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Young People and Philanthropy

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Q: A big part of creating the future of our communities is growing the next generation of philanthropists. How can we get young people involved in philanthropy?

A: There are a number of things to think about with this particular brain teaser. (I guess that's what makes it a brain teaser!) Here are just some things for your team to consider as you focus on growing the next generation of philanthropists.

1 If it is true that growing philanthropy starts at home, and that kids learn by example, are there ways your organization can encourage families to work together to help your efforts? Do you encourage families to bring everyone, and to help out together? What work needs to be done around your organization that can be turned into special family volunteer activities? Are there opportunities you can provide for families to model those behaviors to each other (and involve their friends!)? Whether it's clearing the weeds in the back lot, hauling and sorting donated goods, or doing a large mailing over pizza - brainstorm a list of fun events families can do together to help your mission.

2 Does your organization engage everyone, young and old, NOT in what interests you, but in what interests THEM? People of all ages will provide all sorts of assistance if they are encouraged to give of all their gifts, not just their money. Does your organization have a way to engage anyone who cares about your mission - young or old - in a way that builds on the strengths of those individuals, rather than simply doing what you need to get done?

A Story:

When we were still running Tucson's Diaper Bank, a friend thought it would be great if the Diaper Bank was in our community's holiday parade (and I do mean "friend" in every sense of the word. See the [Intro to FriendRaising](#) to see why I stress that). Unfortunately, the parade was the same day as our day-long Diaper Drive kick-off event in the park. We had not a spare moment to organize one more thing!

We know many groups who would have said, "We just can't do it that day. But please, come help us in the park."

But Sue was so excited about the parade. So we asked her, "Would you be willing to carry the ball on that for us?" The way she lit up, you would think we had asked her if she would share our lottery winnings! She immediately got to work. She asked Home Depot for some scraps to build a cart that would look like a crib. Then she got a bubble machine. Add the Diaper Bank's banner and some diapers to fill the crib, and Voila! The Diaper Bank was in the parade!

The result that mattered, though, was not that we had a float in the parade. What mattered was that Sue was now bought in to the Diaper Bank's efforts 100%. Did that grow her sense of philanthropy? You bet!

For each of your current donors, can you list two things they would love to help with, that has nothing to do with money? Is there a way to translate their passion for gourmet cooking, or gardening, or cinema, or football into a way to help your mission?

When you talk with corporate leaders, can you tap into all the things they value beside their money - their wisdom, their connections, their ideas? When you talk with funders, instead of pitching your own story, are you spending time digging into their brains for the immense knowledge they have about the community?

And when it comes to young people, if you want to grow philanthropy, have you asked them what they would like to do to help your cause? You will be surprised (unless you have kids yourself, and then nothing surprises you!) at how creative and energized they will be in their efforts to further your mission!

Instead of just giving them a project you think they will like, if you are serious about growing the next generation of philanthropists, perhaps it's time to do some Group Sleuthing with young people around the question, "What could young people do to help further our mission?". (See Strategy #24 in FriendRaising for the how-to's of Group Sleuthing.) Be prepared, though - this will be some of the most engaged philanthropy you can imagine!

3 While we're on the subject of Group Sleuthing, if you want to engage young people in philanthropy, have you involved them directly in the issues that matter to them? No, I don't mean a "Youth Advisory Board." I mean real hands-on, meaningful involvement in and responsibility for things that matter about your mission. The best example we know of this is Every Voice in Action Foundation, a small family foundation whose mission is to provide a voice for young people. And one of the many ways they have done so is to [hand their grant-making process over to those young people!](#)

4 One more thought. Perhaps it is time to stop asking, "How can we get young people involved in philanthropy?" Really.

Young people care about their communities. And yet we "older" folks ask this question as if they do not care at all - as if we have to somehow cajole young people to pay attention to the place that is their home just as much as it is ours. When we are involved in conversations about "growing the next generation of philanthropists," I secretly expect to hear the phrase "those young whipper snappers" come up!

Young people are no less likely to want to take action on behalf of their communities than the people asking the questions about growing philanthropy. I have not done a scientific study, but I would be willing to bet the numbers of young people just sitting home, apathetically pounding on video games, caring not a lick for their communities, is the same proportion of people my own age sitting home watching sports or reality shows on tv and caring equally little about the world outside their doors.

And I would be further willing to bet that the numbers of kids who would love to help improve their community may even be higher than the number of adults who currently give their time to do the same.

So that's the final brain teaser when it comes to growing philanthropy: Are you spending time lamenting the apathy in kids these days? Or are you finding ways to provide all sorts of opportunities for young people to share their passion and their gifts? Are you thinking philanthropy must be somehow extracted out of young people despite their loud objection? Or are you assuming it is a natural part of our humanity, to want to help others, and therefore finding ways to encourage and inspire that in EVERYONE in your community, young and old, rich and poor?

If you want to grow the next generation of philanthropists, be the catalyst for engaging the gifts and the enthusiasm and the compassion of the young people in your community. And who knows - they may just teach YOU a thing or two about how to grow philanthropy!



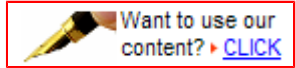
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Strategy #24 on Group Sleuthing can be found in FriendRaising

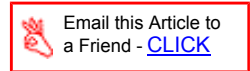
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