



FreeWill Co-CEOs
Patrick Schmitt & Jenny Xia Spradling

OPENING KEYNOTE

New research to drive your strategy

April 8, 2026

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

Agenda

1. Welcome to our first ever Stewardship Summit!
2. Why stewardship really matters
3. Insights from a new Stewardship Survey
4. Next steps



Introductions

INTROS | FreeWill Co-CEOs

Jenny Xia Spradling & Patrick Schmitt

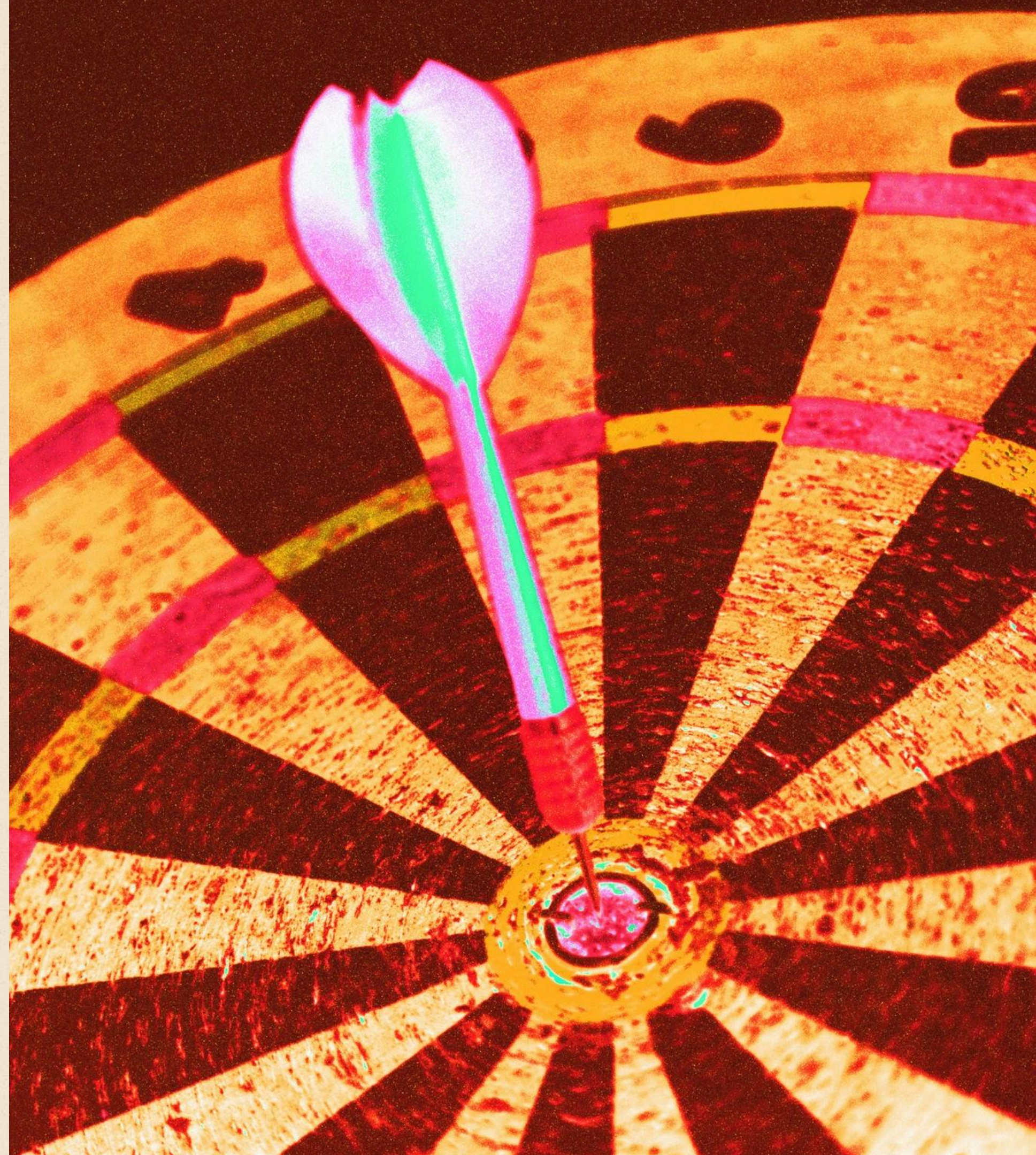




Welcome to FreeWill's
Donor Stewardship Summit!

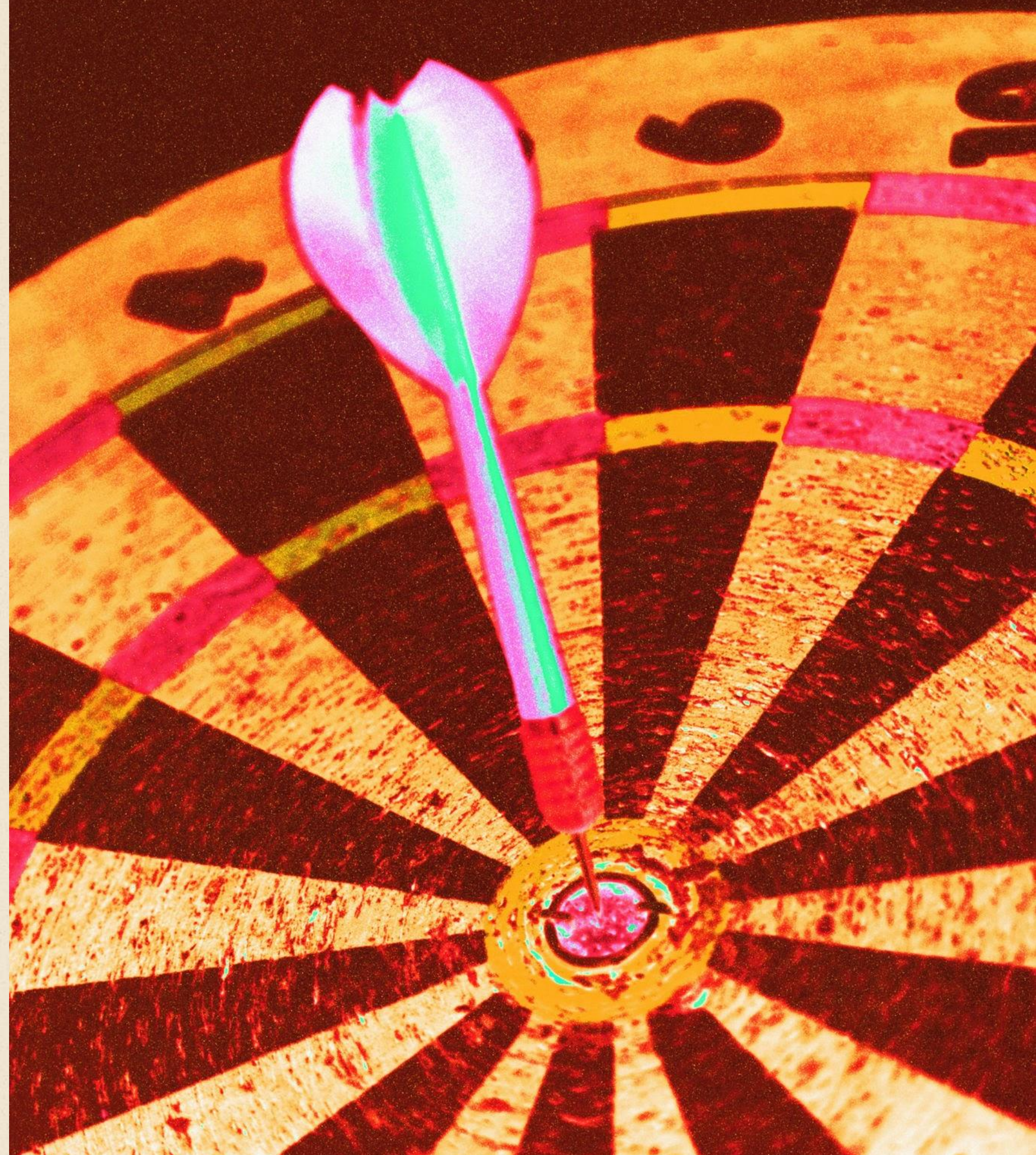
Our goals in creating the Stewardship Summit

1. Thoroughly explore an essential part of fundraising
2. Equip you to **build donor relations programs that deepen relationships, increase loyalty, and drive long-term revenue – and to scale this work without losing the human touch!**
3. Address, head on, one of our partners' biggest pain points: **how to steward donors effectively when they don't respond or engage**



Our goals in creating the Stewardship Summit

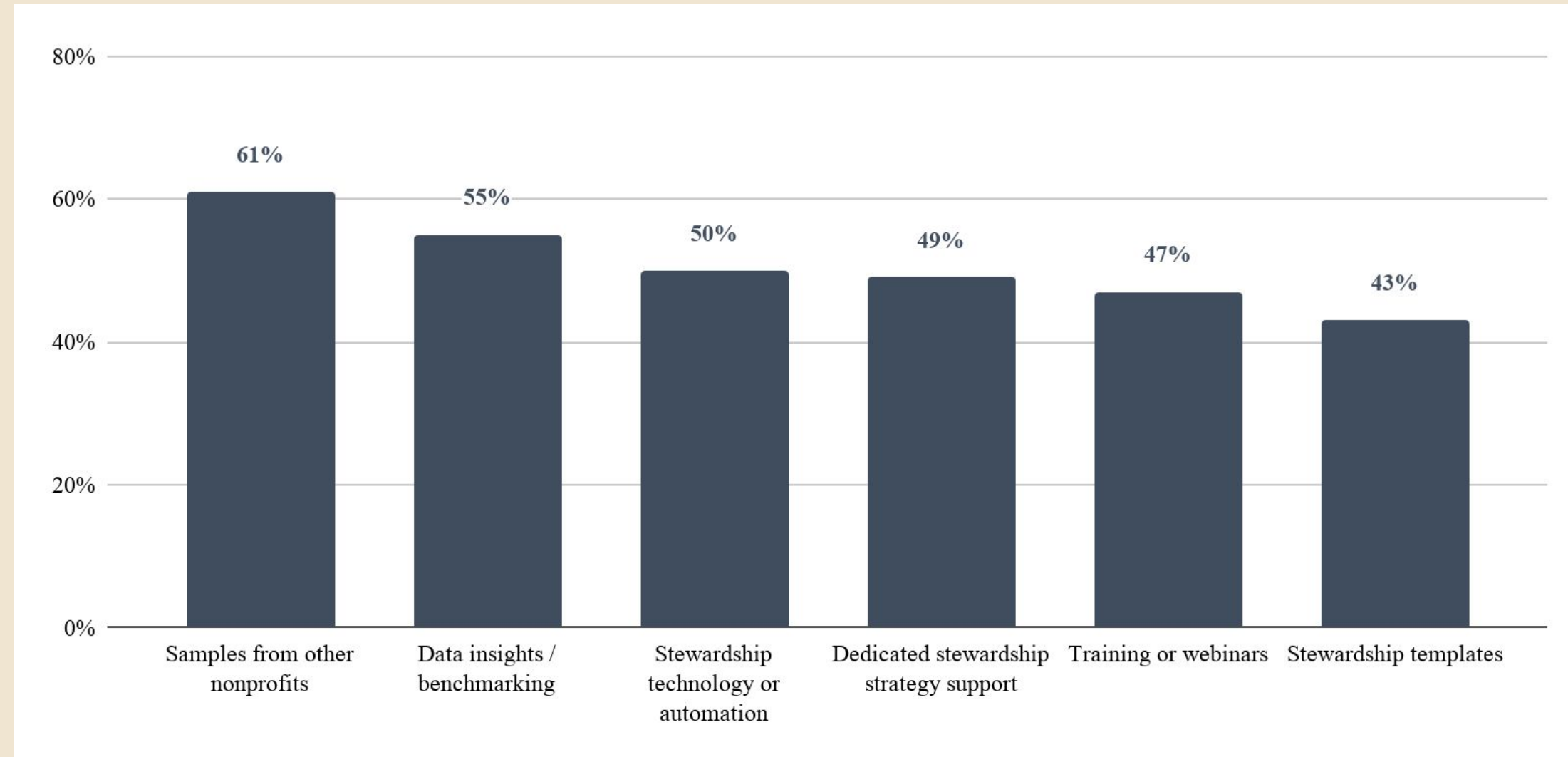
4. Spotlight the ways FreeWill supports your stewardship efforts through our products and Strategists
5. Strengthen the FreeWill community by facilitating connection and networking in the event
6. **Deliver a great value to our nonprofit partners by offering a multi-day learning summit at no cost**



WE ASKED YOU:

What resources or support would most help your team strengthen donor relations?

Good news: These are all coming!



What you can expect over the next two days

- Informative, actionable sessions that offer both high-level strategy and “in the trenches” tactics
- Creative, but do-able, ideas from experts across FreeWill – even on a tight budget
- Thought leadership on tough topics like anonymous and non-responsive donors, benchmarks around planned gift realization
- Connection with your FreeWill community



Donor Stewardship Summit

Day 1 — Wed, Apr 8, 2026

Virtual

12:00 – 1:00 PM EDT	<p>New Research to Drive Your Strategy: FreeWill's Stewardship Survey</p> <p>PS Patrick Schmitt Co-CEO · FreeWill</p>		
1:00 – 2:00 PM EDT	<p>Building a Stewardship Engine: How leading nonprofits turn donor relations into growth</p> <p>LW Lynne Wester Principal & Founder · Donor Relations Group</p>		
2:00 – 2:45 PM EDT	<p>Mystery Money: The growing challenge of anonymous & non-responsive donors</p> <p>NW Nicole Walton Sr. Director, Major & Planned Giving · FreeWill</p> <p>JL Jordan Lehr Principal Strategist</p>		
3:00 – 4:00 PM EDT	<table border="1"><tr><td><p>Stewardship on a Shoestring: Big heart, small budget</p><p>AK Anna Kosatka Sr. Partner Success Strategist · FreeWill</p><p>AH Autumn Hubbard Sr. Partner Success Strategist · FreeWill</p></td><td><p>Why print still works, and why it's an excellent stewardship tool!</p><p>LW Lauren Winther-Hansen Nonprofit Training Lead · FreeWill</p><p>JA Joshua Alcorn Co-Producer · Nonprofit Storytelling Conference</p></td></tr></table>	<p>Stewardship on a Shoestring: Big heart, small budget</p> <p>AK Anna Kosatka Sr. Partner Success Strategist · FreeWill</p> <p>AH Autumn Hubbard Sr. Partner Success Strategist · FreeWill</p>	<p>Why print still works, and why it's an excellent stewardship tool!</p> <p>LW Lauren Winther-Hansen Nonprofit Training Lead · FreeWill</p> <p>JA Joshua Alcorn Co-Producer · Nonprofit Storytelling Conference</p>
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4:00 – 5:00 PM EDT	<p>The Courageous Donor Conversation: How to prepare for, navigate, and follow up on tricky donor moments</p> <p>ME Mallory Erickson CEO · Practivated</p>		

— Research & strategy — Donor challenges — Concurrent sessions — Donor conversations



12:00 – 1:00 PM EDT

Beyond the Submission: Automating stewardship for high-growth grant partnerships

JN Josh Nadzam
Grant Strategy Lead · FreeWill

Stewarding the Flock: Your pastoral role in planned + smart giving

CH Chris Hall
Senior Team Lead, Partner Success [Faith] · FreeWill

CC Clayton Chamberlain
Partner Success Strategy Lead [Faith] · FreeWill

1:00 – 2:00 PM EDT

Systems that Scale: Why data is the foundation of scalable stewardship

LW Lauren Winther-Hansen
Nonprofit Training Lead · FreeWill

CM Catie Martino
Principal Strategist · FreeWill

The Gift Conversation: How to talk to donors & their advisors with confidence

NW Nicole Walton
Sr. Director, Major & Planned Giving · FreeWill

BP Brian Peterson
Sr. Director, Gift & Estate Planning · Human Rights Watch

2:00 – 2:45 PM EDT

Built for Stewardship: How FreeWill helps you see, segment, and cultivate

NW Nicole Walton
Sr. Director, Major & Planned Giving · FreeWill

TA Trisha Arora
Senior Product Manager (PGS) · FreeWill

OA Omar Antila
Staff Product Manager · FreeWill

3:00 – 3:45 PM EDT

The Realization Reality Check: Benchmarks, data, and what to expect from planned gifts

NW Nicole Walton
Sr. Director, Major & Planned Giving Strategy · FreeWill

3:45 – 4:45 PM EDT

Stewardship at Scale: Automation with a human touch

ES Erica Sanchez
Senior Partner Success Strategist · FreeWill

BP Blair Pippin
Senior Partner Success Strategist · FreeWill

PL Pamela Leonard
National Executive Lead, Charitable Estate Planning · American Heart Association

4:45 – 5:00 PM EDT

Closing Remarks with Patrick

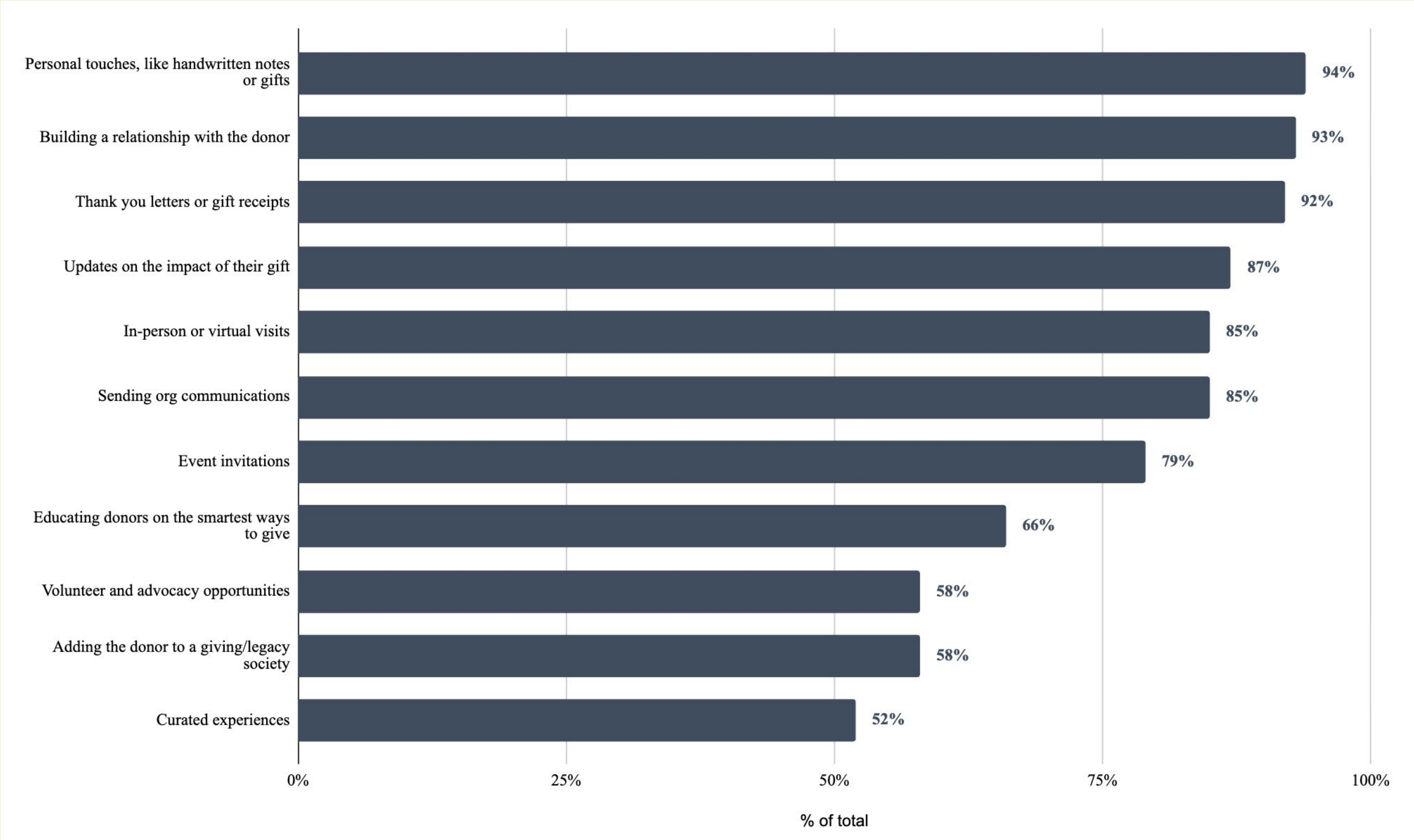
PS Patrick Schmitt
Co-CEO · FreeWill





How do we all define stewardship?

How do you define stewardship?





The science behind connection
and why it really matters

The science of fast connection

- In 1997, psychologist Arthur Aron wanted to know: can you manufacture closeness between strangers in a lab?
- His team had pairs of strangers take turns answering 36 questions that got progressively more personal
- They started light ("Who would you want as a dinner guest?") and slowly got deeper ("When did you last cry in front of another person?")
- The result: strangers felt genuinely close after about 45 minutes (one pair even got married!)



Source: [The New York Times](#)



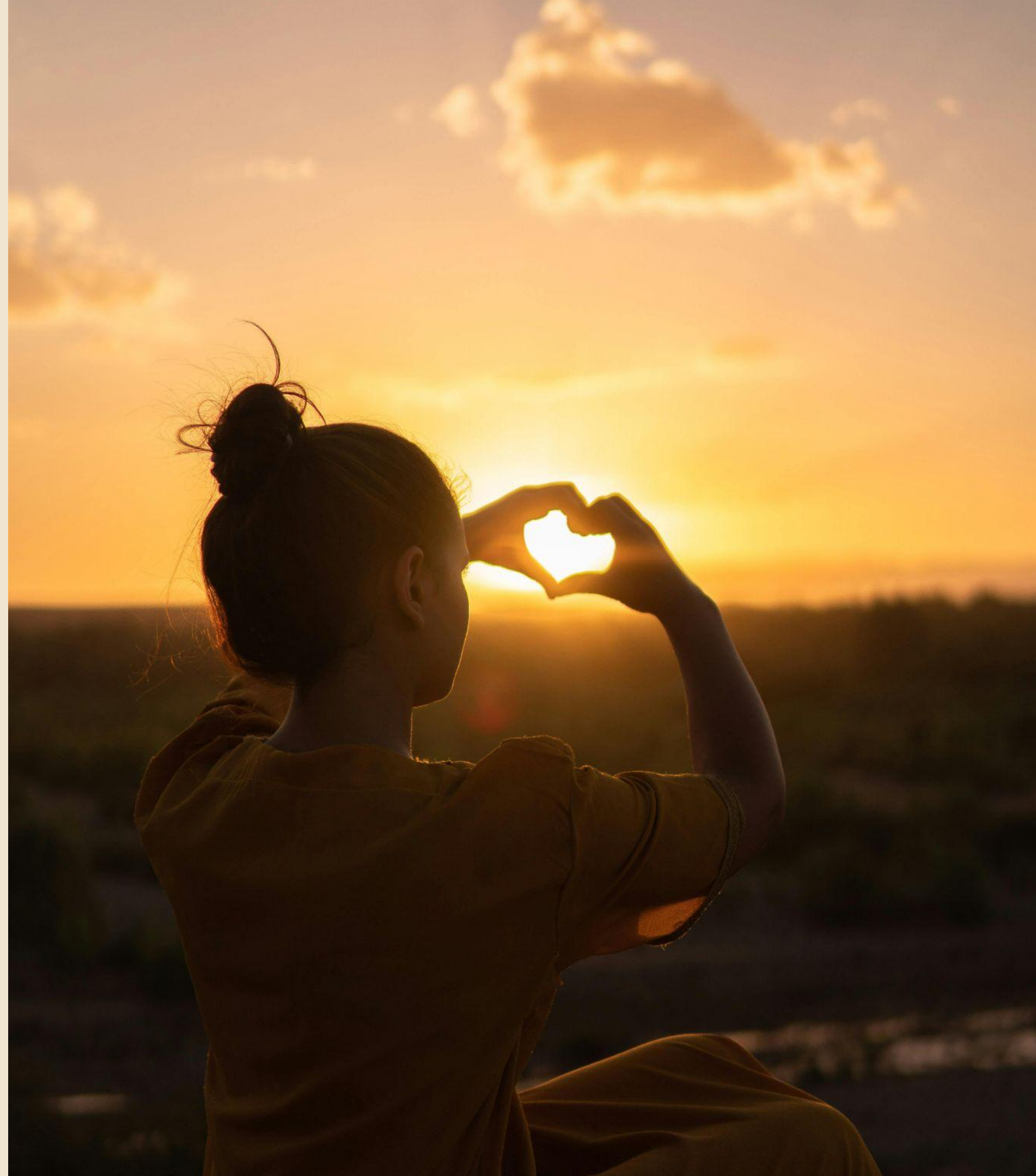
The science of fast connection

- You don't need all 36 questions, and you don't need to ask your donors when they last cried
- But the principle holds – connection isn't something you wait for, it's something you can build on purpose
- By asking better questions and getting a little deeper than small talk
- Research suggests people are more generous when they feel more connected to others



The neuroscience of giving

- In a 2013 study by leading planned giving academic, Dr. Russell James, he used fMRI scans to map the neuroscience of charitable decisions
- He found that charitable decisions light up the same parts of the brain we use for social bonding and, importantly, NOT the parts we use for financial transactions
- Stewardship literally feeds the part of the brain that says ‘yes!’ to giving



Why planned giving is different

- Around 50% of Americans give to charity each year, but only 5–6% leave a charitable bequest
- So, why the gap??
- Estate planning is the only financial decision that forces people to sit with their own mortality”
- And our brains don’t really love that



Why planned giving is different

- Dr. James shows that mortality reminders trigger two defenses:
 - Avoidance: This is why donors say "later" instead of "no"
 - Symbolic immortality: Once avoidance breaks down, the brain starts looking for meaning that outlasts the self (family, community, legacy, values)



How should this influence your stewardship

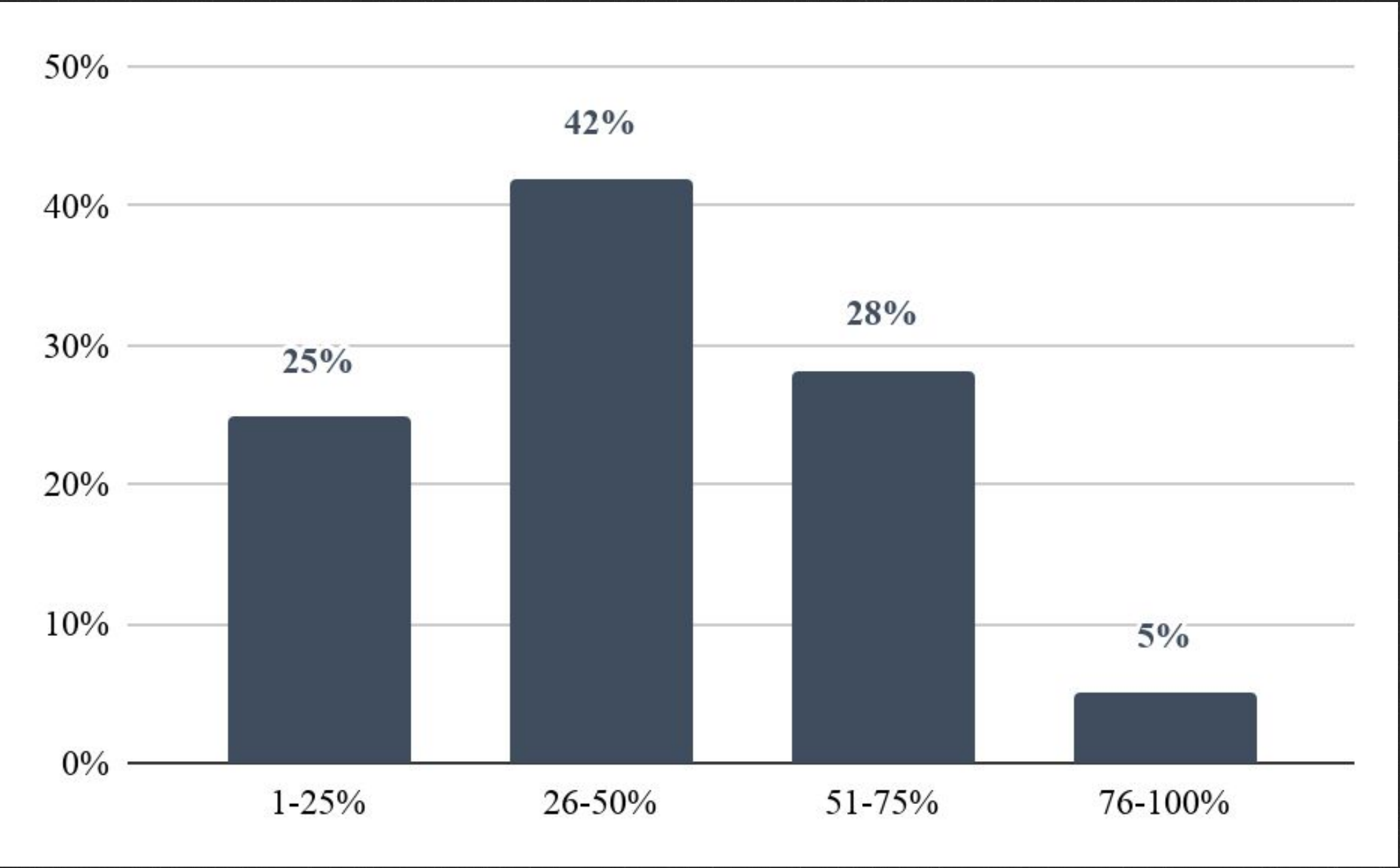
- Dr. James's research tells us what the brain of a planned giving donor is really looking for:
 - Remind donors they're part of something ongoing
 - Donors want to see themselves as the main character of a meaningful story
 - Reinforce the values your donor and your org hold in common
- You're helping your planned giving donor build the story of who they are and what they stood for in life





Why stewardship really matters

What percentage of first time givers to your org renew their support?



Stewardship drives overall revenue

- According to the Quarterly Fundraising Report by the Fundraising Effectiveness Project, the recapture rate for lapsed donors is down to 2% as of Q3 2025
- If donors stop giving to your org, it's unlikely they'll give again
- It is far more efficient to steward and retain your current donor base than constantly acquire new ones



Stewardship drives overall revenue

Some math:

- Two orgs each get 100 new donors every year, and each donor gives \$100 annually
- Organization A has a retention rate of 90% and Organization B has a retention rate of 80%
- How much more valuable is a new donor to Org A compared to Org B over ten years?
- *Answer: Twice as valuable*



Stewardship drives overall revenue

More math:

- Not enough organizations calculate “**LTV**” - *lifetime value of a donor*
- $LTV = \text{Average gift size} / (1 - \text{annual retention rate})$
- So a new donor is **twice as valuable** at an organization with an 80% retention rate compared to one with a 60% rate

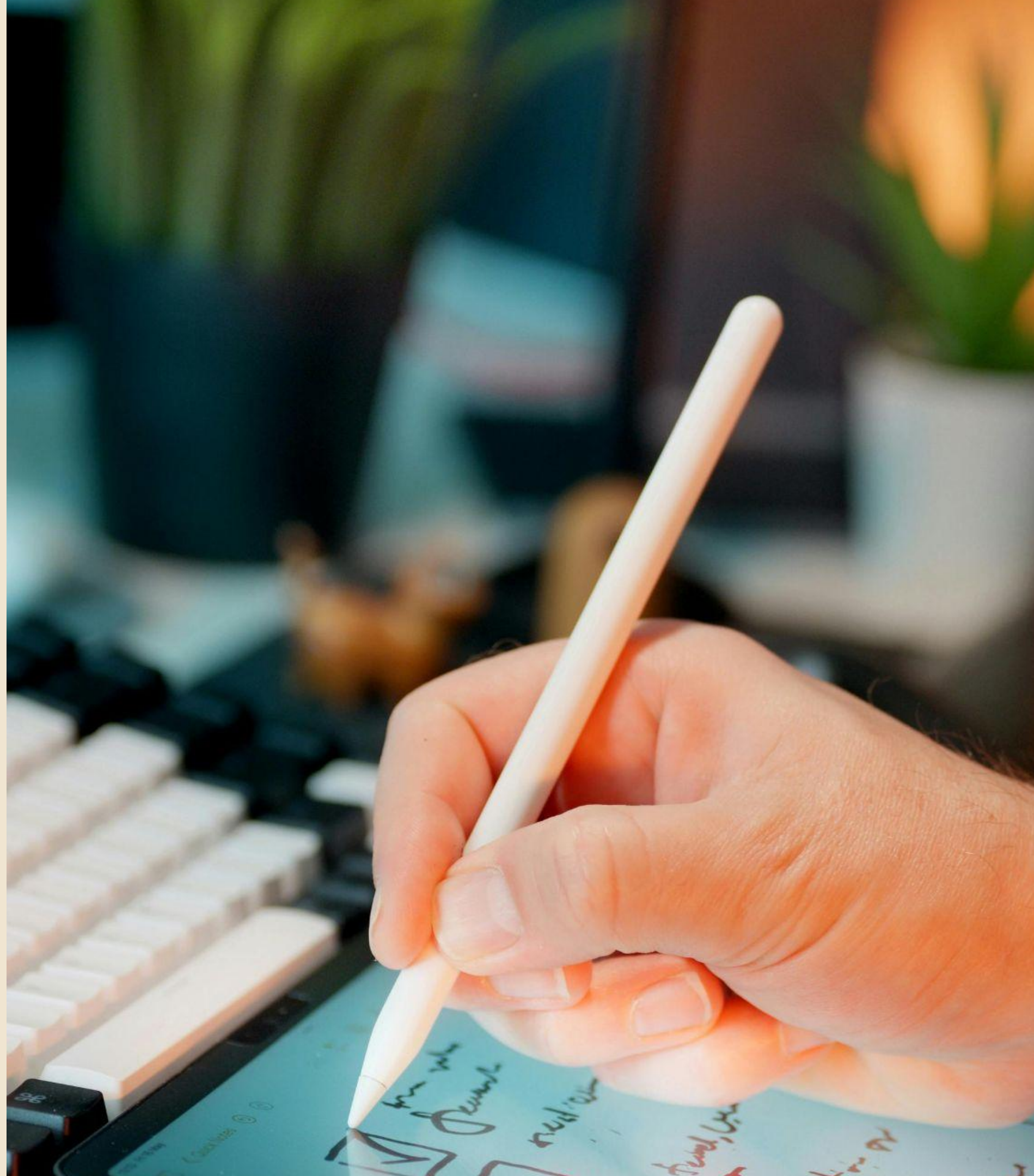




Top insights from our stewardship survey

About our survey

- We surveyed nonprofit professionals across all sizes and cause areas
- From organizations receiving under \$100K to over \$100M in individual contributions
- The majority of respondents were from mid-size organizations
- Human Services was the most represented sector (19%), followed by Health Care (13%) and Arts & Culture (9%)
- Respondents included both FreeWill partners and non-partners



INSIGHT #1

Only 1 in 3 organizations have a stewardship plan they actually use

- Only about 33% of organizations have a stewardship plan they actually use
- 58% have no formal, written stewardship plan at all
- Of the 42% who do have one, 20% admit they don't follow it
- The takeaway: Two-thirds of nonprofits are running stewardship without a documented strategy



INSIGHT #1

Only 1 in 3 organizations have a stewardship plan they actually use

- The planning gap gets worse the smaller an organization is:
 - \$10M–\$100M: 40% have no plan
 - \$1M–\$10M: 52% have no plan
 - \$100K–\$1M: 61% have no plan
 - Under \$100K: 100% have no plan
- Even among organizations with a plan, 20% don't measure stewardship success at all
- Which makes it nearly impossible to hold a plan accountable



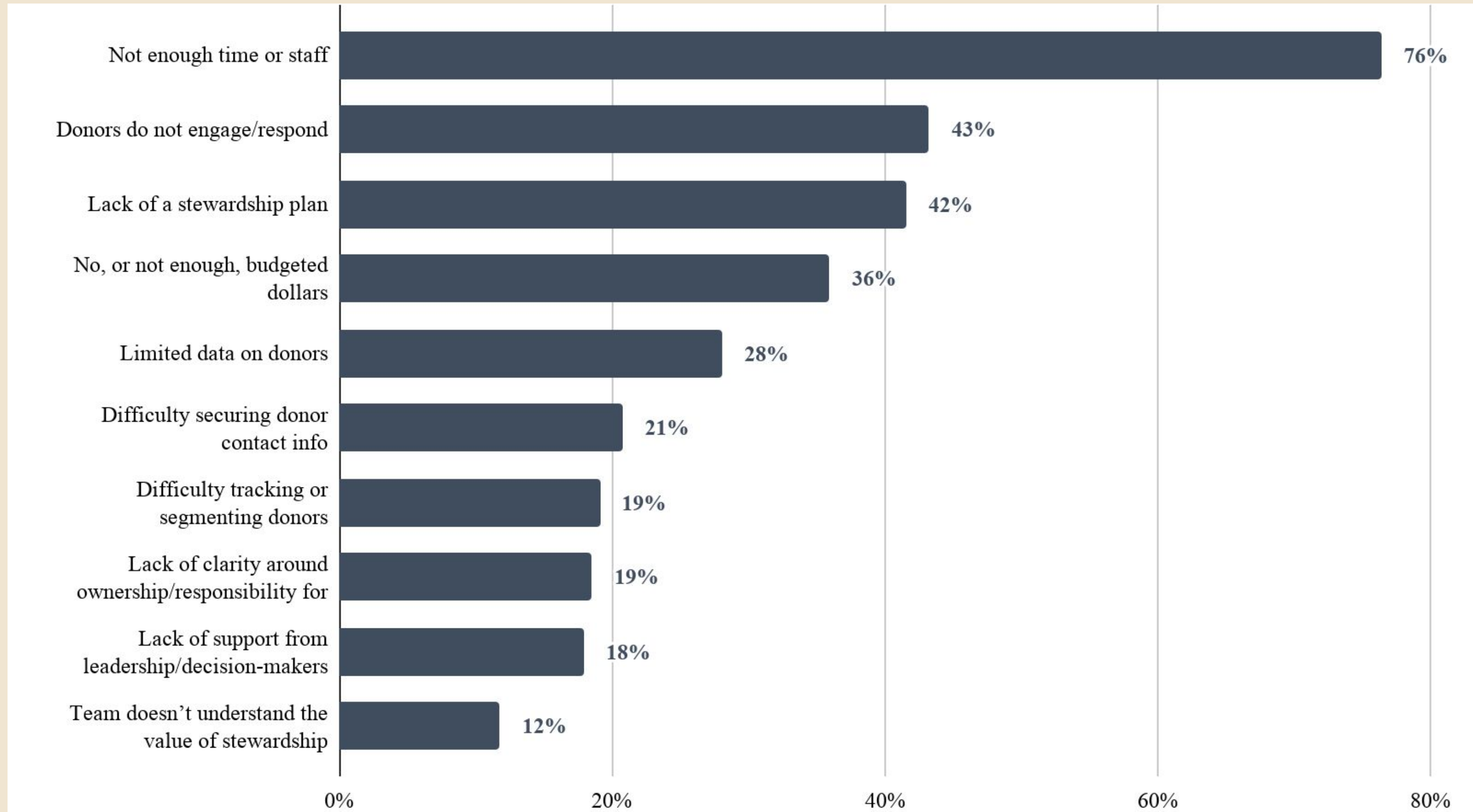
INSIGHT #1

Only 1 in 3 organizations have a stewardship plan they actually use

- And many have no dedicated budget allocated for stewardship either
- The budget gap paints a similar picture:
 - Under \$100K: 78% have no stewardship budget
 - \$100K–\$1M: 50% have no budget
 - \$1M–\$10M: 27%
 - \$10M–\$100M: 31%
- For the smallest organizations, stewardship is happening entirely on personal effort (no plan, no budget, no infrastructure)



Which of these is a barrier to successful stewardship at your organization?



INSIGHT #2

"Not enough time or staff" is the single biggest barrier

This barrier shows up across every org size and sector:

- Higher Education: 92%
- K-12: 90%
- Environment: 90%
- Arts, Culture: 82%
- Health Care: 81%
- Animal-Related: 75%
- Human Services: 74%



INSIGHT #3

We're moderately confident in our personal stewardship abilities

- We asked you to rate your confidence in your personal ability and your organization's ability to retain and deepen relationships with long-time donors
- 1 = not confident at all, 5 = very confident
- Average personal confidence: 3.5
- Average organizational confidence: 3.4
- Respondents were almost 2x as likely to say they personally feel "very confident" in stewardship work (29%) as they were to say they were very confident in their organization's ability (16%)



INSIGHT #3

We're moderately confident in our personal stewardship abilities

- The difference in personal vs. organizational confidence widens with org size
- Under \$100K: 24% personally very confident vs. 17% org very confident
- \$100K–\$1M: 23% personal vs. 9% org
- \$1M–\$10M: 31% personal vs. 18% org
- \$10M–\$100M: 47% personal vs. 27% org



INSIGHT #4

Planned gift stewardship falls behind

- 63% send a stewardship communication within one week of a planned gift commitment
- But 12% take a month or more (!!)
- 53% of respondents said their organization does not steward planned gift donors differently than donors who gave cash



INSIGHT #4

Planned gift stewardship falls behind

- Even among organizations with a legacy society, engagement is mixed
- Of respondents with a legacy society, only half (52%) said they're active
- The remaining 48% of respondents said their legacy societies are either dormant or non-existent



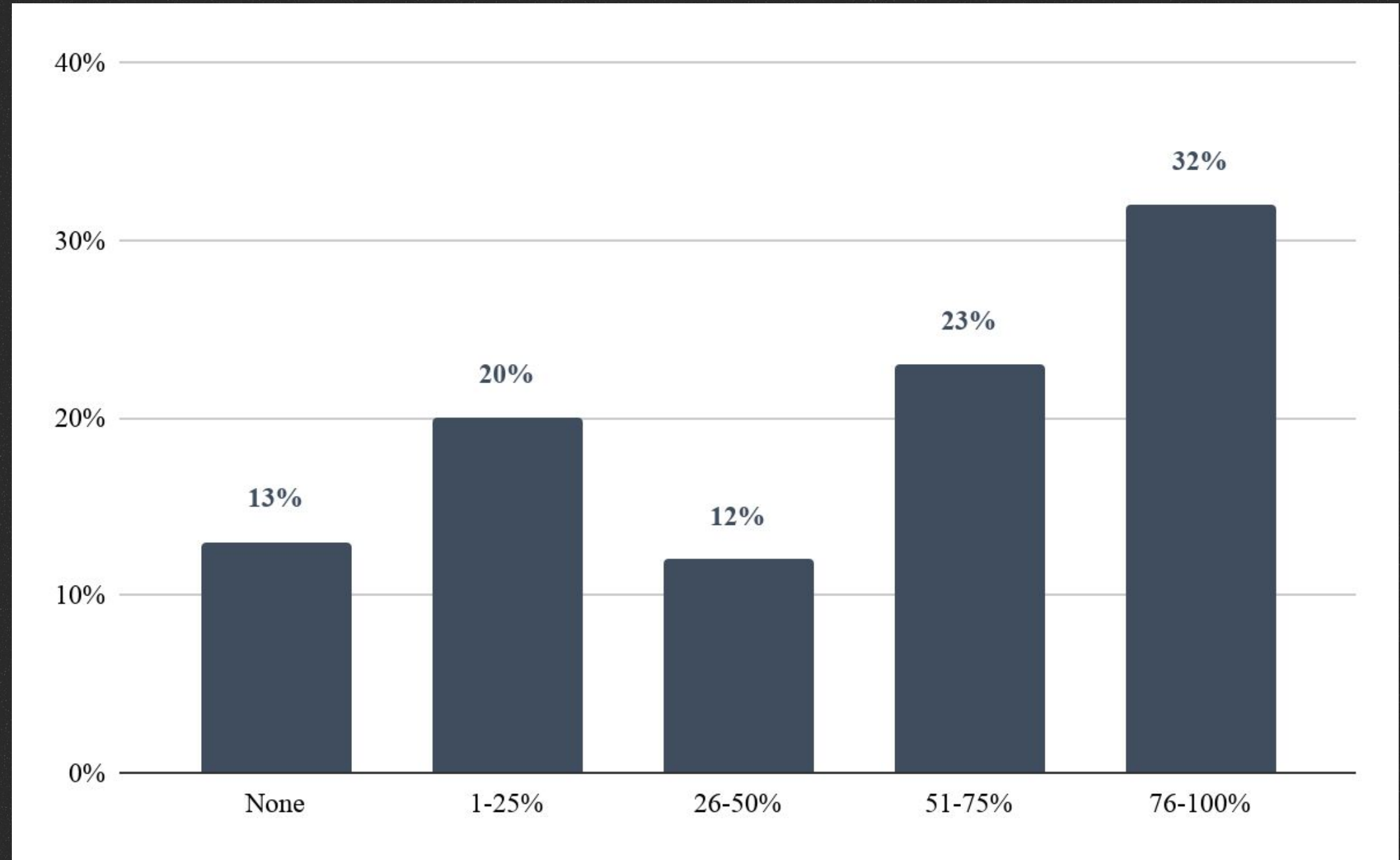
BONUS INSIGHT

Your planned giving donors are your annual donors

- 55% of organizations report that more than half of their planned gift donors also give annually
- Nearly a third (32%) say it's 76–100%
- For some, your planned and annual giving programs are stewarding the same people
- Donors may receive separate, disconnected touchpoints from teams operating in silos
- But a donor who has made a planned gift and continues to give annually deserves an elite stewardship experience



What percentage of your planned giving donors make annual gifts as well?



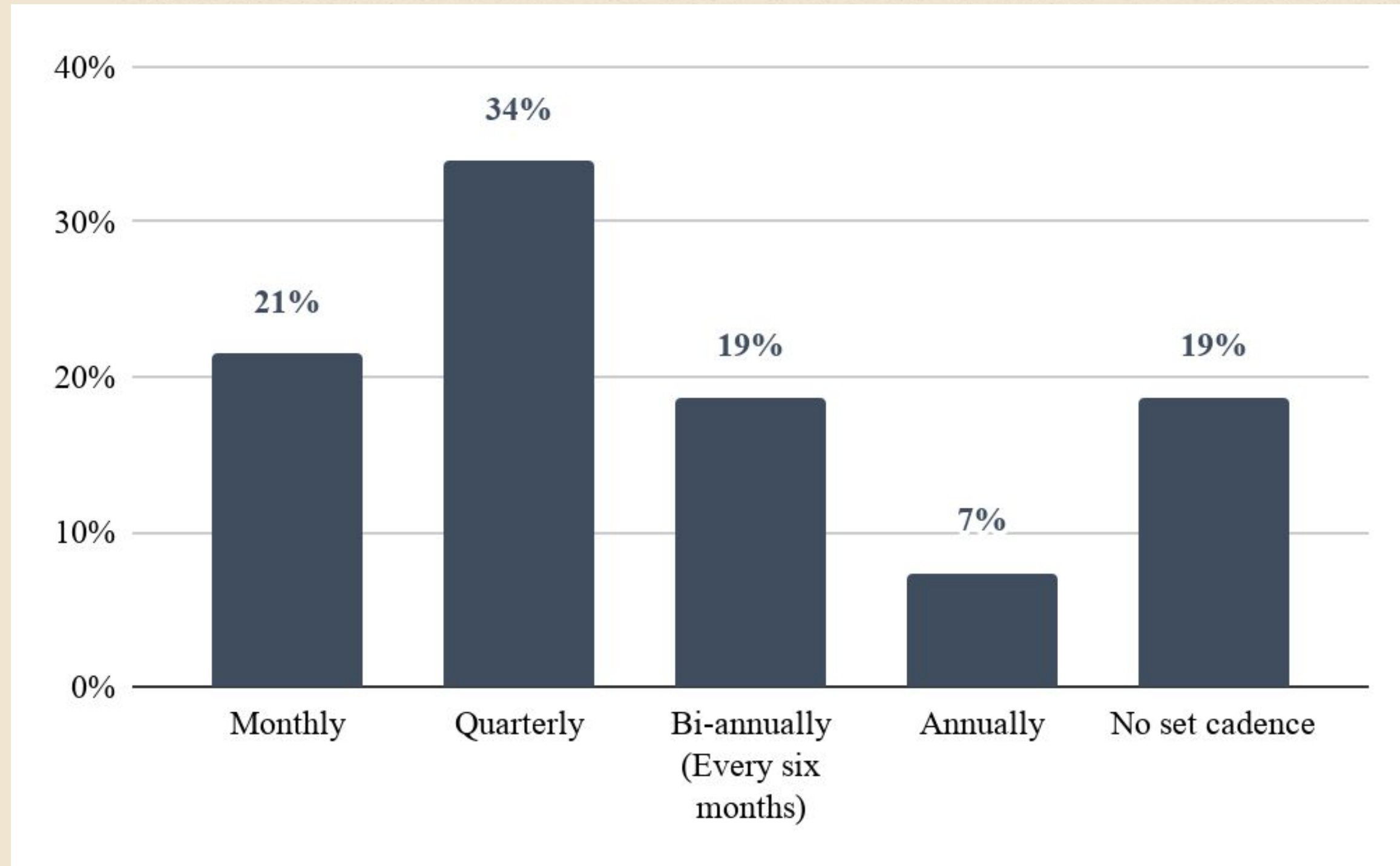
INSIGHT #5

Major & mid-level stewardship is mostly consistent

- 34% reach out quarterly
- Another 21% reach out monthly, and 19% bi-annually
- That means about 3 in 4 fundraisers are touching mid-level and major donors at least every six months
- But 7% are only reaching out once a year
- And **another 19% don't have a set cadence at all**



How frequently do you reach out to mid-level or major donors with a stewardship message?



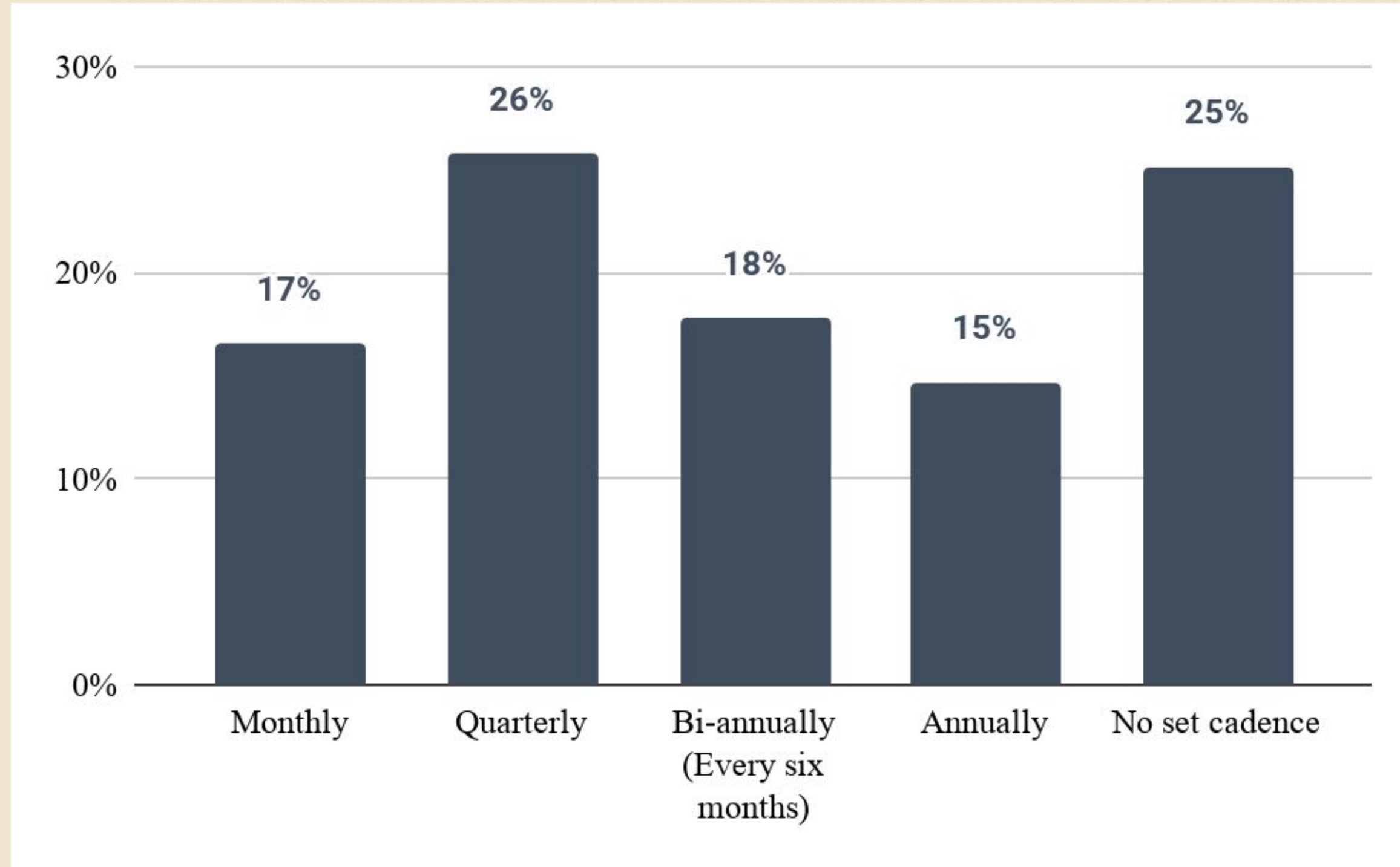
INSIGHT #6

Planned gift stewardship lacks rhythm

- Quarterly is still the most common cadence, but it drops from 34% to 26%
- And the responses spread out across every other option:
 - 18% bi-annually
 - 17% monthly
 - 15% annually (more than 2x the rate for major and mid donors)



How frequently do you reach out to planned gift donors with a stewardship message?



INSIGHT #6

Planned gift stewardship lacks rhythm

- 25% of respondents don't have a set cadence at all for planned giving
- Folks who didn't regularly steward planned giving donors shared:
 - "Sporadically" or "Randomly"
 - "No plan right now"
 - "We don't have a planned giving process"
- This the biggest gift the majority of these individuals will make in their lifetime
- And many are getting stewarded the same as a \$25 annual donor on your email list





Tell us in the chat: What's your
favorite stewardship tip?

WE ASKED YOU

Share an anonymous story or example of successful stewardship at your organization

"A major gift donor was unhappy with the outcome of a scholarship program he funded and stopped giving. Fifteen years later, a frontline fundraiser developed a proposal, obtained commitment from campus partners, and approached the donor through industry connections. The outcome was a program to fund over \$18,000,000 in student scholarships."

"Sent a dormant donor a letter from an alum whose tuition the donor's donations had supported. The donor promptly started donating \$10K/year again. All students are required to write thank you letters to their respective donor."

"I was aware that a donor was frustrated with our organization. I wrote acknowledging their frustration and requesting a time to talk. They pulled out their checkbook on the spot and wrote a check for \$5K — up from a \$500 annual gift."





Our 3 favorite stewardship tips

TIP #1:

Surprise them with a “thinking of you” note

- The “thinking of you” note out of the blue is particularly effective for this — the element of surprise creates emotional resonance
- Surprise often increases pleasure in a given moment
- The ventral tegmental area (our midbrain) is associated with pleasure and reward expectation responds most strongly to unexpected events



TIP #1:

Surprise them with a “thinking of you” note

- Findings from a 2022 study titled “The Surprise of Reaching Out” show that simple check-ins offer meaningful psychological benefits for both people involved
- And this was true for check-ins via text and over the phone
- Across multiple studies senders consistently underestimated how much their message meant to the recipient
- The effect was even greater when the outreach was unexpected!



TIP #1:

Surprise them with a “thinking of you” note

Subject: “Thinking of you”

Alex —

Had a moment today that I couldn't wait to share with you. While strolling through the arboretum, I stumbled upon a little girl and her grandfather, both engrossed in a bird-watching session. The grandfather shared with me that they've started a tradition of spotting new bird species together every week.

Remember the Bird Sanctuary initiative you and Jamie supported last summer? This is just one of the countless heartwarming scenes it's been fostering. I thought you'd like to know the happiness you're bringing to many by being a philanthropist.

I hope you're having a great day! - [Name]



TIP #1:

Surprise them with a “thinking of you” text

Hi Joanna! Patrick from the Land Trust here.

I thought of you today because I was out walking this morning, and saw a brother and sister (maybe 4 and 6?) just delighting in the daffodils in the new reserve we just opened.

Their mom and dad seemed to love being outside, and the kids seemed like they didn't usually get to spend this much time among wildflowers.



TIP #1:

Surprise them with a “thinking of you” text

I know you helped to fund the expansion we did last August, and I wanted to make sure you knew the joy you were making possible.

Thanks for being such a generous person! And here's my favorite flower I came across today.



TIP #2:

Try the “time traveler” note for lapsed donors

You can help your donor “time travel”
to when they first gave and
reactivate those good feelings

- When did they last give?
- What was going on at the time?
- How was their donation used then,
what impact did it have?
- How far has your org come since
then with their help?
- Why should they give now?



TIP #2:

Try the “time traveler” note for lapsed donors

Hi Devon!

I was going through our records and I saw you made a really meaningful gift to our museum in March of 2011. (March 17th to be exact!) Thank you again for being some who supports access to art!

That was certainly a different time - Barack Obama was still in his first term, Adele had just released her first album, and the world barely ever used video chat!

I'd be curious to better understand what motivated that gift, and I'd love to share how those resources have been put to use over the years.

Would you mind if I gave you a call this week?

*All my best,
Patrick*



TIP #3:

Add a personal touch to your annual report

Next time you send your annual report to a major or planned giving donor, do this:

- Paperclip a personalized note or letter to the front
- Call out a specific page or section that's especially relevant to that donor (a program they've supported, a project they volunteered on)
- In less than five minutes, you can turn what might've been a "so what?" piece of mail into something they feel was sent just for them



TIP #3:

Add a personal touch to your annual report (using AI!)

What can I help with?



2024-annual-report.pdf
PDF



Please make an executive summary for john and mary smith, who have been donors for the past 12 years and recently gave a \$35,000 stock gift to support our efforts to stop pollution in the bay



Dear John and Mary,

Thank You for Over 12 Years of Generosity

Your steadfast support of our mission to protect and restore the Chesapeake Bay has been truly transformative. Most recently, your generous \$35,000 stock gift has played a pivotal role in advancing our efforts to stop pollution in the Bay, and we are excited to share the impact of your incredible contributions.

The Difference You've Made:

- **Tackling Pollution (p. 10):**
Your gift directly supports our efforts to address industrial pollution, such as improper handling of industrial sludge on Maryland's Eastern Shore. With your help, we've secured bipartisan legislation to regulate these harmful practices and ensure accountability.
- **Restoring Natural Habitats (p. 8):**
Thanks to your generosity, we've made significant progress in expanding living shorelines and restoring oyster reefs. These initiatives provide critical habitats, protect against erosion, and bolster resilience to rising sea levels, creating a healthier Bay ecosystem.
- **Advocating for a Sustainable Future (p. 12):**
Your support strengthens our advocacy work, such as championing the Whole Watershed Act. This innovative legislation targets collaborative restoration efforts in five key watersheds, ensuring holistic improvements to water quality and habitat health.

Looking Ahead:

Your commitment is creating lasting change. Together, we are addressing the challenges of climate change, combating stormwater runoff, and securing vital protections for the Bay's ecosystems and communities.

Learn More About the Impact of Your Gift:

To see the results of your support in greater detail, we encourage you to explore these sections of our 2024 Annual Report:

1. **Stopping Pollution** (p. 10)
2. **Living Shorelines** (p. 8)
3. **Advocacy Highlights** (p. 12)

With Gratitude,

Your partnership inspires us every day. Your generosity is at the heart of the progress we've made and the future we're building. Together, we are stopping pollution and restoring hope for the next generation.

Warm regards,

[Your Name]

[Your Title]

[Organization Name]



Next steps (after the Summit)

FreeWill loves your feedback!

- We'll be in touch a few times over the next few days to ask for your feedback
- **Later today:** A Day 1 email with session recordings, resources, and a short survey on today's speakers and sessions
- **Tomorrow evening:** A Day 2 recap email with everything from day two, plus another quick survey
- **Friday:** A final wrap-up email with a survey on your overall Summit experience



What's next?

*Posting about the Summit on LinkedIn?
Use #StewardshipSummit!*

- Head back to the event Lobby (this is where you'll be hanging out between sessions!)
- Update your profile and chat/connect with other attendees
- Bookmark your don't-miss sessions

The image shows two screenshots from a Zoom event interface. The top screenshot displays the event lobby with a navigation bar at the top containing 'Lobby', 'Sessions', 'Itinerary', 'Speakers', and 'Network'. A user profile icon in the top right corner is highlighted with an orange arrow, and a dropdown menu is open, showing options like 'Share event link', 'Test my device', 'Share feedback', 'Moderate event', 'My profile', 'Language', and 'Sign out'. The bottom screenshot shows the 'Edit profile' page for 'Lauren W-H', with fields for 'Basic information' such as first name, last name, preferred name, pronoun, position, and company name. A 'Profile card preview' on the right shows the user's profile information, including their name, title, location, and attendance status.



Thank you!

CO-CEO

Patrick Schmitt