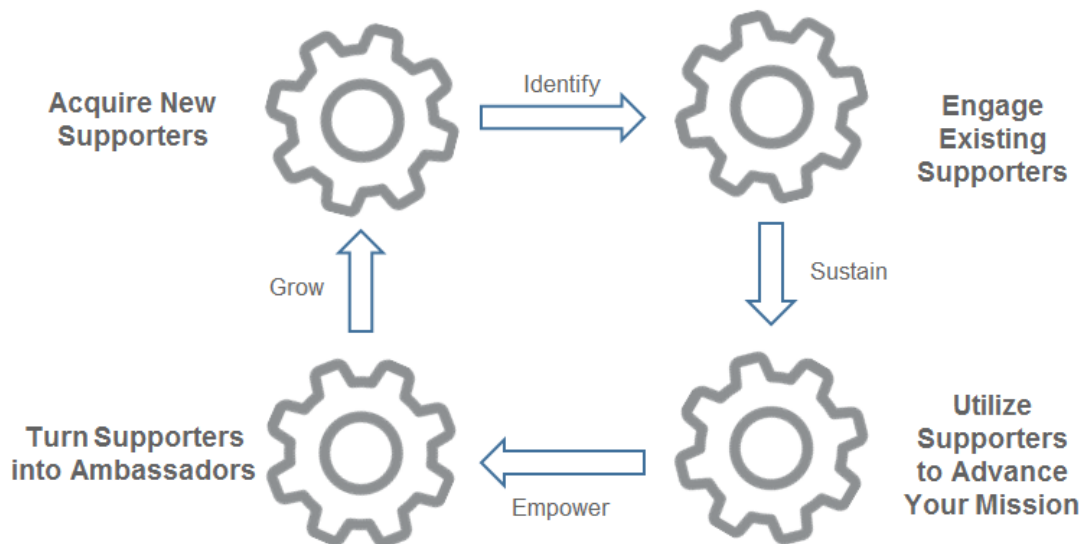


Supporter Gears Model: A Strategy for Empowering Supporters

By Joe Williams



For decades, most nonprofits (and for-profits) have focused their attention on finding new supporters (or customers) and getting them to volunteer or make donations (make a purchase). It was the fastest and easiest way to grow until the rise of social media and affordability of digital communications, in the early 2000s. With these new channels came expectations from supporters to feel engaged with the organization.

Organizations like Apple and Starbucks, which had record low stock prices at the time, realized this opportunity and understood if they could engage their supporters enough to create strong relationships that they would do the heavy lifting and bring in more supporters.

Today, the same recipe for success is still relevant for all organization, including nonprofits. To help nonprofits understand this engagement and ambassador concept we created the Supporter Gears Model.

The Supporter Gears Model is a framework designed to make it easy for nonprofits to understand the steps needed to grow their supporter base by focusing on engaging and utilizing their existing supporters as ambassadors to bring in new supporters. Since no two nonprofits are the same, the model is customizable and focuses the organization on the most important aspects needed to grow your supporter base and advance your mission.

Acquire New Supporters

One of the hardest jobs for a nonprofit is to find new supporters. There is no magic bullet. A story in your local newspaper or a fundraising event will only boost numbers for a few days. To make a long term impact, you need to rely on and utilize your greatest assets, your current supporters. The Supporter Gears Model focuses your efforts on turning your current supporters into ambassadors and empowers them to bring in new supporters. This in turn, frees up time to for you to focus on the Engagement and Ambassador gears.

However, you still play a role in keeping this gear moving. Keep the following in mind to ensure you are set up to acquire new supporters effectively and cast your net wide enough to bring in new supporters yourself.

- Position yourself as a thought leader in your industry and community
 - Identify events for leaders to speak at

- Establish relationships with local media to become a frequent on air expert
- Invest resources in strategic media relations
 - Develop a news release template to share newsworthy stories in a timely manner
 - Create and maintain a contact list for local, national and industry media
- Create resources and opportunities to capture potential support information
 - Create a lightbox for your website homepage
 - Utilize a paper form at events
 - Create a sign up form or hold a contest/promotion on social media

Engage Existing Supporters

Having an engaged supporter base is more than a nice to have: it's integral to a nonprofit's success. No longer can you rely on sporadic engagements to keep your supporters interested, informed and equipped to help advance your mission. By creating a steady drumbeat of engagement opportunities, nonprofits can create strong relationships with their supporters who will in turn become more passionate about helping advance the mission. However, if you become inconsistent and unreliable, you can turn a strong relationship into a weak relationship, and it becomes harder the second time to regain their trust.

Engagement will look different for every nonprofit but here are some thought starters to keep in mind when you think about your Engagement gear:

- Develop foundational materials to support engagement initiatives
 - Craft key messages to create consistent communications
 - Develop email communication templates that are optimized for mobile and usability
 - Create segmented distribution lists based on age, giving level and location
- Develop a social media strategy
 - Create compelling day-to-day content with links, photos and videos, which fare better than those without on social media
 - Ask questions to keep content engaging and create dialogue with supporters
 - Thank supporters for their support of the mission and if appropriate, recognize individual supporters
 - Create quarterly contests to engage and reward supporters
 - Utilize hashtags on Twitter and Instagram to spread the message with those outside of your supporter base
 - When possible, engage influencers and organizations to help spread your message
- Emotionally connect supporters with the mission to encourage support
 - Match supporters with those you serve through frequent updates, video messages or an annual event
 - Share quantitative or qualitative results regarding your nonprofit's impact to demonstrate the impact their donation is making in the community

Utilize Supporters to Advance Your Mission

Nonprofits by their very nature and classification rely on generous donations from organizations and individuals to advance their missions. And while it's natural to want to monetize a new supporter immediately, because we focused first on engagement, we have an opportunity to connect with supporters on a more personal level and offer opportunities for them to donate in ways that don't always involve monetary donations. Think donation of their time, skills and connections.

And keep in mind; there is no one size fits all. You need to have different opportunities for supporters to help you advance your mission.

Leverage these different approaches for supporters to help advance your mission.

- Provide options for supporters to help advance your mission

- Create a quarterly volunteer activity to invite potential new supporters to as they are engaged by ambassadors
- Identify skills you need help with from volunteers (i.e., lawyers, marketing professionals, event planners, etc.) and offer them as volunteer/pro bono opportunities
- Create different giving levels and opportunities for your different supporters populations/groups
- Always thank supporters for their support
 - Provide a cost-friendly gift to supporters or in their name who give at a certain level. For example, if I give at least \$250, a book is given in my name to a child served by the organization
 - Utilize board members, staff and leaders to send a donor thank you cards
 - Make personal phone calls to donors who give at a certain level to thank them and understand what additional information they would like moving forward

Turn Supporters into Ambassadors

While some individuals actively seek out nonprofits, most hear the mission from a connection who is a supporter of the organization. This final gear turns those passionate supporters into ambassadors and provides them the right tools and resources to help bring in new supporters. Hearing the mission from a connection increases the likelihood of someone becoming a supporter.

Keep in mind, this gear will take the longest to get up to full speed, but most nonprofits already have unofficial ambassadors, including board members, young professionals and employees. These groups are an ideal place start creating an official ambassador program. Consider these approaches to get this gear spinning and bring new supporters in your pipeline.

- Provide resources and training to make supporters comfortable as ambassadors
 - Create an ambassador toolkit to provide easy access to information
 - Provide ambassador training (in person or virtual) to ensure ambassadors understand their role and are comfortable
- Create opportunities for ambassadors to share the mission with their connections
 - Develop a short program welcome event for ambassadors to use to share the mission
 - Create a volunteer activity kit for ambassadors to use to connect individuals to the mission
- Leverage ambassadors to share the mission with their social networks
 - Update social platform information to show they are involved with Family Lifeline
 - Create a social media program where ambassadors are prompted by nonprofit staff to share, tweet and post specific information, updates or events