

BONUS CHAPTER · THE NONPROFIT EMAIL ENGINE

The Donor Cast

Know your cast before you call action.

A chapter from the Run of Show Playbook

HEART

Why they give

HEAD

What they believe their gift does

HABIT

How they give, and how consistently

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"A director doesn't walk onto set and hope the cast figures it out. Every character is known before the camera rolls. Every motivation mapped. Every scene written for the people performing it — not for some imaginary, idealized actor who never shows up."

SECTION 01

The Problem Nobody Talks About

Every nonprofit knows their fund-a-need goal.

They know the venue. The caterer. The AV setup. The seating chart. The order of the program. They've rehearsed the auctioneer and briefed the emcee. They've built a run-of-show document three pages long.

And they walk into that room without the faintest idea who is actually sitting in it.

Not really. Not in any way that shapes the message.

They know the donor names. They know the giving history — who gave last year, who lapsed, who upgraded. They know the table sponsors and the board members and the longtime supporters. They have a spreadsheet.

What they don't have is a cast profile.

They don't know why those donors are in the room. They don't know what those donors believe about the mission. They don't know which donors are giving on conviction and which ones are giving on obligation and which ones showed up skeptical and are waiting to be convinced.

So they write one program. For everyone. And they hope.

This is the problem. And it is entirely solvable.

SECTION 02

What Hollywood Knows That Fundraising Doesn't

On a production set, you don't shoot a scene until you understand every character in it.

Not just the lead. Every character. The person in the background. The one with two lines. The one who doesn't speak but whose presence shifts the energy of the scene.

Because a great director knows that an audience reads everything. They read the room. They sense when something is off. They feel the difference between a scene written for the actual cast and a scene written for whoever happened to show up.

Your gala room is a cast. Two hundred, three hundred, five hundred people — each of them bringing a different emotional state, a different relationship to your mission, a different history with your organization, a different reason for being in that seat tonight.

You cannot write one message for all of them and expect it to land for any of them.

But here is what you can do. You can understand the types. You can profile the room before you write the program. You can architect a message that moves through the evening in a sequence designed to reach every character in the cast — not just the ones who were already going to give.

That is what this chapter is about.

SECTION 03

The Three Axes of Every Donor in the Room

There is something about donor psychology that the fundraising industry has been circling for decades without naming directly.

Every donor in your gala room is defined by three things — and only three things — that determine whether they will give, how much they will give, and whether they will ever give again.

These are not demographic variables. They are not wealth indicators. They are not even giving history, though giving history is a symptom of all three.

They are:



These are three independent variables. A donor can score high on Heart and low on Head — deeply moved by the cause but completely unclear on what their money accomplishes. A donor can score high on Habit and low on Heart — giving every year on autopilot, their emotional conviction quietly fading. A donor can score high on Head and low on Habit — intellectually committed to the mission but never quite pulled into a consistent giving pattern.

Most gala programs are written for the Heart alone. They prime emotion brilliantly, build to a peak, and then ask for money from a room that includes people who needed something more than emotion to act.

The donors who needed Head content — proof, impact, logical framework — don't raise their paddles. Or they raise them lower than they could have. And the event team wonders what went wrong.

Nothing went wrong with the emotion. Everything went wrong with the architecture.

SECTION 04

The Heart Axis: Why They Give

The Heart axis measures a donor's emotional connection to the cause — the internal driver that brought them into relationship with your organization in the first place.

There are five distinct Heart types. Every donor in your room is primarily one of these, with a secondary type that may activate under the right conditions.

◆ The Believer

The Believer's giving is rooted in personal conviction. This cause is not something they support — it is something they carry. They have a story, an experience, a relationship that made this mission personal. They don't need to be persuaded. They need to be given language for what they already feel, and a worthy moment to act on it.

The Believer is your most reliable giver. They are also, paradoxically, your most dangerous lapsed donor — because when they leave, they leave with reasons, not just drift. They felt the mission was compromised, or the organization lost its way, or the room stopped feeling like a place that deserved their conviction.

What the program owes the Believer: confirmation that their conviction was right, and that the organization is still worthy of it.

◆ The Connector

The Connector came to the gala because someone invited them. A board member. A friend. A colleague. The cause is secondary — the relationship is primary. This is not cynicism on the Connector's part. It is simply the truth of how they navigate the world. They give to people they trust, for causes those people care about.

The Connector is frequently underestimated by fundraising teams who mistake their social motivation for shallow giving. In fact, Connectors can become some of your most loyal donors — once the cause catches them. They arrived through a door held open by someone they know. The program's job is to give them something to walk toward on their own.

What the program owes the Connector: a moment that transcends the social and touches something personal. The story that makes it real.

◆ The Builder

The Builder's giving is an extension of identity. They are building something with their philanthropy — a legacy, a reputation, a sense of themselves as someone who matters to the community. They are not purely ego-driven, though ego is present. They are driven by a desire for impact at scale, and by the feeling that their contribution is architecturally significant, not merely symbolic.

Builders respond to vision. They want to know where the organization is going, not just where it has been. They want the ask to feel proportional to the opportunity, not just the budget. A Builder who gives \$10,000 to an organization with a \$500,000 fund-a-need feels like a cornerstone. The same Builder giving \$10,000 to an organization with a \$5 million fund-a-need feels like a rounding error. Scale the story to the Builder's need for significance.

What the program owes the Builder: a vision large enough to be worth building toward, and an ask that honors the size of their ambition.

◆ The Loyal

The Loyal is in the room because someone they love is connected to this cause. A child who benefited from the program. A family member on the board. A friend who runs the organization. Their giving is an act of relationship — not charity, not legacy, not even cause alignment. It is love expressed through a check.

The Loyal is deeply reliable within the geography of that relationship. When the relationship shifts — the friend moves on, the child ages out of the program — the Loyal's connection to the organization must deepen into something independent, or it will dissolve.

What the program owes the Loyal: a moment that expands the relationship beyond the one person they came in for — a story that makes the whole community feel like their community.

◆ The Skeptic

The Skeptic is in the room with questions they haven't asked out loud. Are they using the money well? Does this organization actually accomplish what it claims? Is this event a genuine fundraiser or a performance? They have been burned before — by a charity that disappointed them, by an event that felt more like theater than substance, by an ask that came before trust was built.

The Skeptic is not a problem to be solved. The Skeptic is a reader of rooms. They are watching everything. And if your program is built with integrity, if the stories are real and the numbers are honest and the ask is warranted, the Skeptic will give — and give significantly, because their trust, once earned, is deep.

What the program owes the Skeptic: proof before emotion. Credibility before the ask. Evidence that this room is worth their conviction.

The Head Axis: What They Believe Their Gift Does

The Head axis is the most underestimated dimension in nonprofit fundraising. It is also the most directly within your control as a message architect.

Every donor in your room holds a belief about what their gift accomplishes. That belief is either accurate, vague, or wrong. And the accuracy of that belief has a direct and measurable effect on the size and consistency of their giving.

There are three levels of mission comprehension operating in any gala room.

LEVEL 1

The Vague Sympathizer

The Vague Sympathizer knows your organization does good work. They feel warm about it. They can describe your cause in broad strokes — "they help kids" or "they support the community" — but they cannot tell you what a specific gift accomplishes. They cannot connect \$500 to an outcome. They give emotionally and impulsively, responding to the room's energy in the moment.

This is not a character flaw. It is a communication failure. The Vague Sympathizer became vague because your organization never gave them a clear picture of impact. The gala is your best chance to change that — and if you do, their giving will deepen immediately.

LEVEL 2

The Informed Believer

The Informed Believer understands your mission and can articulate the connection between their gift and an outcome. "My \$1,000 funds three months of tutoring for one student." "A gift at this level underwrites one full scholarship." They give with conviction because they have a mental model of how the machine works.

The Informed Believer tends to upgrade over time. As their comprehension deepens, so does their commitment. They are your most educable donors — not because they need basic information, but because they are ready for the next level of organizational story.

LEVEL 3

The Insider

The Insider has deep organizational knowledge. They have toured a program site, met the staff, read the annual report, asked hard questions and received honest answers. They understand not just what the organization does, but how it does it and why it is designed the way it is.

Insiders give strategically. They are your most likely major donors and your most likely planned giving candidates. They are also your most dangerous advocates — for or against — because they understand the organization well enough to have strong opinions about its leadership and direction.

What this means for your program: You are never speaking to one level of Head comprehension. You are always speaking to all three simultaneously. The program must give Vague Sympathizers a concrete impact image. It must confirm the Informed Believer's understanding and expand it. It must give the Insider a glimpse of where the organization is going next.

This is not three separate speeches. It is one well-constructed arc that carries all three levels forward at once.

SECTION 06

The Habit Axis: How They Give

The Habit axis is the dimension fundraisers know best — and sometimes over-rely on. It measures a donor's behavioral history with the organization: how often they give, how consistently, and whether that pattern is deepening or eroding.

There are five behavioral patterns present in any gala room.

The First-Timer has no history with the organization. Everything they know, they learned tonight. The program is their entire introduction to the cause, the community, and the ask. They will not give without being taken through the full arc — emotional connection, mission comprehension, and a clear, justified ask.

The Loyal Annual Giver has been in this room before. They have a giving pattern, and that pattern has its own momentum. The risk with the Loyal Annual is complacency — theirs and yours. They are likely to give what they gave last year, because that is what the relationship has asked of them. The program's job is to disrupt that pattern — not aggressively, but meaningfully. Give them a reason to reconsider the size of their commitment.

The Upgrader came to this event in motion. Something has shifted in their relationship to the cause — a new personal connection, increased wealth, a deeper understanding of the mission's impact — and they are ready to give more. The program's job is to meet them where they are and give them a moment worthy of the upgrade they were already considering.

The Lapsed Returner was once a consistent giver and has been absent for a season. Their presence in the room tonight is itself a signal — something drew them back. They are not cold. They are cautious. The program must re-earn what the relationship once had, not assume it still does.

The Recurring Sustainer gives monthly or annually through an automated system. They are your most valuable behavioral asset and your most commonly overlooked gala guest. They are already committed at the systems level. The gala is not where they make their giving decision — they made it already. What the gala can do is deepen their emotional conviction and open the door to a major gift conversation.

SECTION 07

The Donor Cast: Putting the Three Axes Together

Every donor in your room can be described by the intersection of all three axes. Their Heart type tells you why they give. Their Head level tells you what they believe their gift does. Their Habit pattern tells you how they give.

Together, these three dimensions produce a complete donor profile — a Cast Profile — that has direct implications for how the program is written and sequenced.

A useful shorthand for any donor looks like this:

Builder / Informed / Annual

a legacy-focused donor who understands the mission and gives consistently but may be ready for an upgrade conversation if the vision is large enough.

Connector / Vague / First-Timer

a social participant attending for the first time with low mission comprehension who needs the full emotional and educational arc before any ask will land.

Believer / Insider / Recurring

a mission-convicted donor with deep organizational knowledge who sustains their giving automatically and is a strong major gift candidate if the right conversation is opened.

You don't need to profile every donor in the room. You need to understand which types are dominant in your room — and write the program for the actual cast, not the imaginary one.

SECTION 08

Know Your Room: The HHH Score

The practical tool that emerges from the three-axis model is what we call the HHH Score — a simple, three-number profile of any donor or donor room.

Each axis scores on a 1-to-3 scale.

AXIS Heart Score

- 1 Warm but distant.** Feels good about the organization. No deep personal connection to the cause.
- 2 Emotionally engaged.** Has been moved by the mission at least once. The cause has touched something real.
- 3 Personally convicted.** The cause lives inside their own story. This is not charity — it is identity.

AXIS Head Score

- 1 Vague Sympathizer.** Knows the org does good work. Cannot connect a gift to a specific outcome.
- 2 Informed Believer.** Understands the mission. Can articulate the impact of a gift at a specific level.
- 3 Insider.** Deep organizational knowledge. Understands strategy, scale, and the complexity of the work.

AXIS Habit Score

- 1 First-Timer or Lapsed.** No established giving pattern with this organization.
- 2 Occasional Giver.** Gives when asked. Pattern is inconsistent. Not yet recurring.
- 3 Loyal or Recurring.** Consistent giving history. Pattern is deepening, not eroding.

A donor's full profile is their Heart type plus their HHH Score:

The Skeptic, 2/1/2

emotionally warming, mission comprehension low, occasional giving history.

That sentence tells you exactly what the program needs to do for that person tonight. It gives the Skeptic emotional confirmation that the organization is credible, mission education that elevates their comprehension, and a clear consistent ask that moves their Habit score from 2 to 3.

The Room Profile: Knowing Your Cast Before Curtain

The HHH Score becomes most powerful when applied to the room as a whole.

Before a major gala, the Development Director and Executive Director should walk through their top fifty to one hundred donors and score each one across the three axes. The aggregate scores reveal the Room Profile — the dominant character of the audience the program must serve.

Three Room Types emerge most commonly.

The Heart Room is emotionally connected but intellectually thin. The average Heart score is high; the Head score is low. This room will give generously in the moment — their paddles will go up in the emotional peak of the fund-a-need. But they will not necessarily return. The giving was impulsive, not rooted in comprehension.

Program prescription for the Heart Room: Lead with story, absolutely. But build in a single, crystal-clear impact moment — one number, one outcome, one specific image of what this money does in the world. Give the Heart Room something to hold onto after the emotion fades.

The Head Room understands the mission but may not be emotionally activated. The average Head score is high; the Heart score is moderate. These donors respect the organization. They may not love it yet. They give because it is rational, not because it is personal.

Program prescription for the Head Room: The emotional arc matters more here, not less. Lead with proof — a data point, an impact number, something that confirms their intellectual respect. Then crack the room open with a story that makes it human. The Head Room has been waiting to feel something. Give them permission.

The Habit Room is loyal and consistent but at risk of stagnation. The average Habit score is high; Heart and Head scores are moderate. These donors are giving on autopilot. They will give again tonight — the same amount they gave last year, because that is the groove the relationship has worn.

Program prescription for the Habit Room: Re-earn the conviction. Show them something they have never seen — a new program, a breakthrough result, a vision for what the organization is becoming. The Habit Room does not need to be persuaded to give. It needs to be surprised into giving more.

SECTION 10

The Director's Implication

Here is the sentence that changes how you build every gala program from this point forward.

THE DIRECTOR'S RULE

Your job is not to write a program that moves the room. Your job is to write a program that moves every character in the room — simultaneously, in sequence, without losing anyone in the arc.

That is a director's problem. Not a logistics problem. Not a scheduling problem. Not a speaker-management problem.

It is a message architecture problem. And it is entirely solvable — if you know your cast before you call action.

The Donor Cast framework gives you the vocabulary to have a different kind of pre-event conversation with every client. Not "what is the fund-a-need goal?" — though that matters. Not "how many speakers do we have?" — though that matters too.

The first question is: *Who is in this room?*

What is the dominant Heart type? What is the Head level of the average guest? What is the Habit pattern of the giving base?

The answers to those three questions determine the program architecture. They determine where the emotional peak lands, how the impact data is framed, how the ask is sequenced, and what the room needs to hear in the final moments before the fund-a-need begins.

Every detail of a great gala program flows from knowing the cast.

Audience First. Every Time.

SECTION 11

What This Means for Year-Round Strategy

The Donor Cast framework does not live only in the gala room. It lives in every piece of donor communication your organization produces.

The marketing question it surfaces is this:

Does your organization have more Heart donors, Head donors, or Habit donors — and is your year-round content strategy feeding the right axis?

A Heart-heavy donor base needs more mission education in your communications — more impact reporting, more program data, more stories that show the mechanism of change, not just the emotion of need. You are building Head scores year-round so that when donors arrive at the gala, they arrive as Informed Believers, not Vague Sympathizers.

A Head-heavy donor base needs more emotional content — more personal stories, more beneficiary voices, more moments that make the mission human and close. You are deepening Heart scores so that the intellectual respect becomes personal conviction.

A Habit-heavy donor base needs more vision content — more organizational ambition, more scale thinking, more language about what the next chapter of the mission looks like. You are preventing stagnation and opening the door to major gift conversations.

*Know your room. Not just on the night of the event.
Know it three hundred and sixty-five days a year.*

Chapter continues: The Guided Donor Conversation — how to use the Donor Cast profile in a one-on-one major gift setting.

Run of Show Consulting

Event Message Strategy for Nonprofit Galas

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