



# The Ultimate Guide to Data-led Fundraising

How to turn connections into action  
(and learn to love data along the way.)

By T. Clay Buck, CFRE, Lead Fundraising Coach

Kindsight



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DEAN VAN LEEUWEN, *TOMORROWTODAY CONSULTING*

“In the Connection Economy, competitive advantage shifts to the ability to form meaningful, emotional connections and relationships.”

# Introduction

“In the Connection Economy, competitive advantage shifts to the ability to form meaningful, emotional connections and relationships. In the context of access to information, personal choice and competitive pricing, the question of ‘why buy your product or engage your service?’ becomes ever more narrow. The decisive criteria in that decision comes down to that of personal ‘connection’: I want to do business with you because I like you, trust you, I believe in your cause, your values – we have a relationship. It is that simple, it is that complicated.”

Dean van Leeuwen, *Tomorrowtoday Consulting FUNDRAISING*

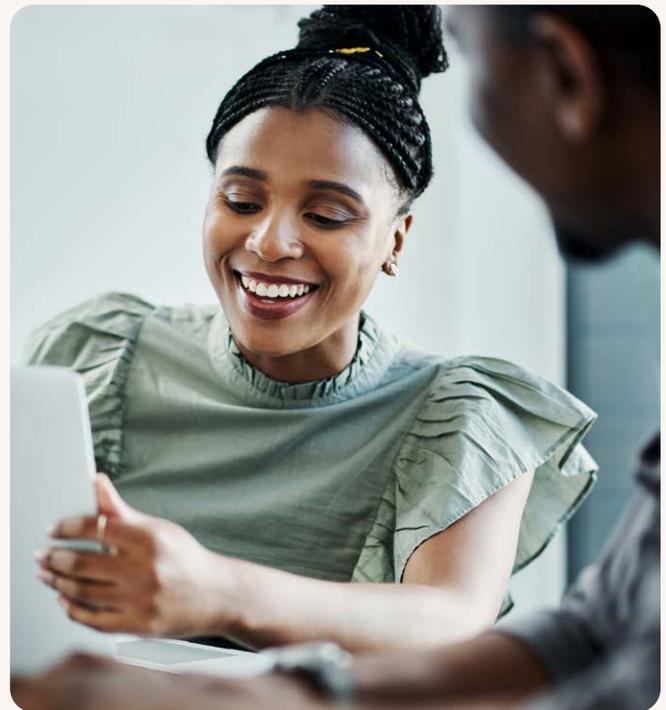
The time we’re living and working in is sometimes called the Connection Economy. Also referred to as the relationship economy or the experience economy, however you refer to it. What’s abundantly clear is that the way we fundraise today has definitely changed. *Or has it?*

As a profession, we have always said that “fundraising is about relationships”—perhaps we were working in the relationship economy long before anyone else, but what is certainly true is that **today’s world is far more focused on trust, connection, permission and access, storytelling and, above all, humanity.**

The industrial revolution relied on the evolution and innovation of physical labor in factory systems, steam and coal-powered machinery, and mechanized manufacturing. It was followed by exponential advancements in mass production and technology—there were only 66 years between the Wright Brothers’ first flight at Kitty Hawk to the moon landing. Telephones evolved from Alexander Graham Bell’s invention to cell phones in just 100 years.

We are, as a species, creating more information than ever before—it’s estimated that **90% of the world’s data was generated in the last two years alone.** And every piece of information that’s created—every email address captured, social media video posted, internet search or product purchased, and, yes, every donation made to a nonprofit—is created by a person. A real, live human who is leaving this trail of information on who they are and what they care about with every interaction.

On May 6, 2017, The Economist boldly proclaimed “**The world’s most valuable resource is no longer oil, but data.**” Of course, we had no way of knowing what was coming just a few short years later—a global pandemic, massive shifts in the world’s economy, louder calls and much-needed focus on social justice issues, and fundamental shifts in the way we live and work. Certainly the fundraising profession has been faced with tremendous changes as we continue to see fewer households giving to charities in both the United States and Canada, and continuing downturns in donor renewal and retention.



## So what happens next?

The following pages will explore these shifts and present an approach to fundraising that continues to build trust and human connections, while tapping into the modern shifts in data and technology that have forever transformed the way we work—and give.

**But first:** we need to dive deeper into the donor data dilemma.

# Unpacking the Donor Data Dilemma.

As much as we may hate to admit it, donors *are* data. That is to say that, writ large, what we know about a person—and, after all, donors are, first and foremost, people—is made up of different pieces of information. Or datum. (The plural of data.)



Their name. Their address. Their contact information like phone number and email. Perhaps a few other pieces of personal information, like interests or class year or communications preferences or brief notes of things we've learned along the way. We also know their giving information—the amount they gave, when they gave it, and what it was for.

Let's look at what we know about people today (Again, reminding ourselves that there isn't this mythical, mysterious entity called "donor"—donors are just regular human people like you and me):

“81% of customers prefer companies that offer a personalized experience, and 70% say a personalized experience in which the employee knows who they are and their history with the company (past purchases, buying patterns, support calls and more) is important. They also want the experience to go beyond people and include the platforms where they prefer to do business.”

- CX expert Shep Hyken in a [Forbes article](#) summarizing his 2024 State of Customer Service and CX Study

Why would we expect donors to be any different? More than likely, the 81% of customers cited in this survey above are also donors and want the same thing from the charities they support, as well as the companies they do business with. **By presenting relevant products and content that resonate with each consumer's interests and needs, companies create a sense of connection and relevance.**

The Donor Data Dilemma in the nonprofit sector is that we've been a little slower to catch up to this idea.

Over the last decade, more and more donors are leaving giving to charitable organizations and making gifts through mutual aid, crowdfunding, and giving circles. And they say they're doing so because they find more resonance, connection, and reciprocity.

This feeling is, in large part, a reason why we're seeing fewer donors giving to charities and declining donor retention rates. Many nonprofit organizations have been dealing with siloed data, no personalization, and poor targeting—**what we at Kindsight call the fundraising blindspot.**

We are living in a different era. Fundraising in 2025 is not the same as it was in the 1980s, or even in the 2010s—a data-driven strategy isn't just for major giving, it is no longer enough to focus on wealth alone, and one size no longer fits all when you're engaging donors.

## Data **lights** the way.

**Without data, fundraisers are operating in the dark,** unsure if they're asking the right person for the right amount at the right time. And when they do ask, they lack the data-led insights into donor interests and affinities that would increase the likelihood of getting a “yes.”

In the work of fundraising, the collection of data goes far beyond a simple administrative necessity. The information living in our databases and CRMs is far more than just data points, it's a rich and descriptive tapestry woven from the threads of human behavior, identity, and philanthropic intentions. By caring for and understanding the data that donors provide—from basic contact information to giving patterns and demographic details—we're piecing together a mosaic of individual human stories, each one telling us something about the caring humans who choose to be a part of charitable causes.

The collection of names, addresses, phone numbers, and email addresses, of course, serve as the basis of any donor database. But these pieces of information are more than just contact information or a collection of facts, they are the beginnings of understanding who our donors are and what is important to them—they are, indeed, the stories donors tell us.

Each piece of information we collect and track is a reflection of a real, live, feeling-and-caring human being. Their donations are a reflection of their values and their identities—indicators of how they see themselves and the kind of world they want to live in.

Valuing the data donors provide means recognizing each bit of information as a piece of a larger puzzle. It's about seeing beyond numbers and records and metrics, but instead seeing the aspirations, generosity, and trust of the individuals who choose to partner with us in our mission and vision for the world.

When we place value in the data that donors provide—when we care for what is entrusted to us and value it as an asset and not just a jumble of information—we're not only enhancing our fundraising results, but also developing—or advancing!—a community of supporters who feel seen, understood, and valued.



### Fundraising Challenges

While for-profit companies are quickly responding to the need for personalization and real-time engagement, it's hard for nonprofits to keep up because of various challenges they are trying to overcome:

#### “Dollars up, donors down”

**phenomenon:** Dollars donated to nonprofits went down by 3.4% in 2022, according to [Giving USA](#)

#### The disintermediation of

**giving:** DAFs, Philanthropic advisors, and other methodologies are separating fundraisers from donors

#### Giving is less general:

Donor behavior is more connected to affinity than other factors, such as proximity or historical giving

#### Shrinking teams:

Reduced time, budget, resources, and headcount in fundraising and advancement teams

#### A surplus of data:

As more donor data becomes available, standard Google Alerts and other tools aren't enough to parse through it

## What do today's donors *want*?

We know from fundraising expert [Penelope Burk's annual research](#) and her seminal work *Donor-Centered Fundraising*, donors want and expect:

- Acknowledgement that their gift was received
- Confirmation that their gift was used as they intended it to be
- What impact their gift had before being asked for another gift

We also know that today's donors want and expect that the charities they support know them and appreciate them. In one Accenture study, 44% of donors said they would donate at least 10% more if the experience of giving were more personalized.

Our colleagues in the for-profit world have certainly invested in the work of personalization; in fact, according to McKinsey, [71% of consumers say they expect personalization, and 76% get frustrated when they don't find it](#). So, what can nonprofits do to keep up, and deliver the experience that donors want?

As a fundraiser, you basically have two assets you can control to engage donors in your mission: **your message** and **your data** (i.e. your list of who you know.) If you have an incredibly compelling case-for-support, but poor-quality data, you're likely not getting your message to the right caring humans.

Conversely, a poorly-constructed case-for-support or uninspiring appeal isn't going to generate much interest, no matter how good your data is and how much you're able to contact your supporters.

**When you have a powerful story to tell and the right people to tell it to, imagine the potential fundraising could have.**



## The cost of *not* fundraising with connection.

If we look at data as the oil of the Connection Economy—the commodity and resource that makes everything possible (after all, how can you connect with someone if you can't reach them?)—then we start to accept the value that data represents.

### Think of it this way:

Let's say you have 5,000 donor records in your CRM, including a mix of current and lapsed. And those 5,000 donors gave \$1M last year, that means, on average, each donor record is 'worth' \$200.

A standard expectation would be that 6%—8% of records lose quality over a one year period—people move, data gets entered incorrectly, etc. There are multiple reasons why contact information just naturally goes bad:

- 8% of 5,000 donor records is 400.
- 400 records multiplied by the average value of \$200 gives us \$80,000.
- That's \$80,000 lost just due to data quality.

Once we start to look at data from an ROI perspective, we start to see the real value it has to our work as fundraisers.

**Imagine if you did absolutely nothing to clean up your data, that's losing \$80,000 per year!** If you ever need to justify why to spend money and time on data quality, imagine showing your Board an \$80,000 yearly loss multiplied over 5 years!

# What to do about the Donor Data Dilemma.

(a.k.a. how to fix your data.)

## STEP 1

### Admit the problem exists and commit to fixing it.

Sure, you might not be a data whiz or a database admin, but the first step is in recognizing the potential.

## STEP 2

### “Chunk” the challenge.

In educational theory, a “chunk” is a smaller part of a larger piece of information. When a topic or a chore seems daunting, it makes it less challenging to “chunk” it into smaller problems.



“I have 4,000 duplicate records!”

OK. That’s scary. But you can tackle 200 of them in a week. And if you divide that up—say five people commit to de-duping 200 records in a week, by the end of 4 weeks you’re basically done.

The same is true in data quality. Perhaps it’s daunting to edit thousands of addresses AND ZIP code issues AND email addresses AND... So, start with current donors. Or Lapsed Donors. Or donors within a 25 mile radius. Chunk the big problem into smaller sections and then tackle them one chunk at a time.

## Alternatively, chunk by *segment*.

Start with all your current donors and then do lapsed, long-lapsed, etc. Or tackle all the ones in-state vs out-of-state. However you approach it, breaking down your goals into smaller, more manageable chunks will make the work seem less daunting and overpowering.

## One word of advice?

However you start, focus on the group that will have the most impact first—major donors, current donors, recent event attendees, etc.



The following page will walk you through the first steps in cleaning up your data.



# What to look for in data *quality*.

Data quality is the first area you can “chunk”—or put into a smaller quantity that seems more manageable or achievable. No, you can’t “clean” 10,000 records all at once (not without some fancy software, anyway), but you CAN focus on one area at time. **Here are the first three to look and ask the following questions:**

## 1 Names and Basic Information

- Are both first name and last name populated?
- Are there formal and informal salutations?
- Do you have spouse/family information?
- Are titles correct and consistent?

## 2 Address Information

- Do you have all required information—street, city, state, zip?
- Are the states and/or provinces spelled or abbreviated correctly?
- Are the zip codes formatted correctly?
- How many records don't have addresses at all? Or only partial addresses?

## 3 Contact Details

- Do you have email addresses?
- Do you have phone numbers?
- Do you know which phone numbers are mobile and which are land lines?
- How many records don't have either a phone number or email? How many records only have one? Are they formatted correctly? Are they accurate?

### QUICK NOTE: Data Support Services

There are very good services that will take your data and standardize it, search for and add missing information, and research changes of address and other details so that you can easily update any issues you may have with contact information. The cost is typically favorable, especially when compared with your ROI number we calculated above. There are also services that will append email addresses and phone numbers to your data, but both email and phone are subject to legislative oversight so make sure you confirm with your legal counsel on how your organization interprets those laws and what you can and cannot do with appended information.



# Find *power* inside a database audit.

**The life-changing, mind-blowing, super-awesome, money-raising power of a database audit.**

A database audit takes a deep dive into your data and reviews the quality of each record, what the impact data errors have on potential ROI, any areas of weakness that need to be addressed and what can be done to address them. It will show exactly how many address errors you have, for example.

An audit will also take a deep dive into previous giving history and project trends and historical successes or opportunities so you can make your data work for you rather than against you.

### Total Donor Statistics

Donation Data	
# of Records	12,061
# of Donors	9,162
# of Gifts	26,267
\$ Donations	\$68,741,096
\$ Average Gift	\$7,503

Contact Data		
Blank Addresses	1,661	14%
Invalid ZIP Codes	1,747	15%
Blank Home Phone	10,137	87%
Blank Business Phone	8,740	75%
Blank Email	9,353	78%



JAY BAER, MARKETING AND  
CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE EXPERT

“We are surrounded by data but starved for insights.”

## THE FINAL STEP:

# Adding insights to good data.

Data on its own doesn't do us much good unless we can really use it to further our goals and fulfill the donors' philanthropic values.

While having a lot of demographic information and correct information is a major step forward, once we start to add additional insights to it, that's when its usefulness really starts to soar.

**That's where adding *more* data to what you already have in your database comes in.**

A screening adds informational data to your already-existing records, providing insights into a donor's capacity, propensity, and above all, potential generosity.

A database screening—or a “**wealth screening**” even though the information pulled together goes far beyond just wealth—takes your data and matches it to publicly available information sources, such as real estate, asset ownership, stock holding information, businesses, connections, and other philanthropic giving. Each record is compared to billions of different data points to bring you back an estimation of a donor's potential capacity to give, their affinity to your organization, and other critical information and insights about how to cultivate and engage each donor and help them become champions of your cause.

This is where your attention to data quality really pays off in huge dividends. When matching your data to public information, the more detail it has, the more accurate it is.

For example, if you only have a donor's name with no contact information, you might find some data records that don't actually match to your donor—but they have the same name.

If you have name and correct address information, you've suddenly opened the door to understanding more about who your supporters are because the more accurate the address, the better the quality of the match and the scores!



## wealth screening

[welth skree-ning]

noun

1. a process used by nonprofit, education, and healthcare organizations to identify individuals with the greatest potential to contribute large donations to support their cause.
2. how fundraising organizations determine which prospective donors have the ability to donate to a cause.

# Leveling up with live profiles.

What's even more exciting in this day and age of immediacy, personalization, and quick action, Kindsight has added **live profiles** to our already robust screening process (we the industry's most comprehensive data suite, but who are we to brag?).

The screenshot displays a user profile for Luca Ferriera, CEO of Acme Co. Ltd. The profile includes contact information: phone (555) 632-0012 and email lferriera@acme.edu. The Kindsight Score is 4, and the estimated capacity is \$350,000+. The 'Profile Alerts' section shows a 'New Score Preview' with 'Current Capacity' at 3 and 'New Capacity' at 4, both with corresponding gauge charts. Below this, 'New Matched Records' are listed in two tables. The first table, 'ZOOM INFO', shows Luca Ferriera as CEO in New York. The second table, 'CHARITABLE DONATIONS', shows a record for Luca M Ferriera as CEO. A notification bubble indicates a 'New \$100,000 donation to your cause.'

With live profiles, you're getting up-to-date information quickly whenever information about your donor changes. As soon as the data is uploaded, you'll have the latest and greatest information at your fingertips.

And with real-time alerts on key prospects or donors, you don't have to go looking for the information—it'll be sent right to you so that you know the moment information is updated or changed and that might just make the critical difference in connecting with donors.

Think about that—how quickly you could respond and have the donors most up-to-date information so that you're making real-time decisions on how to best grow giving to your organization.



## live profiles

[lahyv proh-fahyls]

### noun

1. profiles that monitor donor information continuously, delivering real-time updates that enable nonprofits to act on fresh opportunities.
2. a donor intelligence solution for nonprofit organizations who struggle with outdated donor data and inefficient outreach.



# Final thoughts.

Data doesn't have to be daunting or overwhelming. In fact, with cleaner data and stronger, more robust intelligence at your fingertips, you're actually using data and information to its fullest potential. It all begins with the quality of the data and caring for it just like you would the person it represents. While at the same time, gaining valuable, useful insights about the people who do (and could!) support your mission—and turning that information into action.



## About T. Clay Buck, CFRE

With over 30 years of experience in nonprofit leadership and fundraising, T. Clay Buck is the Founder & Principal of Next River Fundraising Strategies, a consultancy focused on individual giving, strategy, systems, and storytelling. He also teaches fundraising and strategic planning at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, and is the co-host of the #1 ranked fundraising podcast, Fundraising is Funny.

## About Kindsight

Kindsight builds technology that helps nonprofits make a difference. For 30+ years, Kindsight has supported fundraising organizations with purpose-built tools and the industry's most comprehensive data suite. As a leader in fundraising intelligence, Kindsight leverages real-time data and emerging technologies to help organizations identify and engage with donors and manage campaigns—at any scale. The holistic platform includes four products, *iwave*, *engage*, *ascend*, and *connect*, that work together to deliver valuable donor intel and insights, generative AI that builds campaigns and creates meaningful outreach, and a CRM that corrals your donor information and campaign tracking into one place. Connect your story to donors who care about your cause. At any scale. In real time. **That's the power of Kindsight.**

Learn more at [kindsight.io](https://kindsight.io)

## Kindsight *knows data.*

We've got the industry's most comprehensive data suite—plus 100+ scores, analytics, models, and visual dashboards to help you understand the data. Book a demo to see how our data can supercharge your mission.

[Book a demo today](#)

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