More Than *Thank* YOU

BY MARY ELLEN COLLINS

How donor recognition is changing the way you acknowledge donors and volunteers and tell your organization's story

Walk through the lobbies of many nonprofit organizations and you will see inspirational works of art, technological displays that invite participation and creative installations that tell a story. This is donor recognition today.

Createfirst/Veer

In addition to having a greater focus on the fundraising process, donor recognition also plays a significant role in an organization's overall brand or public image, according to Todd Burgess, founder of Presentations (**www.p-egd.com**) in Hiawatha, Iowa. "Environmental branding is the thoughtful application of an organization's brand to every point of contact an organization has with the employees, clients or donors," he says. "Beyond business cards and letterhead, environmental branding is combining the disciplines of graphic, architectural, interior, landscape and industrial design to communicate identity, information and the idea of place."

Burgess explains the thought process behind designing a donor-recognition wall to fit the brand of the new John XXIII Catholic Church in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. "Because the church had a new modern feel and a very open floor design, we didn't want to just showcase traditional Catholic symbolism. We researched Pope John XXIII, and the spark for the design came from his quote 'Throw open the windows of the church and let the fresh air of the Spirit blow through.'"

The installation is on a large front wall in the entry, well lit from a nearby large window. It portrays wispy clouds against a blue sky, with the pope's quotation and 900 leaf-shaped donor-recognition plates arranged to illustrate the motion of the wind, creating a sense of the fresh air of the Spirit blowing into the church—perfectly complementing the words of the man for whom the church is named.

Donor recognition has undergone a sea change in the past decade, and the professionals who create the public installations note a number of trends that illustrate how and why the nonprofit sector is taking "thank you" to a whole new level.

The Strategy of Gratitude

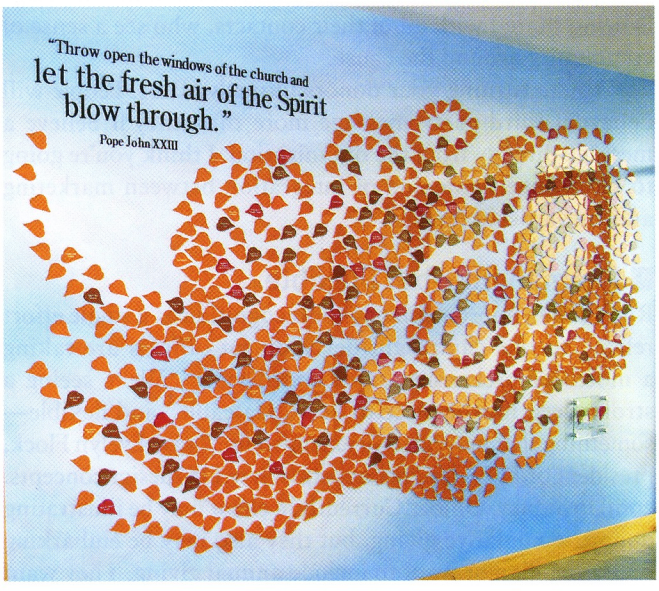
By definition, donor recognition is about acknowledging current and past supporters, but more and more organizations understand that recognition can and should also attract new donors. That requires an approach that places as much emphasis on outreach, public relations and return on investment as it does on design specifics.

Priority Marketing

"In the past, we saw people looking at donor-recognition walls after the conclusion of a campaign as a thank-you, but that misses the point," says Eric Ascalon, general manager of Ascalon Studios (**www.ascalonstudios.com**) in West Berlin, N.J. "The point is to use the donor-recognition process as a marketing tool to invigorate donors and generate interest among new donors. Ten years ago you never would have seen donor-recognition walls in architects' plans. Now you do. We used to get involved after the campaign. Now organizations will retain our design services early on and say, 'Let's



Donor recognition has shifted from a primarily historical, static recognition to a dynamic, interactive and integral aspect of effective fundraising. Many organizations have identified the distinct correlation between successful recognition and successful philanthropy. (Brook Recognition Systems, www.brookrecognition.com)



(RIGHT) Environmental branding combines various design disciplines to communicate identity, information and the idea of place. (Presentations, www.p-egd.com)



(LEFT) The donor-recognition process can serve as a marketing tool to invigorate donors and generate interest among new donors. (Ascalon Studios, www.ascalonstudios.com)

(MIDDLE) Donor recognition can help turn donors into advocates, strengthening a sense of community. (Donor Recognition.ca, www.donorrecognition.ca)

(BOTTOM) At Wright State University, large, archival photographs of the Wright Brothers make a strong statement about the school's history. (1157 designconcepts, www.1157designconcepts.com)

figure out what the donor recognition will look like.' We create detailed renderings that they include in the campaign marketing materials."

Steve Cunningham, president of Donor Recognition.ca (**www.donorrecognition.ca**) in Burlington, Ontario, says Toronto's Princess Margaret Hospital Foundation successfully integrated marketing and recognition functions via social media. "They do a weeklong cancer walk, and when they changed the route so that it ended at the hospital, they requested a landmark piece to commemorate the event and the donors," he says. "We built an iconic sculpture of the walk's founders with their hands clasped in the air, and as walkers passed it they stopped and took photos, which they then posted on Facebook. All of a sudden the walk's message is being shared with all of their contacts, who see a sense of community around the cause.

"You're turning your donors into advocates. People will believe a third-party message more than they'll believe a message directly from the organization. I think you're going to see a huge tightening of integration between marketing and stewardship teams."





Permanent—but Flexible

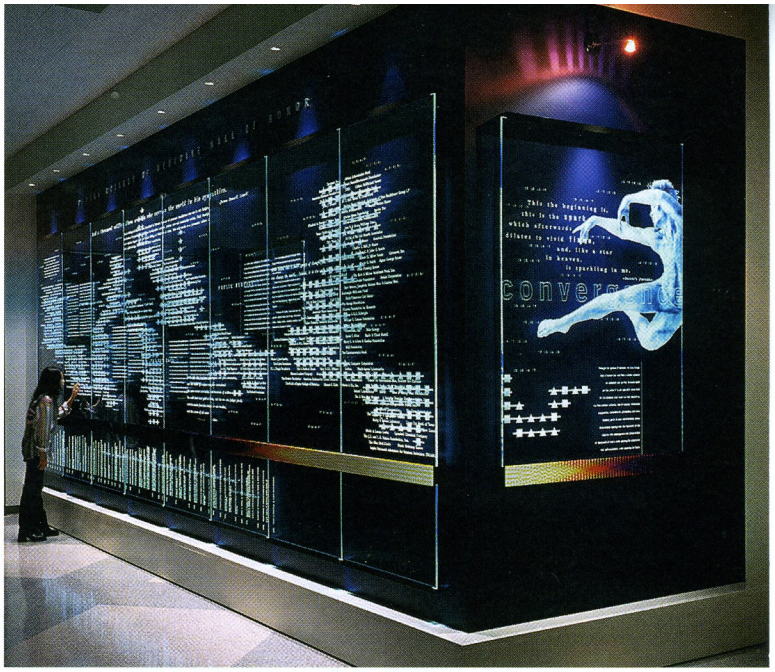
Rather than approaching donor recognition as a single effort related to one campaign, development officers are taking a more comprehensive, open-ended view. "We're seeing a strong need for the piece to be "updateable" and flexible—something that may have an extended life," says Evelyn Flock, president of 1157 designconcepts (**www.1157designconcepts.com**) in Sidney, Ohio. "Currently, a client may be illustrating donors' cumulative giving, but they also may be embarking on a campaign or want to include annual giving. They want

a design system that can accommodate that, which might involve a placeholder or digital images and text that can be replaced with something else. We have to ask enough questions to understand their big picture so we can work with them to develop a full spectrum of recognition."

This approach works well for organizations and also sends a clear message to everyone who views the display. "We design every wall to be updateable and tastefully leave room for a number of additional names," adds Christina Amri, founder and lead designer of Amri Studio (**www.amristudio.com**) in Santa Rosa, Calif. "We call it 'invitational room.' People look at it and understand immediately that there's a spot on the wall for them. When donors see beautifully designed, artistic recognition that deeply and sincerely honors the values and participants in an organization, they want to engage in their community as fully as they can."

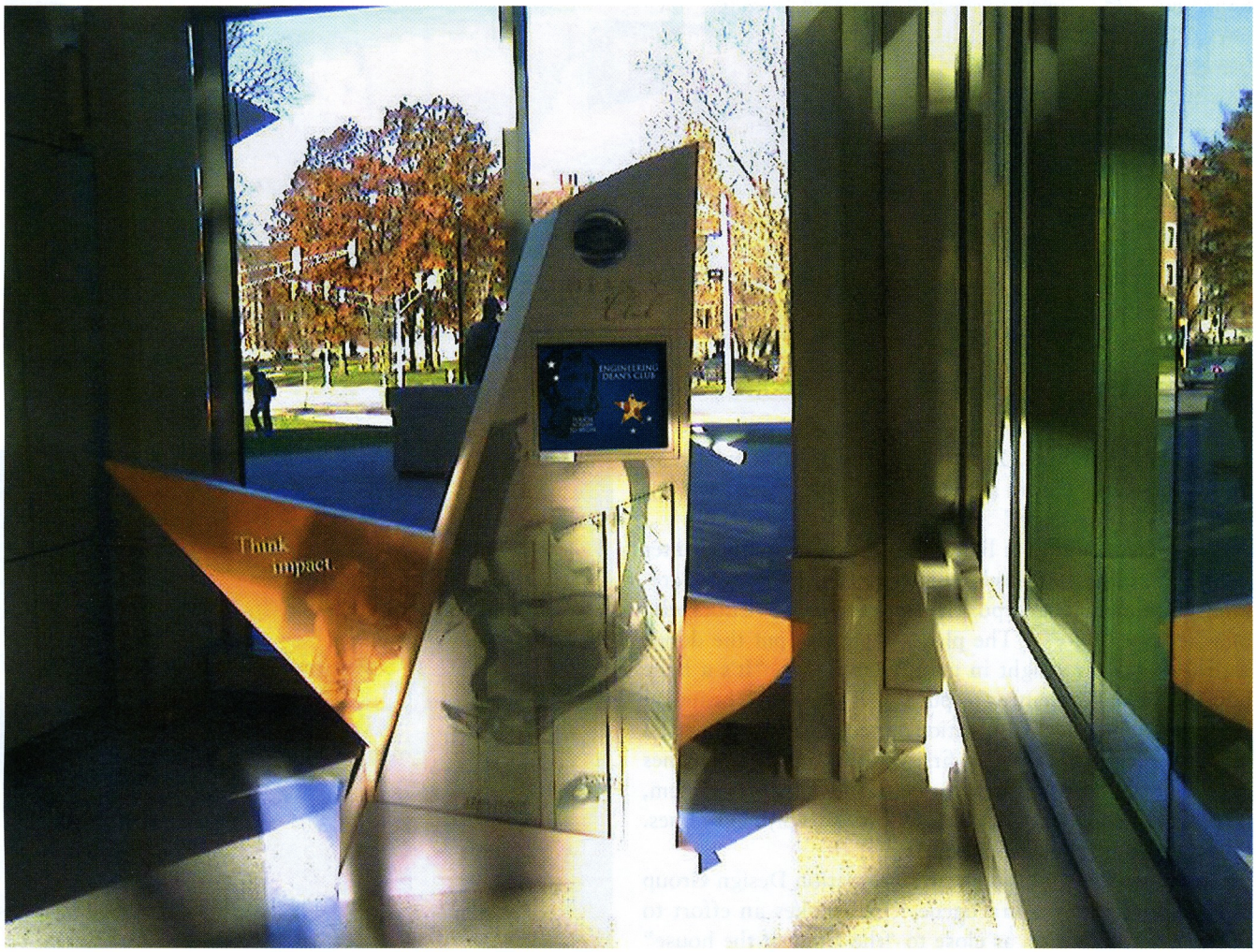
■ Location, Location, Location

"Back when I started out, the development officer would lead you down four or five hallways to show you where the donor wall was going to be," recalls Greg Short, president and CEO of Partners in Recognition (**www.partnersinrecognition.**



(ABOVE) A carved-crystal donor-recognition wall at Baylor University honors donors and celebrates the work of the scientists at Baylor who were a key part of the nationwide project to decode the human genome. (Amri Studio, www.amristudio.com)

(BELOW) Recognition is a forethought, and it's right by the front door. (Partners in Recognition, www.partnersinrecognition.com)





(LEFT) Recognition that previously may have been spread throughout an institution can achieve maximum impact with a hall of honor. (Presentation Design Group, www.pdgdesign.net)

(MIDDLE) Future donors interacting with the donor wall at New Pond Farm in West Redding, Conn. (Grebow Tile Fundraising Murals, www.grebowtiles.com)

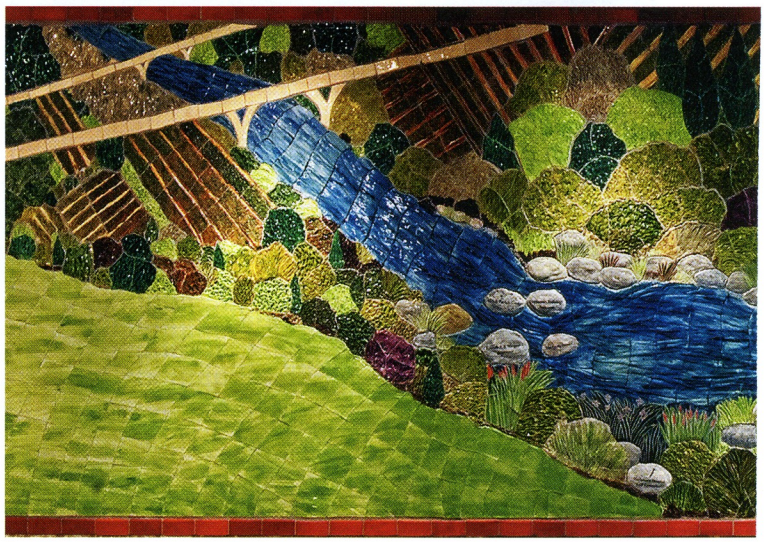
(BELOW) The 25-foot donor-recognition wall at Doylestown Hospital depicts the nearby Delaware River, with major-donors' names inscribed on the rocks (Karen Singer Tileworks, www.karensinger.com)



com) in Fort Loramie, Ohio. "It's not an afterthought in an out-of-the-way location anymore. It's forethought, and it's right by the front door."

Donor recognition is literally taking a front-and-center position as organizations honor their donors while also creating an immediate and positive impression for visitors who may become donors. "The place where you put the donor wall is worth its weight in gold," Amri says. "It's a huge public relations statement to put something that's beautiful in a prominent, powerful location, especially in hospitals and cancer centers. When people first walk in and see the names of all of the hundreds of neighbors who are supporting them, it says, 'You're in the right place. We have deeply held values. We're going to take care of you.'"

Tommy Griffin, president of Presentation Design Group (**www.pdgdesign.net**) in Eugene, Ore., makes an effort to put donor recognition as close to "the front of the house"



as possible. "Donor recognition is the visible presence of philanthropy in your organization," he says. "When you have attractive and active recognition strategically placed, it communicates to both internal and external communities why philanthropy is important.

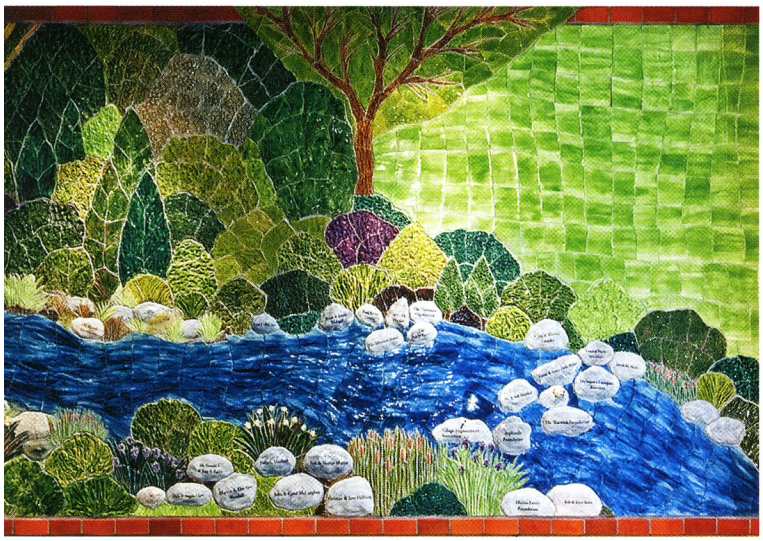
"Especially with large healthcare clients, we try to use a space large enough to have a veritable 'hall of honor' where you can hold events for donors. The space has lists of clients, a history display and information on centers of excellence. At Scott & White Hospital in Temple, Texas, we have a 100-foot-long display that takes up the whole end of the main lobby. A development officer can walk a major donor through it and say, 'This is our history. These are the major initiatives that we want to get support for, and here is how you will be recognized.' We're trying to take recognition that was previously spread throughout the institution and achieve maximum impact with a hall of honor."

Art and Emotion

Organizations have seen the capacity of recognition installations to evoke an emotional response, so they are replacing generic displays with artistic designs. "Creating a work of art that honors donors and depicts the organization's distinct story will make its mission resonate," says Marion Grebow, owner of Grebow Tile Fundraising Murals (**www.grebowtiles.com**) in Redding, Conn. Her three-dimensional mural in the entryway of the Earthplace Nature Center in Westport, Conn., greets visitors with an eye-catching educational experience that incorporates donor recognition on individual tiles. "When people see the thoughtful way in which an organization thanks its donors and weaves the recognition in with its overall mission, they're much more willing to give," Grebow says.

Design With a Mission

The move away from simple lists of donor names has come with a shift toward recognition installations that reflect the organization's work. In some cases, this comes from the actual physical design, such as the freestanding piece at Purdue's College of Engineering where numerous astronauts, including Neil Armstrong, have studied. "We gave it an aerospace look, with hard lines," Short says. "There's video footage of Neil Armstrong stepping on the moon, and then you can touch the screen to get to the list of capital campaign donors."



The shape of the display suggests both a space capsule and a star, and the angularity and straight lines fit the feel of a building devoted to the study of engineering.

Ascalon agrees that today's clients want something with a high level of design aesthetic. "We like to create something that looks like it was born in the space," he says. "In our donor recognition at the Science Fiction Museum Hall of Fame near the Space Needle in Seattle, donor names are on high-tech glass tubes that look like something belonging on a space ship."

At the Toronto General Hospital Foundation, Cunningham's firm designed an eight-foot metal DNA spiral that includes a named area space and interactive kiosk. "A lot of research goes on here," he says, "so we tried to turn that concept into something that comes to life and will get people to stop and look."

Donors in the Story

Increasingly, donor recognition involves telling a visual story that reflects an organization's mission, vision and values or highlights its history. By integrating donor recognition into a larger context, it reinforces donors' contributions as an important legacy in the life of the organization.

When Karen Singer, artistic director of Karen Singer Tileworks (**www.karensinger.com**) in Philadelphia, created donor recognition for Doylestown Hospital in Doylestown, Pa., she was inspired by the goal of its emergency room. "They wanted people to easily flow or move through the facility, have their needs met and be able to leave," she says.

She created a 25-foot-long tile mural depicting the nearby Delaware River, evoking a sense of peaceful movement. Donors of $100,000 or more had their names inscribed on rocks in the river, a perfect analogy for those benefactors being seen as the bedrock, or foundation, of the hospital. Within a month of the mural's dedication, an additional $500,000 came in from donors who wanted to claim their place on a river rock.

As part of a large donor-recognition project for a county library, Grebow needed to design a major-donor tile to honor a local family with a long history in the lumber business. Although the donor at first intended to base the tile simply on an often-published photograph of his lumberyard, Grebow proposed a design that shows the family's role in the community's growth. "The tile will include images of logging, milling, the railroad, the lumber mill and the resulting flooring company," she says. "It will show that the family, which has benefited from the natural resources and the manpower of the Smoky Mountains, is now a generous supporter of



(ABOVE) If one-time visitors walk in your organization, you want to make sure their heads turn to look at that wall. (W&E Baum, www.webaum.com)



The LCD touch screen on the donor wall at the Presbyterian Healthcare Foundation in Albuquerque, N.M., provides a rich, interactive experience. (Planned Legacy, www.plannedlegacy.com)

the new library. The donor was so pleased with the design concept that he went on to sponsor numerous other tiles on the wall as well as encourage others to participate. The community can double its benefits, bringing in new funds while at the same time creating a mural that illustrates its history."

Technology and Tradition

Another trend in donor recognition is the transformation from the purely physical to the physical and interactive. Technology can help an organization bring people's stories to life and convey a great deal of additional information about mission, values and programming without the need for a huge physical space.

"With interactive multimedia, instead of standing in front of a static donor wall you can touch a screen and actually hear the testimonial of a donor talking about what a hospital did for him," says Harv Mock, vice president, sales and marketing, for Planned Legacy (**www.plannedlegacy.com**) in Winnipeg, Manitoba. "The LCD touch screen we did for the Presbyterian Healthcare Foundation provides visitors with a very rich interactive experience. They can watch a video of the founder, see an interactive historical timeline, read donor profiles and biographies of board members, see a map listing various Presbyterian hospitals and clinics, and access information on foundation fundraising initiatives and volunteer activities. The display is even equipped with a printer so visitors can also print an adult or youth volunteer application form."

Amri Studio has developed cutting-edge technology to enhance the experience people have when viewing the permanent monument-style glass installations. Amri's etched and deep V-carved, optically clear crystal panels are edge-lit to enable the luminous graphics to holographically "pop." In addition, she often adds programmed, interactive LED lighting. "You can program each bulb to change, so the dimensional, etched graphics look like they are moving," she says.

An installation Amri did for Children's Hospital Boston contains images of children flying kites, surrounded by butterflies. The kites appear to be moving, and two peek-a-boo windows allow children to change the butterflies by walking up to the hidden proximity sensor.

The Efficiency Factor

Another practical consideration when opting for technology is the fact that information on touch screens can be updated easily by the company that designs the installation or by the clients themselves. This is particularly helpful in annual giving, when donor lists change regularly.

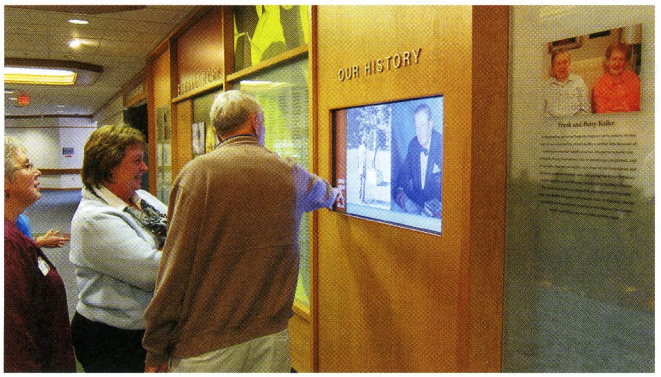
Heshy Spira, vice president at W&E Baum (**www.webaum.com**) in Freehold, N.J., uses technology not only in donor-recognition displays but also in one of the most traditional types of installations: synagogue memorial plaques. These include the names of the deceased, each one next to a light that represents a burning candle. "You used to have to manually turn each one of those bulbs on and off—and there could be 200 names on a plaque and 10 or 20 plaques on the wall," Spira says. "We've created a program that uses a computer system to automate LED bulbs. It turns them on and off, doesn't produce any heat and saves time and energy. The bulbs last for 15,000 hours, so it will be a huge money-saver down the road."

In addition, unlike a permanent installation, technology allows for portability. "One thing that has worked well for some organizations is a transportable kiosk you can take with you," Mock says. "A kiosk is a glorified enclosure for a touch screen, and you can actually transport your 'donor wall' to an event or out into the community."

What doesn't work? Mock says that some of his clients



(BELOW) Digital touch screens are often embedded into an architectural donor wall not only to tell the stories of grateful patients, caregivers and donors but also to recognize major donors in a rich, enduring manner. (Presentation Design Group)



have asked for a credit card swipe to be included with an interactive display. "That idea hasn't really caught on," he admits. "The organizations that have it really don't get a lot of gifts that way."

Best of Both Worlds

While the cost for interactive components is coming down, they are not for everyone, especially major donors who want to see their names on something permanent that is connected to the mission and values of the organization. "Digital technology is a wonderful supplement to something permanent," Griffin says, "but it doesn't replace it."

For Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio, Flock began with very large, archival photographs of the Wright Brothers as a backdrop in response to the university's desire to make a strong statement about its history. She added clear panels to hold updateable information about the college and a touch screen in the center of the display containing video messages, donor stories and detailed information about ways of giving.

"This piece draws people in with the overall images," she says. "The clear panels hold transparencies that have a variety of information, such as inspirational statements, notable achievements from specific departments and student stories. The interactive gets into more details of giving, allowing the physical display to be clean and uncluttered. The marketing aspect of this is powerful as well. It is placed in the student center near the president's dining room and conference center."

Money Matters

The recession has had a definite impact on the entire fundraising process, including donor recognition. Nonprofits are taking longer to make decisions about committing to projects. "This is the first time in our 20 years of existence that we've developed a new product line to address the need for lower-cost recognition," Singer says. "In the past we've turned people away because they wanted our work, but couldn't afford it. We're hoping this will solve a need."

Singer is in the beginning stages of marketing Instant Recognition, a series of ceramic tile and text panels that are not custom designed. They will offer iconic images, such as a large arching tree or a pathway to the future, which a variety of organizations could use to illustrate their fundraising projects.

Although many recognition companies report a recession-related slowdown in business, it is not always due to a lack of funds. In some cases, fundraisers do not want to give the impression they are spending on recognition when other parts of the organization are experiencing layoffs or other challenges. Donors want their gifts spent in other ways.

However, Short sees things picking up. "I think donor recognition is a lagging indicator of recession and a leading indicator of recovery," he says. "Projects that had been on hold are moving ahead."

Organizations that perceive recognition as a way of attracting new donors see the expenditure as an investment in future fundraising successes. "When clients learn what the cost of a project is going to be, they often say, 'Let me see if we can raise the money,'"Amri says. "Very often during dedications, people whip out their checkbook and say, 'I want to be a part of this wall.'"

Donor recognition has been transformed from carrying only a message of gratitude to telling your organization's story in a way that becomes one of the most important marketing tools you have. "Sometimes when I'm talking with clients I remind them of that," Spira says. "I tell them, 'This donor wall is not for you; it's for me. I'm here now. If I'm a one-time visitor who walks in, you want to make sure my head turns to look at that wall.'" 

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