Annual giving solicitation

Policy type: Local
Responsible office: Office of Development and Alumni Relations
Initial policy approved: 01/2013
Current revision approved: 06/30/2021

Policy Statement and Purpose

The Office of Development and Alumni Relations (DAR) oversees annual giving strategy and operations across university units and departments. The Office of Strategic Marketing and Engagement determines the deployment and evaluation of annual giving marketing campaigns. The goal of annual fund marketing is to increase the number of annual donors and the value of annual cash gifts and pledges. Annual fund gifts and pledges are attributable to solicitation efforts for gifts less than $50,000 and are repeatable in nature. Annual solicitations are conducted through multichannel direct marketing efforts, including, but not limited to, direct mail, phone-a-thon, email, crowdfunding, text messaging, direct and indirect response marketing and face-to-face solicitations. Pledges for annual support are typically fulfilled within one year but can span multiple fiscal or calendar years.

DAR teams provide data and analytics toward goals for annual giving. Additional measurement of annual giving performance is reported via the DAR alumni statistics and the DAR Metrics reports. The solicited rate is reported nationally to the Voluntary Support of Education survey managed by the Council for Aid and Support to Education. An alumnus is considered solicited if sent a direct mail appeal, opens an email and/or responds to a direct ask through the phone-a-thon program.

Noncompliance with this policy could result in disciplinary action up to and including termination. VCU supports an environment free from retaliation. Retaliation is prohibited against any employee who brings forth a good faith concern, asks a clarifying question, or participates in an investigation.

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Who Should Know This Policy

All university employees engaged in development who solicit, accept and administer annual gifts should know this policy and familiarize themselves with its contents and provisions.

Definitions

Annual gift
At VCU, an annual gift is any charitable, current-use or restricted donation that is less than $50,000. Typically, annual gifts are made in response to a solicitation, such as direct mail, phone-a-thon, email, text, digital marketing, social media appeals, face-to-face visits or individual annual giving proposals. An unsolicited gift of less than $50,000 and multiyear pledges of less than $50,000 are also considered annual gifts. Additionally, a gift of less than $50,000 made in support of an existing endowed fund is considered an annual gift as it is renewable in nature and is not part of the original gift agreement.

Direct marketing
A form of brand messaging that allows VCU to communicate with its constituents via techniques such as text messaging, email, social media, digital marketing and promotion, websites, mail and phone-a-thons. Direct marketing drives a call to action that emphasizes analytical, measurable responses typically showing return on investment and/or engagement, reach, frequency, impressions, listeners or viewers.

Finder number
A unique, maximum 12-character alphanumeric string that is assigned and printed on every remittance piece associated with a solicitation. The finder number is specific to a constituent and the appeal it represents.

Phone-a-thon program
A phone-a-thon program uses an outbound model. Calling typically occurs during the academic year, with scheduling adjusted to maximize the permissible number of calling hours while considering holidays, special events, elections, or natural disasters. Fundraising phone campaigns are annual fund marketing strategies, similar to direct mail or email campaigns. As of July 1, 2021, only the School of Medicine utilizes this fundraising tool and there is no DAR-sponsored phone-a-thon program.

Segmentation
The practice of dividing an audience to receive specific communications/solicitations, for example: donor, nondonor, school affiliation, generation and/or affinity.
Solicitation
Any correspondence that asks for a gift, either through a direct or indirect ask. This can be through a mailer reply card, business reply, courtesy reply, embedded website link, phone call, event registration, digital ad or personal solicitation.

Solicited alumni rate
The solicited alumni rate is determined by dividing the number of solicited alumni by the number of alumni donors. An alumnus is considered solicited if they receive a direct mail appeal, open a solicitation email or respond in person on the phone to a direct ask for funds.

Source code
A 24-character alphanumeric string used to track and define the details of a particular segment within a direct marketing solicitation. Source codes are components that characterize the solicitation, such as the segment, package and timing. Source codes are not tied to specific constituents.

VCU opportunity constituents
Individuals with accepted opportunities, documented in the database of record, of at least $25,000 with an ask date in the month of or the month before the solicitation.

Contacts
The Office of Development and Alumni Relations officially interprets this policy. DAR is responsible for obtaining approval for any revisions as required by the policy Creating and Maintaining Policies and Procedures through the appropriate governance structures. Direct policy questions to the assistant vice president of Strategic Marketing and Engagement, which manages annual giving strategy and operations on all campuses of Virginia Commonwealth University.

Policy Specifics and Procedures

Solicitation approval and scheduling
Strategic Marketing and Engagement sets the university’s annual giving marketing strategy and determines whether alumni can be solicited for a specific purpose and when timing is most appropriate, e.g. campaign priorities, Giving Day, a retiring leader or a new initiative. Campus partners must follow DAR procedures to obtain approval for specific marketing and solicitation appeals. Tickets for constituent marketing requests must be submitted via the DAR Help Desk no less than 10 business days before desired delivery. If working with the DAR annual giving office to coordinate the mailing, the final/approved mailing list must be completed four weeks before the drop date of the appeal.

Solicitation guidelines and accountability
Strategic Marketing and Engagement consults with campus partners to optimize and coordinate annual giving marketing strategies.

1. DAR staff consults annually with campus partners to plan solicitation goals and timing.
2. Campus partner submits annual giving request through a constituent marketing ticket on the DAR Help Desk, regardless of channel or segment.
3. The request must define solicitation segments and adhere to the standard turnaround times, as defined by DAR Communications, of a minimum of 10 business days.

4. Before a mailing/email list is provided, DAR must receive a proof of the solicitation, including content, images and return mechanism, to ensure compliance with university branding standards, quality of grammar and messaging, and correct use of source codes and/or finder numbers.

5. All remittance/reply forms must adhere to AQ2 standards, including sizing specifications and inclusion of a scan line.

6. Campus partners must use a DAR-provided mailing/email/telephone list to ensure compliance with university communications policy and best practices.

7. Annual giving marketing campaign reporting is available to campus partners through the Solicitation Report by Unit section of the VCU Reports page in RADAR.

**Solicitation segmentation**

DAR solicits segments of constituents maintained in the DAR database of record for universitywide and targeted university priorities. DAR considers the impact of excluding individuals flagged as members of governing boards, individuals with documented accepted opportunities of at least $25,000 with an ask date of the month of or the month before the solicitation (based on drop date), and individuals with open pledges or current fiscal-year gifts. All segments must be coordinated, approved and executed using data maintained in the DAR database of record. A campus partner must request permission from the assistant vice president for Strategic Marketing and Engagement to solicit alumni or donors from another area.

Standard exclusions include constituents who are:

1. Current fiscal-year donors
2. Donors with open pledges or active recurring gifts
3. Members of governing boards
4. VCU opportunity prospects
5. Constituents marked with do not solicit or do not contact attribute in the database of record.

Other strategic marketing exceptions could be approved by the assistant vice president, e.g. when soliciting for “second-ask” gifts, such as an individual who made a restricted gift or pledge in the fall and is solicited in the spring for a universitywide gift. Second asks can also be used with specific audiences such as the Black & Gold Loyalty Society.

**Forms**

Marketing request tickets are available to VCU development and marketing personnel on the DAR intranet via the Help Desk. For assistance with access, contact your unit’s development or communications office or through the DAR Help Desk.

1. **Constituent Marketing Request form** (DAR Intranet)
2. **AQ2 Remittance Forms** (DAR Intranet)
3. **DAR calendar** review and to schedule activities (DAR Intranet)
4. **AQ2-compliant remittance forms** (DAR Intranet)

**Related Documents**
1. Creating and Maintaining Policies and Procedures
2. Development and Alumni Relations Activities
3. Gift Acceptance and Administration
4. Policy on Development and Alumni Relations-Related Communications (update currently in progress)
5. Policy on crowdfunding (update currently in progress)

Revision History

This policy supersedes the following archived policies:

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<th>Approval/Revision Date</th>
<th>Title</th>
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<td>May 2016</td>
<td>Policy on annual giving solicitation</td>
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<tr>
<td>August 2015</td>
<td>Policy on annual giving solicitation</td>
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<td>May 2015</td>
<td>Policy on annual giving solicitation</td>
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<tr>
<td>December 2013</td>
<td>Policy on annual giving solicitation</td>
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<tr>
<td>January 2013</td>
<td>Policy on annual giving solicitation</td>
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FAQ

1. Can I solicit constituents who don’t have records in RADAR?
   Yes. In this instance, a source code must be printed on the return mail piece, embedded into an email link or included in a landing page URL promoted through digital advertising. A source code is obtained by submitting a ticket through the DAR Help Desk.

2. Does my newsletter, invitation or informational communication count as a solicitation if a soft ask is included?
   No, it is not considered a solicitation but a general correspondence. Communications with the primary purpose of securing donations are classified as solicitations. Using a source code specific to the effort, however, helps report on effectiveness of communications in generating revenue.

3. Can I pull constituent data from the Constituent List in RADAR and use that as my mail/email list?
   No. You can pull a list from the RADAR Constituent List to determine headcount, but this list does not include required exclusions. A direct marketing effort is required to generate and code the exact audience receiving the appeal. Submit a request, adhering to stated turnaround times, for all mailing lists.

4. What is the difference between a source code and a finder number?
   A source code is used when a mail piece is not personalized. For example, a printed annual report or newsletter that has an envelope inserted into the publication requires a source code. A mail piece to a known constituent receives a finder number that is unique to the constituent and to the appeal.
5. Can campus partners run crowdfunding campaigns?
The Office of Annual Giving administers VCU’s crowdfunding platform, and no other platform can be used. Crowdfunding campaigns occur throughout the year. An application is required for consideration. Approval is first vetted by SME, provided certain criteria are met. Primarily, SME requires a story concept and photos and encourages the use of video. Preference is given to those applications that have five nonemployee donors to serve as advocates/champions for the campaign.

6. When can campus partners solicit their alumni and donors? And when can DAR solicit alumni and donors?
The OAG plans one to two years in advance the solicitation calendar for annual giving efforts. The OAG collaborates with campus partners to identify opportunities within a fiscal calendar that are strategic in terms of timing, messaging and frequency. Campus partners and DAR can solicit throughout the year, as long as the efforts are coordinated. The OAG must approve the timing of all campus partner appeals.

7. How will overlap of appeals be coordinated?
The Office of Annual Giving plans a solicitation calendar for each fiscal year. The calendar is created to minimize overlap of appeals.

8. For the Black & Gold & You loyalty program, how are faculty and staff who are alumni solicited when their payroll deductions expire?
The BGY campaign and communications run year round. Campus partners should cultivate, steward and solicit faculty for leadership gifts ($1,000+) all year round.

9. How do I hire or execute a phonathon program?
Telefundraising is prohibited outside of a university contract managed by DAR. Special accommodations are possible, with permission of the assistant vice president for Strategic Marketing and Engagement in consultation with other DAR leadership.