

Business to Arts
Developing Creative
Partnerships



DeVosInstitute
of Arts Management at the Kennedy Center

Business to Arts/DeVos Institute Case Study— Wexford Festival Opera Major Donor Fundraising

Wexford Festival Opera (WFO), in southeastern Ireland, began in October 1951. Founded by Dr. Tom Walsh, WFO is celebrated internationally for its dedication to re-invigorating neglected, rare, and unusual operas performed by predominantly emerging and undiscovered talent. Together with three mainstage productions each year, the 12-day annual festival offers a robust programme of morning events, lunchtime recitals, concerts and late night events.



The Festival's Mission

A unique festival, enabling local, national & international audiences to indulge their passion for unjustly neglected opera, with a programme of supporting events at the time of the festival and throughout the year, all presented to the highest professional standards, while providing access to, and a platform for, new and emerging Irish and global talent.

The Challenge—Moving Beyond Public Funding

Historically, like so many cultural organisations, especially those with a national remit, WFO relied substantially on public funding and box office income. In the wake of the recent recession, however, it became clear that public aid and box office revenues were likely to stagnate (or decline), and that a new approach to fundraising was required. For WFO, this challenge was augmented by the fact that opera, as a form, requires a long-term planning approach in order to contract the best artists, designers, and directors. As a result of the annual nature of public funding, WFO artistic planning had largely taken place on an annual basis, leaving little time for the development of truly transformational work requiring more than 12 months to plan, fund, market, and produce.

Two Key Strategies

To confront these dilemmas, WFO decided upon **two primary mechanisms** to increase private-sector engagement, namely from corporations and individuals:

- A. An enhanced “**major donor**” **scheme** (for higher-level individual and corporate gifts of €10,000 and above)
- B. A U.S.A.-based **special event campaign** (especially to engage new donors and patrons, both individuals and corporations)

The intended result was a greater level of financial flexibility and durability. On the one hand, fundraising from individual and corporate sources can take place on a schedule that extends far beyond the annual constraints of public funding. As a result, WFO would be able to plan with confidence further into the future, increasing the likelihood that its work would produce greater impact and attract more diverse audiences.

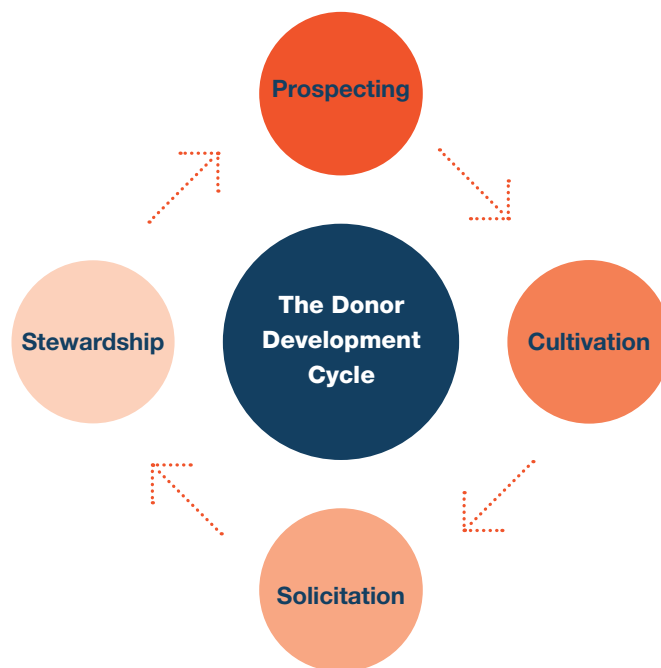
On the other hand, these strategies would decrease WFO dependence on public subsidy and market-driven income. WFO would continue to make a strong case that it deserves (and needs) support from the public sector, as a leading cultural event with an international brand and major contributor to national cultural tourism. But, at the same time, it would add new, substantial sources of contributed income from a diversity of sources, decreasing the impact that the sudden loss or decrease from any one source would have on its overall financial durability.

A. Strategy One—An Enhanced Major Donor Scheme

Threats

At the onset of the New Stream/DeVos Institute Programme, WFO evaluated its existing *Friends and Major Donor* programmes (annual fundraising schemes focused on “entry-level”, and “high-level” donors, respectively). Leadership determined two top-level threats:

1. The level of care paid to current donors—or what the Institute refers to as donor *stewardship*—required improvement. This deficiency was a result of both a lack of priority and a lack of dedicated manpower. The new environment—of stalled non-voluntary income sources—required an increased investment in this area, especially as more organisations were competing for the same donors.
2. The structure of the programme itself was insufficient. The programme’s benefit levels and incentives were not positioned to maximise revenue.



Action Taken

The Festival adopted a new approach to the cultivation of its “family” of donors, friends, and partners, taking every opportunity to understand their giving interest and ability. An investment was made, in particular, into the *prospecting*, *cultivation*, and *solicitation* functions of the donor management process.

Prospecting

The Festival quickly expanded its list of potential donors, or *prospects*, with the ability to make a major gift. These prospects were drawn from its lists of repeat ticket buyers; special event attendees; entry-level contributors; the personal and professional networks of key members of the organisation; and existing major donors. Prospects entirely new to the WFO network were identified through a rigorous research and evaluation phase.

Cultivation

Top-level prospects were assigned a strategy comprising carefully-selected cultivation events that utilised annual artistic and institutional marketing assets. These assets included dinner with artists, VIP access within Festival events, preferred seating, and special events for donors during the Festival itself and at other times during the year—both in Ireland and abroad. Each prospect was assigned a relationship manager to assure consistency of approach.

Solicitation

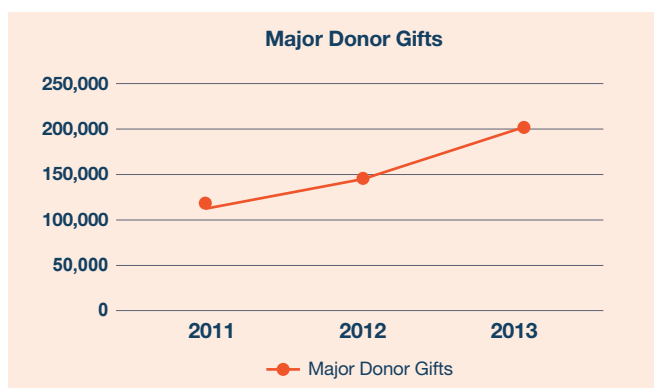
Critically, the process of giving was *personalised* through a new structure of giving. WFO began to offer donors bespoke options to fund a *specific* function within the WFO season. Categories of giving included:

- Cast Sponsorship (with access to the cast of WFO productions)—€5,000
- Short Work Producers (including credit for serving as a “producer” of a new, short-form work)—€10,000
- Evening Opera Sponsors—€25,000
- Associate Producer for Evening Opera—€50,000
- Senior Producer for Evening Opera—€200,000

The Outcome

The results from this effort were astonishing.

Between 2011 and 2013, WFO generated €465,484 in **new, increased revenue** from major gifts. Gifts from major donors increased in value by an overwhelming 81% from 2012 to 2013 alone.



Major gift revenue represented 3.2% of the Festival’s total income in 2012; it represented almost double that, or 5.6%, in 2013.

Approximately half of the donors in this period were new to WFO, representing a major expansion in the diversity of WFO’s funding base, a key indicator of fundraising health.

The Takeaway

This outcome was enabled by a culture change in how the Festival looked after its family of donors. WFO tailored its solicitation strategy toward proactive “asks” based on specific individual interests. Stewardship was emphasised, nurturing warm, authentic, and meaningful relationships with donors based on mutual interest.

Additionally, WFO cultivated “leadership” relationships with key major donors. Later this year, a leading, six-figure donor (towards WFO’s Presidents’ Circle Major Gifts campaign), will host a prospect introduction event in his home with existing donors and key prospects.

WFO’s major gift goal for 2014 is €375,000. To achieve this, it is currently working on a growing list of major donor prospects.

B. Strategy Two—Developing income from Abroad

Over the years, WFO has developed significant connections with its audiences abroad, primarily in the U.K., the U.S.A., and Europe.

Following a fact-finding trip to the U.S.A. in 2009, WFO set upon the deliberate development of a presence in the U.S. fundraising market.

Action Taken

Value Proposition

WFO understood that in order to successfully fundraise in a crowded philanthropic environment, one with many local organisations vying for the same dollars, the Festival would need to illustrate an unique value proposition to U.S.-based prospects. After considerable environmental analysis, WFO established the following, unique selling points to define its presence in the U.S. market:

- **Discovery**—WFO's programme focuses on the discovery of little-known work, including that of American composers and co-productions with American opera companies.
- **Emerging Talent**—WFO acts as highly-regarded international platform for emerging opera talent from the U.S. Many, now-prominent American artists (some touring worldwide) made their international debut in Wexford.

Influential Network

To jumpstart the fundraising process in the U.S., WFO approached a trusted friend and long-time supporter of the Festival: leading Irish-American philanthropist, Loretta Brennan Glucksman. In 2012, Ms. Brennan Glucksman hosted a launch event to concretise the Festival's presence in the U.S. The event was attended by over 50 key individuals, comprised WFO's established U.S. connections, together with potential future ambassadors and prospects of the Festival.

Galvanizing Mechanism

In January, 2013, the Festival formalised the *American Friends of Wexford Opera*, made up of 12 U.S.-based members. Ms. Brennan Glucksman agreed to serve as Honorary Patron and Shane Naughton, a leading NYC-based technology investor and entrepreneur, was named Chair. The objective of this Committee was to identify U.S.-based prospects; ultimately it yielded more than 500 prospects and potential honourees for the Festival's inaugural fundraising gala in September 2013.

In its pre-gala communications, WFO promoted the fact that the evening's proceeds would fund one of the upcoming season's operas—a rare production of an opera brought back to life. (The work subsequently won the Best Rediscovered Work award at the International Opera Awards.)

And, that June, the Irish Consul General hosted the launch of the American Friends of Wexford Opera, to introduce prospects to the inaugural New York Dinner Gala, further coalescing a body of support around the effort.

The Outcome

On September 19th, the Festival hosted its first Gala dinner in the U.S. at New York City's Mandarin Oriental Hotel.

The evening featured an elegant dinner, speeches, live music, and a remarkable performance by the spectacular American Soprano, Angela Meade. Ms. Meade had made her European premiere at WFO in 2010, and has subsequently become an established presence in major opera houses throughout around the world, reinforcing Wexford's credentials as an incubator of emerging American operatic talent.

196 people attended the event which grossed almost \$300,000 for the Festival. The vast majority of the people who attended the gala were **new to the Festival**, with the exception of two pre-existing *Friends*.

The majority of the gala attendees had never attended the Festival in Wexford.

Tables were sold at the \$10,000, \$15,000, \$25,000 and \$35,000 levels, and seats sold at \$750 each. The Festival also placed pledge cards on each table, offering guests of those who purchased tables the opportunity to donate to the various costs associated with bringing the American artists to Ireland for last year's Festival. That effort alone raised over \$7,000 on the night.

The Takeaway

The Festival will produce another New York City Gala in September 2014. **This year's target is \$400,000 (€295,000)** which will fund WFO's European premiere of a Pulitzer-prize winning opera by an American composer. It retained all U.S.-based committee members, and grown that body by three equally well-connected new patrons.

All of last year's attendees, including those invited by people who purchased tables are being targeted to attend and support this year's event.

The Festival has vigorously encouraged Gala attendees to visit Wexford in an effort to further develop its relationship with these prospective donors, and expand the Festival's international audience.

Inspired by the success of the Festival's U.S.-based fundraising committee, the organisation has recently established a similar mechanism in Ireland. This committee, known as the National Development Council, will consist of existing donors and leading friends of the Festival, and will be tasked with acting as advocates and ambassadors for WFO in Irish funding circles and facilitating introductions to major, Ireland-based donor prospects.

Summary

Wexford Festival Opera identified a pressing need to expand the number of sources on which it would call, financially, in the years to come. Two primary mechanisms—a major donor campaign and a U.S.-based special event—formed the bedrock of its response. The result—the addition of over 200 new donors and over €560,000 in new income (in just three years)—speaks to the promise of this effort.

While this amount would not yet offset a serious decline in public subsidy or stalled commercial revenues, it has allowed WFO, rather, a longer-term approach to planning its art and, as a result, more creative flexibility. Whereas its planning in 2012 was limited to less than a year by the annual funding cycle, a more diverse set of resources has provided WFO leadership the confidence to work much further in advance, setting in motion a virtuous cycle of artistic, marketing, and fundraising potential.