

## Donor management 101: How to give thanks

By [Lisa Bertagnoli](#) November 25, 2013

At least three times a year, Helen Zell zips down to Orchestra Hall to watch maestro Riccardo Muti and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra in a closed rehearsal. It's an invitation-only event for Ms. Zell, who, along with her husband, Equity Group Investments Chairman Sam Zell, has given several million dollars to the CSO. "I love it," Ms. Zell says of the rehearsals, attended by other big donors, too. "I'm there for the music."

The Zells also are part of the new Richard and Helen Thomas Donor Gallery at Symphony Center. The gallery, unveiled in October, pays pictorial and video tribute to 87 individuals who, like the Zells, have given more than \$500,000 to the CSO, plus 56 institutions that have given more than \$1 million to the orchestra.

The tribute is nice, Ms. Zell says, particularly if it encourages others to give generously, but other than that? "It has no relevance in my life, or in Sam's life," she says.



From left, Karen Alexander, Chicago Symphony Orchestra vice president of development; Deborah Rutter, CSO president; Jay Henderson, CSO board of trustees chairman; Helen Zell. Photo: Kendall Karmanian

Nonprofits spend lots of time dreaming up ways to thank and acknowledge big donors. The CSO's donor gallery, in the works for two years (the CSO won't reveal its cost), is one. The gallery, which makes its debut just as the CSO is trying to step up contributions for special projects, such as endowing chairs and financing international tours, is a way to thank the "commitment and consistency" of those who have given generously over time, says Karen Alexander, vice president of development.

But donors like the Zells really want access—to people and experiences they might not have otherwise. Ms. Zell, for instance, turned down celebratory dinners and other gestures from the University of Michigan after she and Mr. Zell gave \$50 million to endow a creative writing program. Her preferred tribute? Her name on the program, plus handwritten thank-you notes from students. "They are from people who are writers and poets, and I will save them until I die," Ms. Zell says.

Saying thanks for a big bag of money usually comes down to recognition—a name on a building or a program—and access to a special event or experience. Celebrity access in particular "drives a lot of philanthropy," says Brian Lauterbach, a fundraising consultant and founder of DonorPath, a Chicago-based for-profit company that provides consulting services to small nonprofits.

For Chicagoan Elissa Hamid Efroymsen, "celebrity" means public television personalities.

Access to them—for herself and for her children—is one reason Ms. Efroymsen, vice chair of the Efroymsen Family Fund in Indianapolis, has increased her giving to WTTW-TV/Channel 11 over the years to a current rate of about \$25,000 a year. Ms. Efroymsen's husband has met documentary filmmaker Ken Burns. Her 6-year-old son, Lincoln, met one of his heroes, David Pogue, host of "Nova ScienceNow" on PBS, at a private dinner for major donors. The station has ways for more modest donors to meet TV personalities; the more intimate events, like the dinners, "make it special" for big contributors, Ms. Efroymsen says.

Still, even major money doesn't buy an all-access pass. The station won't let donors buy their way onto "Chicago Tonight" or "Check, Please!," says Jill Britton, senior vice president for development at WTTW-11/WFMT 98.7. "It's not a quid pro quo," she says.

Oak Brook residents Jeffrey and Julie Diermeier are major contributors to UCAN, a Chicago nonprofit that helps youth who have experienced trauma. To thank the Diermeiers for a \$500,000 gift, UCAN named a program after them—Diermeier Future Leaders Now, a violence-prevention initiative. The name recognition "delighted" Mr. Diermeier, 61, chairman of the Financial Accounting Foundation in Norwalk, Conn. He'd rather have his name on a program than a building, "if you can see a lot of people benefiting from it," he says.

Another form of recognition for him: the chance to help shape the organization's work.

UCAN CEO “Tom Vanden Berk will give me a call—'Hey, we're working on this, would you mind taking a look?' “ Mr. Diermeier says. “It's the feeling that you're an adviser or a counselor and that they value your opinion.”



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