anonymous giving

Religion	Key Concept	Primary Focus
Judaism	<i>Tzedakah</i>	Anonymous giving is considered a superior form of tzedakah because it protects the recipient from embarrassment and ensures the donor's motives are pure.
Christianity	<i>Secret Alms</i>	Matthew 6:4 “so that your giving may be in secret ”
Islam	<i>Sadaqah</i>	Demonstrating sincerity (<i>Ikhlas</i>) to God alone, not for recognition – emphasizes discretion and humility to Allah. Voluntary, heartfelt charity
Buddhism	<i>Dana</i>	Reducing attachment to the “ego” or “self” – giving without expecting anything in return
Hinduism	<i>Gupt Daan</i>	“Secret Gift” – maximizing spiritual merit (Karma) through silence



Additional privacy motivations

- Keep wealth private from volunteers, board members, colleagues, and family
- Protect against changes in personal or professional relationships
- Security concerns - data breaches and digital privacy in the modern era
- Avoid being publicly attacked for controversial cause support (Silent Donor, 2025)



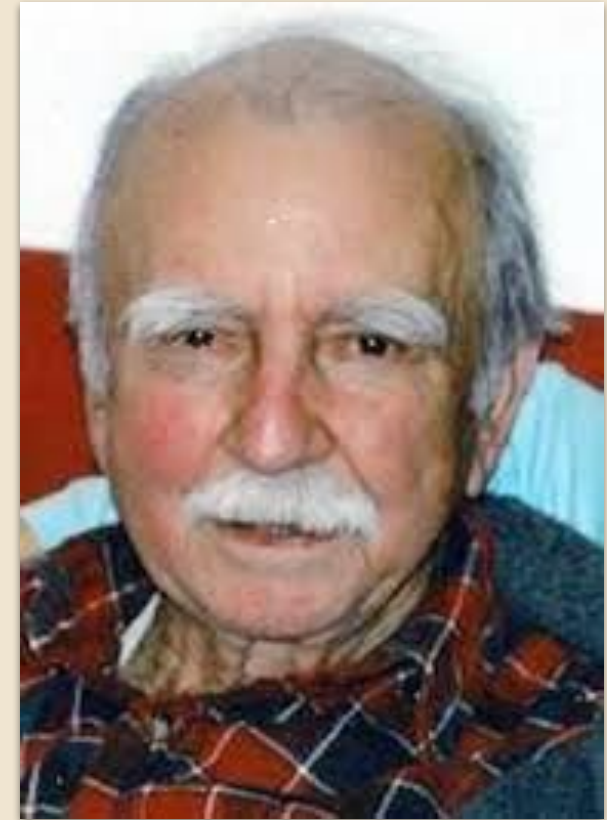
Additional privacy motivations

- Maintain flexibility - fear that disclosure creates a perception of irrevocable commitment
- Estate plan confidentiality - details are deeply personal and often involve family complexity
- Donating has been "transformed into a public and politicized spectacle" - driving donors to seek privacy tools



Examples of “everyday” donors

- Ronald Read – Janitor & Gas Station Attendant – **\$8M bequest**
 - Left \$4.8M to Brattleboro Memorial Hospital and \$1.2M to the local library. Neighbors thought he couldn’t afford a hat. Spent his free time reading the Wall Street Journal and quietly investing in blue-chip stocks for decades.
- Robert Morin – University Librarian – **\$4M bequest to UNH**
 - Drove a 1992 Plymouth and ate frozen dinners. Left his entire estate to the University of New Hampshire. Note: UNH controversially spent \$1M on a football scoreboard – a cautionary tale about honoring donor intent.



Examples of “everyday” donors

- Sylvia Bloom - Legal Secretary - **\$9M bequest**

Worked 67 years at the same NYC law firm, took the subway daily. She mirrored her boss's stock trades in tiny amounts for decades. Left \$6.24M to Henry Street Settlement for low-income student scholarships.



- Grace Groner - Secretary - **\$7M bequest to Lake Forest College**

Lived in a tiny inherited cottage and walked everywhere. In 1935, she bought three shares of Abbott Labs stock for \$180 and never sold. Reinvested dividends for 75 years.





The unique challenges of anonymous planned gift stewardship

The 'unknown until realized' problem

- ~70% of bequests arrive as complete surprises - no opportunity for lifetime relationship building
- No ability to demonstrate impact to the donor during their lifetime
- Missed opportunities for additional gifts, program alignment, or increased commitment
- No feedback loop to understand donor intent - which can lead to serious misuse of funds

Missed stewardship opportunities

- Annual reports, donor walls, or public recognition programs
- Public recognition events or giving societies
- Personalized major gift communications
- Leverage for peer-to-peer solicitation or testimonials



Traditional organizational barriers

Internal organizational struggles:

- Difficulty celebrating wins and demonstrating team success
- Database tracking and anonymity flagging are inconsistently maintained

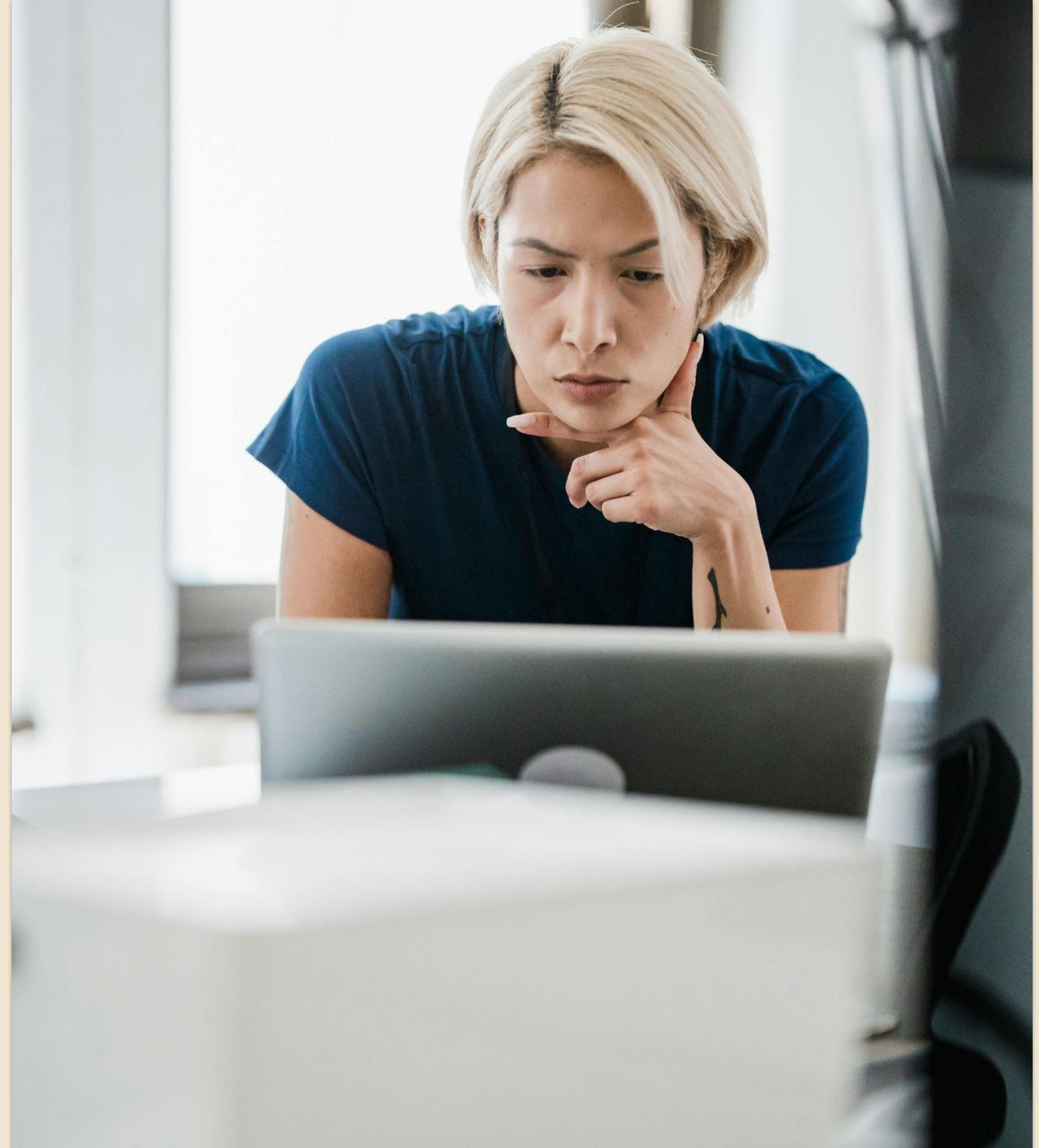
Internal budgeting struggles:

- Surprise bequests create extreme revenue volatility - making multi-year budgeting unreliable
- Development teams risk underreporting program success if anonymous gifts aren't tracked and attributed
- Leadership and board may not see the true value of the planned giving pipeline



Smarter forecasting approaches

- Use 5-year rolling averages to smooth bequest volatility - more reliable than annual point estimates
- Replace single-number forecasts with scenario ranges: conservative, expected, and upside
- Track all bequest revenue - even unexpected arrivals - to demonstrate true program value
- Build a “quiet pipeline” dashboard with aggregate anonymous commitments for board reporting
- Create a documented “Windfall Policy” for how to use large, unexpected and unrestricted gifts





Stewardship strategies that honor anonymity

For the 70% you don't know about (yet)

- (FreeWill donors) Talk to your strategist about ***Anonymous Donor Stewardship***
- Make bequest language easy to find (not buried in a footer), so donors aren't required to contact you; remove friction for those who want to remain anonymous
- Build an attorney outreach program - estate planning attorneys rarely advise clients to notify charities - but trust building can help close the gap
- Create giving opportunities with anonymous options clearly stated upfront



For the 30%: Ask, record, and respect

- Always ask about anonymity preferences at both the donor level AND the gift level
- Some donors want ALL giving anonymous - others only specific gifts
- Document clearly in your database with a consistent, searchable flagging system



For the 30%: Ask, record, and respect

Sample acknowledgment language:

“[Organization] confirms that you wish this gift to remain anonymous, and we will gratefully abide by your wishes. Your generosity - and your trust in us to honor it - mean everything.”

- From the FreeWill survey: 26% of anonymous donors say they will NEVER share their information
- Honor this completely: build your systems around it, not in spite of it





Strategies for non-responsive donors

Non-responsive donors

- When a donor shares their plans to include an estate gift to an organization, but does not respond to stewardship, it is rarely about the organization
- Usually, it is a boundary-setting behavior
- They have completed the big step of creating an estate plan, included you in their legacy, and now want to return to their private life



Why are donors non-responsive?

Donors are non-responsive for many of the same reasons that donors choose anonymity:

- Fear of more solicitations
- Meeting with a “gift officer” can feel out of place for many
- Talking about estate plans (with a stranger) is uncomfortable
- Donors are busy and distracted, like everyone else!
- Happy with impact of their gift and they are not seeking recognition or further engagement



Lead with impact, not the estate plan

- Dr. Russell James's "Words that Work" studies show that "death reminders" activate the avoidance centers of the brain
- Non-responsive donors may be avoiding you because your outreach inadvertently reminds them of their mortality
- The Advice: Use "Family Words" messaging to make the stewardship feel like a celebration of their life and legacy, not a preparation for their death
 - Don't say: *"Regarding your bequest/estate plan..."*
 - Do say: *"Your values are important and deserve to live on,"* or *"Regarding the legacy you are building."*



Respect donor preferences

- In planned giving, silence is often a form of satisfaction
- If a donor stops responding to coffee invites or phone calls, they likely find those interactions too high-pressure or time-consuming
- Ask them directly about their preferences for stewardship
 - Send a one-time, highly personalized message (video or letter) that says:
"We are so honored to be part of your legacy. We want to respect your time and privacy - would you prefer to receive our quarterly impact reports, or should we simply keep your file updated and reach out only for major milestones?"



Organizational stewardship efforts

- If a donor hasn't responded in 18–24 months, move them to a "Quiet Stewardship" track
- Continue sending high-level impact reports and annual thank-yous, but avoid the active meeting requests if it's clear the donor is not interested
- In the world of bequests, no news is typically good news - it means the will is still in the drawer and your organization is still in the will



Takeaways for non-responsive donors

1. Ask donors about their stewardship and communication preferences
2. Stop the "meeting request" loop – it creates pressure
3. Continue the "impact" loop → Send high-level results 3–4 times a year
4. Use "living" language → Focus on the continuity of their lives and values
5. Acknowledge their "hero" status as a committed supporter
 - Every touchpoint should be a "gift" to the donor (information, a heart-warming story, a thank you) that quietly celebrates their gift





Best practices for stewarding anonymous donors

Anonymous donor strategies to implement

<i>Immediately</i>	<i>This quarter</i>	<i>This year</i>
Make bequest language easy to find on your website - not buried in a footer	Train all staff on anonymity policies and confidentiality protocols	Develop an anonymous donor protocol for staff and board
Audit database for anonymity flagging consistency	Establish confidential communication channels for known anonymous donors	Reframe forecasting to use rolling averages and scenario ranges
Ask your strategist about the <i>Anonymous Donor Stewardship feature</i>	Add explicit anonymity respect language to legacy marketing " <i>Anonymity requests will always be honored.</i> "	Build an attorney outreach program





Thank you.

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