

## Signature Theatre

### Thinking Outside the Box to Identify, Engage and Solicit Donors

The logo for Signature Theatre, featuring the word "signature" in a lowercase, orange, sans-serif font. A thin horizontal line with a small black dot is positioned above the text.

### Breaking the Mold to Find New Donors

Signature Theatre is a Tony Award®-winning, nonprofit professional theater company with a mission to produce contemporary musicals and plays, reinvent classic musicals, develop new work, and reach its community through engaging educational and outreach opportunities. Beginning in a garage space in 1993, Signature has swiftly become a landmark theater in the DC Region's theatre scene, as well as a recognized player among the nation's regional theatres.

Signature's Director of Development, Sara Jaffe indicates that they have had to "think outside the box for fundraising, breaking away from the traditional moves-management model of turning single ticket buyers into subscribers and then donors." "A frequent single ticket buyer likely feels like a Signature "insider" without becoming a subscriber. We work to find a way to harness that feeling and give them that sense of partnership that leads to support for the theatre." At Signature they have developed a new, less traditional model for cultivation:

- Identify frequent single ticket purchasers (have interest and affinity to Signature)
- Assess giving potential (research individuals in FindWealth Online)
- Begin cultivation process (invitations to talk back sessions, personal notes on seats, greeting at performances etc.)
- Make the ask

### Keeping Development Personal

The development and marketing departments work closely to ensure that donors are not overwhelmed by e-contact with solicitations, offers, and news. The development team has created a strategy to encourage individuals to donate online, by offering incentives such as discounts at the theatre bar. This helps cut down on costs associated with direct mailing, and also makes the donations readily available.

Development Manager, Emily Hill emphasizes, "There are always people who just want to write a check. They want to own the transaction from start to finish, and know that 100% of the donation is going directly to Signature and our programming." Hill is referencing the fact that the quickest route of online donation through Network for Good, takes a percentage of the donation towards their own operational costs. While this operational cost, 3% of the total donation to Signature through the site is minimal, there can be donor resistance to relinquishing a portion of their donation to another organization. Emily and Sara both echo, "The old adage is true – every dollar helps. If you want to send us a check for \$25, or make that donation online, we want to make sure you feel good about helping continue the mission of Signature Theatre."

*"Development is so personal, and there is a level of care that needs to shine through with each donor, whether that is a personal hand-written note of thanks, or a specific and targeted ask letter. Moving toward the online arena for donations is a tricky balance."*

Sara Jaffe, Director of Development,  
Signature Theatre

## Developing and Implementing Strategies

So, how does Signature leverage community for their development strategy? “We have struggled with finding the resources to utilize the data we collect at events like the open house, and during our shows, but we are getting there and have a plan,” says Jaffe. “We utilize FindWealth Online in our day-to-day efforts, screening prospects who may be connected to our Board of Directors and other friends of Signature, and committed single ticket purchasers.” Hill adds, “I always screen anyone who has made an unexpected change in their giving level or a new gift to see what their giving potential is, and if we can increase the size and frequency of future gifts.” FindWealth Online played a large role in Signature’s capital campaign and in the growth of their donor pool from 200 individuals to 1,000 between years 2001-2003.



Now, with several thousand donors, and a rocky economy, the Signature team is once again thinking outside the box for major gift acquisition. “Instead of asking people to make a substantial one-time gift, we are approaching individuals for multi-year gifts. This allows us to project our contributions year-to-year, and relieves some of the stress on the donors.” Ms. Jaffe indicates that this new process for Major Donor solicitation has worked so far, and FindWealth Online’s capacity and Propensity to Give (P2G™) scores help give the development team a better sense of what is an appropriate ask amount.

At the time of publication, Signature has just completed a 1,000 individual screening with WealthEngine and is working to incorporate the results into their donor management system (DMS) and begin analyzing the data. In this screening they included all new donors from last two years, subscribers, and frequent single ticket buyers, but narrowed their list by targeting only individuals from wealthy zip codes. “We see the value of maximizing the screening data to help us focus on building the right relationships and make targeted asks throughout the year. We have created a development strategy to make that happen and are eager to get started,” says Jaffe.

As Signature continues to expand its audience and open doors to the community they will continue to think of strategic ways to engage their ticket buyers and donors and build relationships. Their development model will continue to evolve with changes in the economic landscape and they will continue to grow their community with prospect research.