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What To Do With Unwanted Donations

Everyone agrees that donations are the lifeblood of not-for-profit organizations. At the top of most wish lists is cash, and depending on your situation, you may accept other assets and in-kind contributions.

But what should you do when offered donations that are not usable or appropriate? For example, how should a charity react when it is offered an item so worn that the only option is to send it to the local dump? Unfortunately, this can be a drain on the charity's staff, and if there's a fee to use the dump, it can cost the organization.

Another sticky situation that some not-for-profits face is what to do with donations of real estate. Although property is potentially valuable, many organizations don't have the staff or skills to manage real estate and may not want to accept the environmental liabilities that go along with it.

And how should you cope with contributions of old computers? Since computer parts may contain lead and are considered hazardous waste, many areas charge a fee for proper disposal.



Of course, not-for-profit don't want to run the risk of offending donors -- especially when a few months down the road, the same individuals might come up with something that perfectly meshes with the organization's needs.

Honesty and politeness are the best policy. Most contributors respond well when gently told that the organization appreciates the gesture, but the donation is something you cannot use. Furthermore, most people understand that a not-for-profit must watch expenses. Explain that it isn't fiscally prudent to accept something, such as out-of-date computers, which will cost the organization money to dispose of.

Some not-for-profit managers tell donors they can't accept contributions because they lack storage space while others smooth over any ruffled feathers by letting donors know of other items the organization needs -- including volunteer hours.

Another trick to minimize the problem is to use local media -- send press releases to newspapers and local television stations, for instance -- to get the word out about what your organization really needs and what it cannot accept.

Or consider making use of clearinghouses in which for-profit organizations advertise what they have to donate -- office furniture and equipment, for example. For a small annual fee, not-for-profits have access to a "bulletin board" and can scan it for items on their wish lists.

Here are a few other suggestions to minimize any bad feelings and get what your organization really needs.

- Try to steer donors to a more appropriate venue -- another not-for-profit group that might be able to use the items.

- Consult with your not-for-profit adviser about whether it's possible to accept certain assets, such as real estate, and the best way to go about handling such transactions.
- Try to find out if the donors have other items that you need and let them know about those needs. When soliciting contributions from for-profits, remind them of what donations can do for their companies in terms of image enhancement and tax benefits. This approach is frequently more effective than talking up the impact a donation has on people's lives.
- Another good method for getting items you need is to ask someone from a particular for-profit company to sit on your board of directors.

And, of course, the best policy in some situations may be to graciously accept a well-intended, but inappropriate, gift and quietly take it to the dumpster or to be recycled.

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