
Guide to Donor Screening

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What is Donor Screening

Donor screening is a process where a list of potential or current donors is analyzed and, usually, ranked. Typically, the names on the list will be ranked for their viability as a major gift prospect, but donor screening is also used to identify monthly, annual giving, and other types of prospects. Donor screening is extremely useful in better understanding your donor database and the people in it.

"Donor screening is the best first step in prioritizing which of your donors you need to look at next. Most fundraising shops have more donors than fundraisers can handle, so a way to help prioritize that big list is to do a screen."

-Tracey Church, Tracy Church & Associates



Why is Donor Screening Useful?

Prospect Identification

Consider the following scenario. There is a donor who has been faithfully giving your organization \$100 every month for the last few years. This donor is very likely entrenched firmly in your organization's monthly giving bucket. And rightfully so; based on gifts to your organisation, this donor fits the profile of a monthly donor.

Donor screening has the potential to reveal information about this donor that will alter that profile. Perhaps the screen reveals that, based on external wealth indicators, this individual has the capacity to make a six-figure gift. Perhaps the screen analyzes external donation records (gifts to other organizations) and reveals this donor is on the board of private family foundation that routinely makes five-figure gifts to the local hospital.

In this scenario donor screening has helped your organization realize that a fantastic monthly donor is actually a fantastic major gift prospect.

Database Segmentation

Donor screening also helps you segment your database. A good donor database is used by multiple people for multiple reasons (or, sometimes, one person assuming multiple roles). For example, a donor database should be able to tell a major gift officer who her top prospects are. It should also be able to tell an annual giving officer who his top prospects are. And it should also be able to tell the organization what postal codes are likely to have the biggest impact for an upcoming mailout.



How do I do it?

Typically, you will send a donor screening service a spreadsheet containing names pulled from your database. This spreadsheet may also include email addresses or postal codes depending on a) the data the service needs to conduct a screen and b) the data they will return to you.

The service will then attempt to match those names (and other data points, if included) to external data sets. External data sets used in a donor screen can include: real estate wealth, connections to your organization, donation records, and salary records. After the names have been matched the screening service will append the spreadsheet and rank your list of names based on any agreed upon criteria.

Donor Screening vs. Wealth Screening

Donor screening and wealth screening are sometimes used interchangeably in fundraising. Since wealth screening is almost always a component of donor screening, this misunderstanding is understandable. Nevertheless, it is important to understand the limitations of pure wealth screening when compared to full donor screening. Let's look a closer look at both types of screening.

Wealth Screening Overview

Wealth screening is solely concerned with wealth. Here are some of the things wealth screening can tell you:

- Net worth
- Dwelling value
- Salary
- Other assets and liabilities

Donor Screening Overview

Donor screening is also concerned with wealth and any quality donor screen will include the elements of wealth screening listed above. However, donor screening may also look for the following:

- Connections to your organization
- Past philanthropic gifts in general
- Past philanthropic gifts to specific causes
- Non-giving philanthropic engagement such as serving on the board of a charity
- Political giving
- Capacity
- Affinity



What's the Difference?

Where wealth screening and donor screening differ concerns capacity and affinity. Wealth screening tries to determine how much money a person has. Donor screening expands on wealth screening and looks at a person's overall viability as a donor in addition to how much a person can give. Wealth screening focuses on capacity. Donor screening focuses on capacity and affinity.

Yes, it is critical to have an idea of a person's capacity to give – this makes sure our gift asks are reasonable and accurate. However, we also need to know the person's affinity for the cause or organization if we want to maximize our chances of success. Wealth screening helps determine the gift ask. Donor screening helps determine the gift ask and the likelihood of success.

Although sometimes they are confused due to their similarity, it is important to understand the differences between wealth screening and donor screening.

If you are solely concerned with a person's capacity to give, wealth screening is the exercise for you. If you are concerned with a person's capacity to give and his or her connections to your organization and likelihood to give to your organization, donor screening makes the most sense.

"One of my favourite use cases has been reviewing long time monthly donors through donor screening. Doing that helped identify some individuals who we needed to develop our relationship with, as they had the capacity for partnering on some larger projects."

-Aldera Chisholm, Sargent Solutions



Donor Screening Return on Investment

Donor screening helps fundraising organizations identify the best prospects by analyzing donors' capacity, and affinity for giving. This results in a more efficient approach to fundraising. Here's why the ROI of donor screening is worth it.

Efficiency

Donor screening allows fundraisers to focus on high-potential prospects. WealthEngine reports that nonprofits using screening see a 10–20% rise in average gift size and a 10% increase in donor engagement. By identifying likely major gift donors early, fundraisers can prioritize these relationships.

Conversion Rates

Screened prospects are more likely to give. DonorSearch found that they convert at nearly twice the rate of non-screened donors.

Cost Savings on Donor Acquisition

Targeted outreach cuts down on acquisition costs. Blackbaud notes that acquiring new donors costs up to 10 times more than retaining existing ones. Screening helps fundraising organizations focus on the right donors.

More Major and Planned Gifts

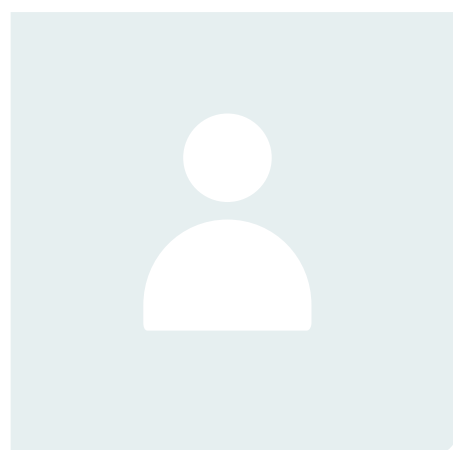
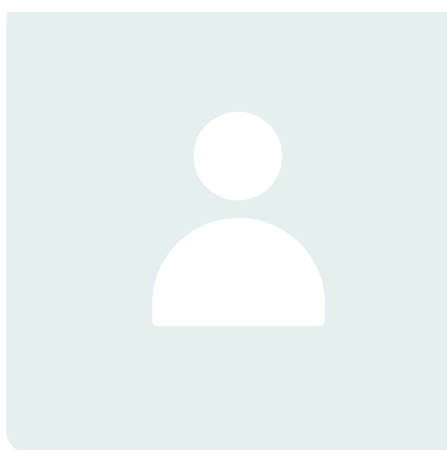
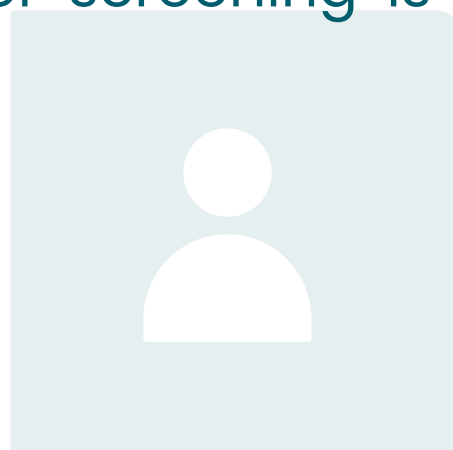
Donor insights drive major and planned giving revenue. Charities using wealth data increase major gift revenue.



Better Retention

Screening data supports personalized stewardship, boosting retention. A 10% increase in retention can raise revenue by 50% over time, making it a cost-effective growth strategy.

Donor screening maximizes fundraising ROI by improving efficiency, boosting conversions, cutting acquisition costs, and supporting major gift and retention efforts. For charities aiming to grow and retain key donors, donor screening is an essential investment.



How Often Should You Screen Your Database?

Small Organizations

For small nonprofits with limited budgets and fewer donors, an annual screening is ideal. This once-a-year approach keeps data current without overwhelming limited resources. Focus on top-tier or recurring donors to maximize your investment.

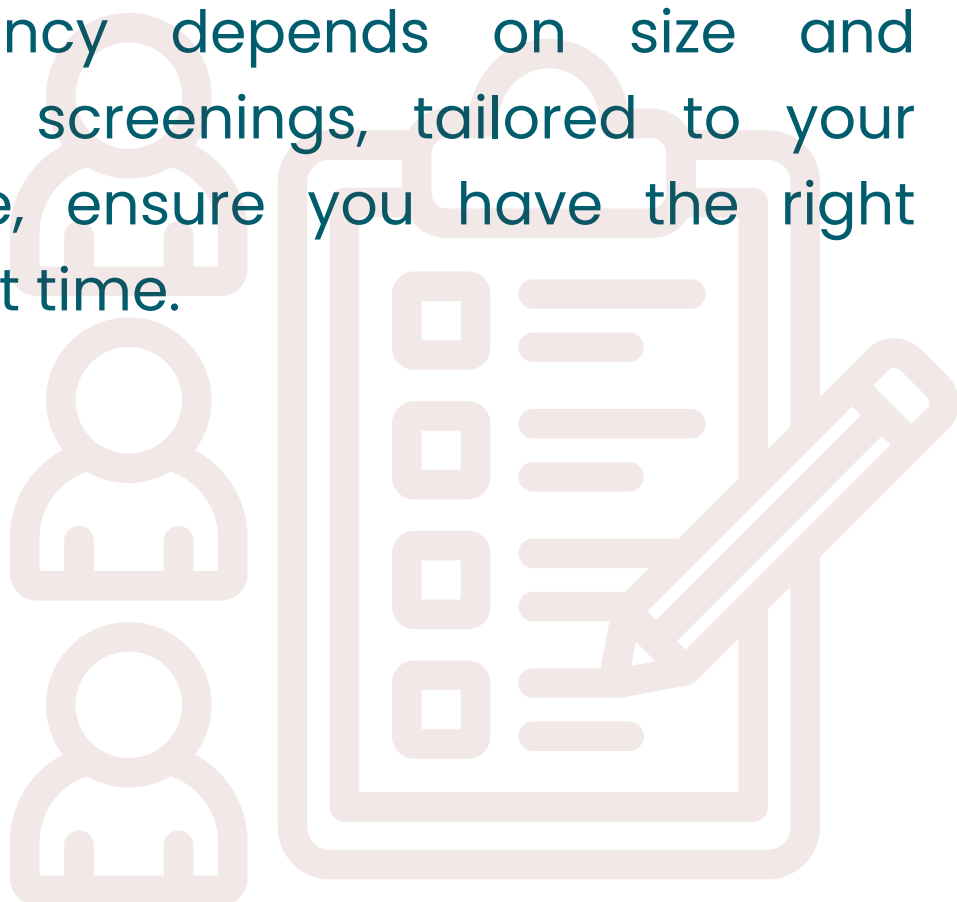
Medium Organizations

Medium-sized organizations should aim for biannual screenings. Screening every six months keeps data up-to-date and allows you to react to changes in donor capacity. Consider adding more frequent screenings for top donors and major gift prospects to stay proactive.

Large Organizations

Large fundraising organizations often benefit from quarterly screenings. Frequent updates help these organizations quickly spot shifts in giving capacity and identify new major gift opportunities. For large organizations, segmenting screenings by donor tier—quarterly for high-potential prospects, biannually for mid-level donors—can enhance strategic focus.

Screening frequency depends on size and capacity. Routine screenings, tailored to your organization's size, ensure you have the right insights at the right time.



Giving Tuesday Use Case

Giving Tuesday is one of the most important days of the year for Canadian charities. Every Giving Tuesday, thousands of charities across Canada receive millions of dollars from donors.

In 2023, CanadaHelps estimates that Canadians donated over \$43 million on Giving Tuesday. As Giving Tuesday continues to grow in popularity, it's a safe assumption that this number will continue to grow, as well.

“While it may go without saying that it should be handled very carefully, data is an organizational resource that charities of all sizes should evaluate as a piece of the puzzle in securing the fundraised revenue that allows for missions to be met. Donor database screening is a tool that charities can deploy to develop the kind of knowledge of their donor base that facilitates respectful, productive and mutually beneficial relationships. Knowing your donors better is a good thing!”

–Peter McKinley, Global Philanthropic

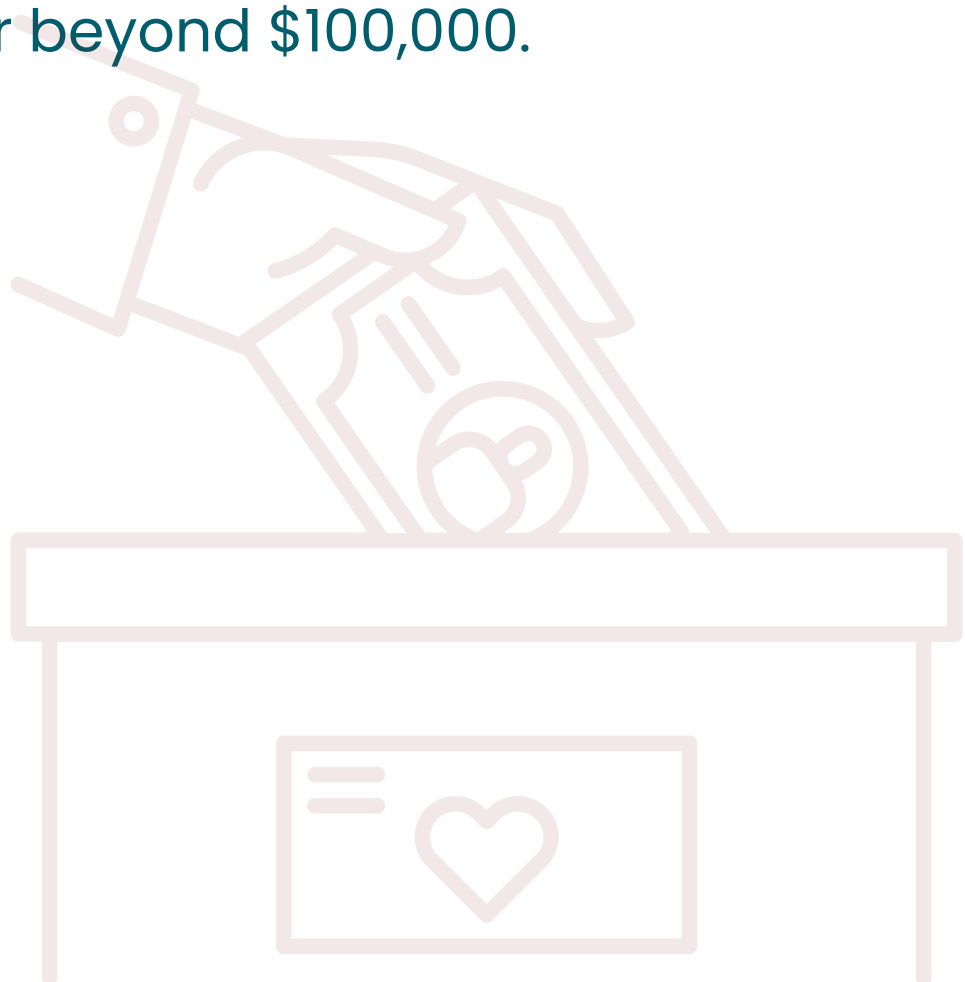
It is clear that Giving Tuesday has a positive impact on Canadian Charities. One, it is extremely effective in encouraging people to give (some of whom will be brand new donors) and two, it raises the profile of philanthropy in Canada generally, creating an increased awareness of Canadian charities, the work they do, and the funding required to do that work. But is there a way Canadian charities can benefit from Giving Tuesday beyond the gifts made and the recognition received?

Consider a charity that receives \$100,000 in donations from 2000 new donors on Giving Tuesday. Fantastic, right? \$100,000 in incoming donations from people who have never given to the organization is an amazing accomplishment and should be celebrated. But is that organization maximizing the benefit these donors could provide?

To truly maximize the benefit of Giving Tuesday, charities should look beyond the initial gift, and funnel new donors into their pipelines. The best way to do this is through screening and segmentation.

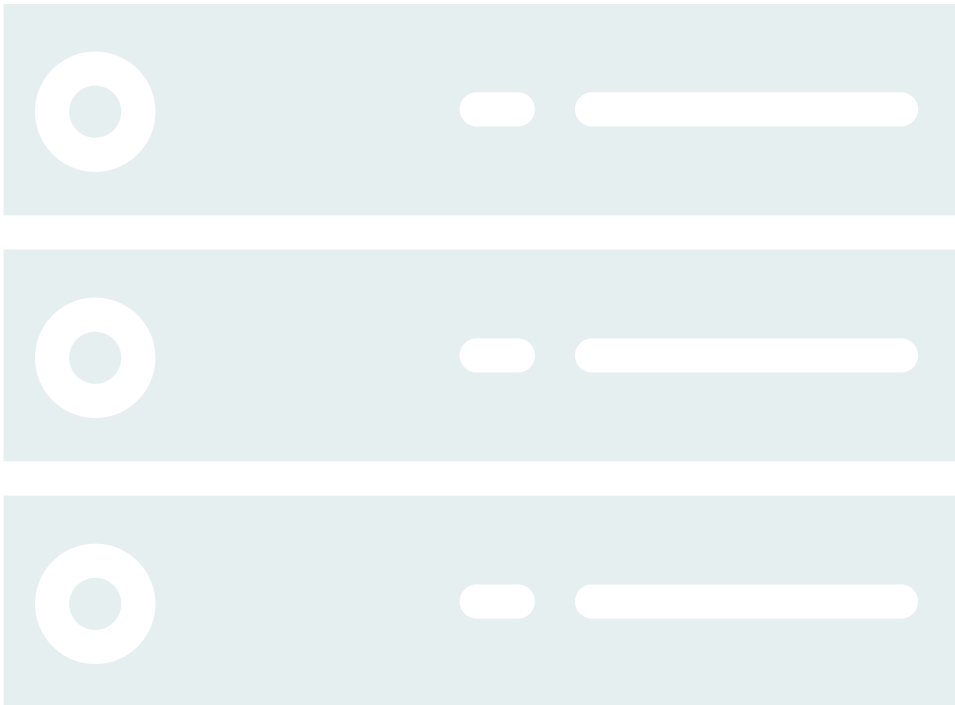
Here's an example:

Consider the charity that received \$100,000 in donations from 2,000 new donors on Giving Tuesday. If that organization screens and segments those donors, the impact of Giving Tuesday will be far beyond \$100,000.



Let's say, if after screening, the breakdown of the group's 5 year total giving capacity is as follows:

Donors	Estimated 5 Year Giving Capacity
10	\$500k+
90	\$250k-\$500k
300	\$100k-250k
1600	\$0-\$100k



Suppose, if after segmenting: The top 5% (100 people) are funneled into the Major Gifts pipeline. After careful cultivation and stewardship 10% (10 people) of them make a major gift with an average size of \$10,000 (which is just a fraction of this group's total 5 year giving capacity). The result is \$100,000 in additional revenue stemming from Giving Tuesday, just from the Major Gifts segment of the screened Giving Tuesday donors.

Giving Tuesday is an important day for Canadian charities. It generates fundraising revenue, increases recognition, and creates awareness. Screening and segmenting the new donors a charity acquires on Giving Tuesday and funneling those donors into appropriate pipelines will ensure the impact of Giving Tuesday lasts far beyond a single calendar day.



Donor screening is an immensely effective exercise for a fundraising organization to undertake. It can quickly help identify under the radar prospects in a database and also segment a database for more effective outreach. Donor screening is a crucial step in developing a better understanding of a donor database and the people in it. Organizations that understand who their donors are raise more money.

