

# The ABCs of Identifying Prospects



Everyone knows potential donors—even people who say, “I don’t know anyone who has money.” Indeed, the average adult has relationships of some sort with 150 to 200 people (we’re not even including social media “friends”), and about 70 percent of those people support charitable organizations. This exercise provides a systematic way of sorting through your relationships to identify prospects.

## Why Do This Exercise?

To help address the myth that “philanthropy comes from wealthy strangers that I don’t know”

## Use This Exercise When

You want your board, staff, and volunteers to help expand your prospect pool or deepen outreach to current donors

## Time Required

20 minutes

## Audience

Anyone involved with your

fundraising campaign: some combination of board, staff, and volunteers

## Setting

Anywhere you gather to work on your campaign plan and train your participants—preferably with people sitting in a circle or around a table

## Materials

- Flip chart paper and markers
- Prospect Form (page 109)

## FACILITATING THE EXERCISE

1. Introduce this exercise by telling participants you want their help with thinking about current donors and also expanding the pool of potential donors. Let them know that, while you’ll be asking for names of people they know, no one will solicit these prospects without the permission or involvement of the recommender.
2. Write the following on the flip chart:  
ACCESS  
BELIEF  
CAPACITY
3. Explain that these are the three criteria for identifying prospects.

**ACCESS:** Do they have a relationship with any of our board members, staff, donors, or key volunteers? Are they already contributing money, time, or both to our organization?

**BELIEF:** Do they care about our issues or programs, or those who benefit from our work? Some organizations have broad appeal, while others will appeal to a narrower group of people.

**CAPACITY:** Are they charitable? Do they give to other organizations?

People who meet these three criteria are legitimate *prospects* and should be asked to contribute (or perhaps asked to contribute more). Note that the ABC formula makes it easier to remember the definition of the word *prospect*.

4. Emphasize that the order listed above—access, belief, capacity—is also the proper ranking when weighing these criteria. To state this differently, the relationship is the most important factor. People who are new to fundraising tend to begin by asking, “Who’s rich?” rather than “Who do we know?” This is exactly backwards.
5. Hand out copies of the prospect form (page 109). Talk people through the headings, explaining that:
  - a) *Contact*. They should write names, but don’t need to include contact information at this time. That will be collected later.
  - b) *Relationship to you* is straightforward: friend, coworker, cousin, and the like.
  - c) *Believes in cause?* This can be answered with a yes, no, or a question mark. Because you’re listing individuals you know, you should have some sense of their values and interests.
  - d) *Gives to nonprofits?* This doesn’t refer specifically to your organization but rather, “Is this person charitable? Does he or she contribute to nonprofits?” Again, this question can be answered with a yes, no, or a question mark.
  - e) *Gives to us?* Has this person ever given to our organization? Use a yes, no, or question mark.
  - f) On *Gift range*, encourage participants to either make an educated guess about the amount the prospect might give or leave this column blank if they’re completely stumped.

It will be helpful to remind everyone that about 70 percent of Americans contribute to nonprofit organizations, so we can assume that seven out of ten people we know are donors. While this exercise is designed to identify new prospects, let participants know they can also include current donors to be “upgraded” or asked to give a larger donation.

6. Ask them to leave the first line blank; it will be filled in at the end of the exercise. Then instruct them to sit quietly, flip through their “mental Rolodexes,” and begin writing names. Encourage participants who have smartphones, tablets, or other devices to use them, since these devices are full of personal contacts. Allow them about ten minutes to get as far as they can with the prospect form. Some will fill up the form and start writing more names in the margins; others will struggle. It’s important to encourage everyone and not make this activity competitive.
7. After ten minutes, ask for attention. On the principle that you can’t ask others until you have given yourself—this is one of the basic tenets of fundraising—instruct each person to write his or her own name on the first line and, if they’re ready, to include the amount of their gift. Those who are uncomfortable writing the amount of their gifts while others are present can add the amount later.
8. Finally, thank everyone for sharing their names. Suggest a process for adding contact information, collecting the forms, and entering them into your database or creating a master list. For example, ask everyone to bring their completed forms to the next board meeting, where the development committee will collect and compile them.
9. Explain that the next step (for a future meeting) is to talk through the names together and decide how to “segment” them: which prospects will be approached in person, or invited to a house party, or added to the mailing list for appeal letters, or added to the phone bank call list, and so on.
10. Debrief the exercise using the following questions:
  - What was your experience thinking about potential donors? How did you choose to filter people in or out?
  - Has your perspective changed on the question “Who is a prospect?” If so, how?
  - Did this exercise change your thinking about your own giving? If so, how?

*We thank our colleagues Kim Klein and Mike Roque for sharing this exercise.*

**TRAINING TIP** You’ll get a lot further with this exercise if you’ve already worked with your team to reduce their resistance to fundraising. Start with *Why People Give* on page 29.