

Y

OU MAY PUT THEIR NAMES IN NEWSLETTERS, on large plaques in athletic facilities, and even in the names of your scholarships. You most likely honor them both privately and publicly.

But what can you do to thank your donors in a more personal way?

In today's world of fundraising, donor recognition is a key aspect of continued success. And today's athletic department fundraising teams need to get creative about making their donors feel appreciated.

"We're all in the same boat, trying to find that novel way to do what we do," says Jane Myers, Director of Bowling Green State University's Falcon Club. "Everyone expects the normal thank-you letter or token gift, and certainly, we need to meet those expectations. But at the same time, we need to do something unique, something unexpected, something personal for each donor to show we've taken the time to think about them individually."

#### MAKING IT PERSONAL

The first step to knowing how to thank your donors is to understand what type

of gesture would be meaningful to them. The anonymous donor obviously needs a very private type of thank-you, while the CEO of a local company may want a public acknowledgement of his or her gift. The pre-Title IX female donor may want to know her gift is helping women's sports at the school, and the diehard football fan may want special access to and information about the team.

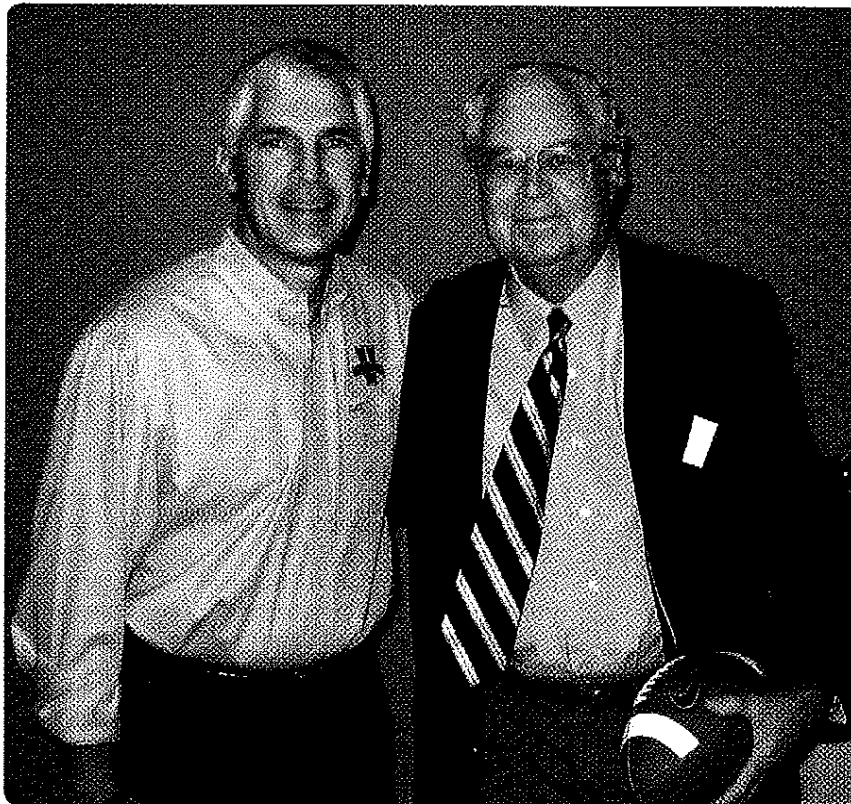
In other words, thinking about how you will say thank-you needs to be part of the entire stewardship process. And the key to accomplishing this, says South Dakota State University Alumni Director V.J. Smith, is

# How To Say Thank-You

By Kenny Berkowitz

*You can show donors you appreciate their gifts with a thank-you note.*

*Or you can dazzle them with a unique and personal expression of gratitude.*



**Vanderbilt Head Football Coach Bobby Johnson thanks donor John Rich for his support with a special game ball.**

caring about your donors as individuals. "Paying attention to your donors is absolutely critical," he says. "To effectively steward your donors, you need to spend 90 percent of your conversation time listening to them, because they'll tell you what they want, what they need, and what they're interested in, even if it's not direct."

"Constantly pepper people with questions, even if you feel you're over-questioning them," continues Smith. "By asking questions and listening carefully, you can learn a lot about an individual. You begin to understand what really matters to them and why they're motivated to share their wealth."

Smith rarely lets a week go by without talking to some of his school's largest donors or potential donors, asking questions about their lives, and sharing news about South Dakota State. Whether he's cultivating a new donor or stewarding an old one, he approaches each of these conversations as part of a long-term process that allows him to know the donor on a personal level.

At Texas State University-San Marcos, listening to donors allowed Tim McMurray, Associate Athletic Director for Development and Communications, to come up with a very personal thank-you gift for a golf-playing donor: a lesson with the school's head golf coach. The session included a detailed video analysis of the donor's swing and a one-on-one follow-up with the coach a week later.

"The coach was more than happy to take this donor out to the driving range, videotape his swing, show him some things to work on, and give him a follow-up lesson after that," says McMurray. "It was a nice touch, and even though the donor wasn't asking for that kind of thanks, he was very pleased."

"We want our stewardship to fit what our individual donors like to do," he continues. "We don't want them to think that their donation is just another check. We want them to understand that their gift is very important to us, so we respond with a personal touch."

Chris Wyrick, Executive Director of Athletic Development at Vanderbilt University, agrees that the best thank-yous are the personal ones. He honors Vanderbilt's mid-range donors with game balls at the end of basketball and football contests, and rewards larger donors with public ceremonies and receptions. However, in deciding exactly how

to express the department's gratitude, Wyrick takes his cue directly from the donor.

"The best way to determine whether someone wants to be thanked publicly is to just flat-out ask them," he says. "I approach them, saying 'We'd like to honor you in this particular way. Will you let us?' And the donor either says yes or no. If we're going to put someone's name on a facility, we'll offer to host a reception where the donor can

invite their family and friends. But before we do, we'll make sure that's how they want to be thanked."

After the reception, Wyrick will send the honoree a set of photographs from the event and have pictures printed in the department's in-house magazine and on its Web site. "As long as you communicate how truly thankful you are, it's very hard to mess up a reception," says Wyrick. "Every-

**AT BOWLING GREEN STATE UNIVERSITY, student-athletes participate in an annual thank-a-thon, telephoning each of the athletic department's 1,500 donors to thank them for their contribution. Jane Myers, Director of BGSU's Falcon Club, offers this advice for starting a similar event at your school:**

■ **Choose your callers wisely.** "Find student-athletes who are articulate and will enjoy talking on the telephone," says Myers. "We ask our coaches to recommend some of their athletes, and the kids have really gotten a kick out of it. Even if they came in not thinking they'd enjoy themselves, they leave at the end of the night feeling really good about what they've done."

■ **Match the student-athlete to the donor.** "In our annual giving package, we ask donors to list their sport of interest, and when we organize the thank-a-thon, we try to personalize our callers to those sports, especially for former student-athletes," says Myers.

■ **Provide callers with a basic script.** "Our students simply say, 'Hello, I'm so-and-so from the such-and-such team, and I'm calling on behalf of the Falcon Club to thank you for your contribution,'" says Myers. "The key is to say thank-you right at the beginning, so donors don't think it's a solicitation call."

■ **Encourage student-athletes to personalize their calls.** "Leave spaces on the script for callers to fill in their own information, and have them write notes about what they'd like to say," Myers says. "They need to put the script into their own words and use their own personalities, because they're not just calling some stranger, they're building a relationship. And if it's not personalized, it becomes just another thank-you. I tell students, 'Talk as

long as you want. I just want you to carry on a conversation that will keep our donors feeling connected.'"

■ **Provide callers with the support they need.** "I have a manageable number of student-athletes calling at any one time, and our staff members stay right there with them," says Myers. "We work with them on every call, give them the information they need, and help keep the conversation moving forward. And we provide pizza and soft drinks to make sure they understand how much we appreciate their help."

■ **Send a personalized postcard to donors who can't be reached by telephone.** "Rather than leaving a message or calling back multiple times, we've developed a postcard that says, 'I tried to call you to say thank-you, but did not find you at home. Please let me extend my thanks this way.' The student-athletes sign it and put their sport on it. That way, we don't have to do a lot of callbacks, which can be very labor intensive."

■ **Use your thank-a-thon as a way to teach student-athletes about gratitude.** "Educate your student-athletes about your expectations of them in the future," says Myers. "By giving them this opportunity to call donors, you're teaching them about giving back."

**THANK-A-THONS**

*Kenny Berkowitz is an Assistant Editor at Athletic Management. He can be reached at: kb@MomentumMedia.com.*

thing doesn't have to go perfectly, as long as the donor feels appreciated."

**ATHLETE THANK-YOUS**

For almost all donors, a thank-you from a student-athlete automatically provides a personal touch, and thus more schools are getting their athletes involved in the process. At South Dakota State, where the department has approximately 80 named scholarships, Smith provides each scholarship athlete with a short history of his or her donor and asks them to write an annual thank-you.

"The letter accomplishes two things," Smith says. "First and foremost, we are acknowledging the donor's goodness. We're telling them their gift is making a difference in someone's life. Secondly, it teaches student-athletes they need to be grateful that someone out there cares enough to give them an educational opportunity."

Smith's directions are simple: "We tell student-athletes, 'These donors want to know who you are. How many brothers and sisters do you have? What do your mom and dad do? What has this scholarship meant to

you?'" says Smith, who reads the letters before mailing them to donors. "Very, very few get rejected. Most of the time, I get a lump in my throat reading them, because I didn't realize that so-and-so's dad died when he was five years old, or that so-and-so's brother has cancer. It becomes a very emotional experience and a tremendous process that's good for everybody."

Smith also tries to get student-athletes involved in some of his more unusual ideas. One involved sending a donor an oversized thank-you card signed by every student-athlete in the department.

"For the next eight years, that donor talked about the card and how much it touched her that all our kids had taken the time to not only sign their names but also to offer a sentence or two about what her support meant to them," says Smith. "We expressed our gratitude in a way that meant more to her than a letter from the president of the university, and when she died, she left almost \$3 million to the athletic program."

At Vanderbilt, scholarship student-athletes send their sponsors birthday cards and holiday greetings with handwritten

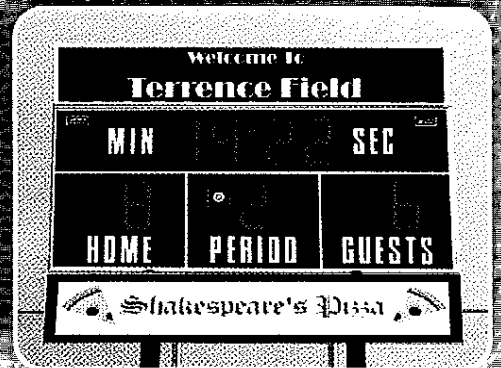
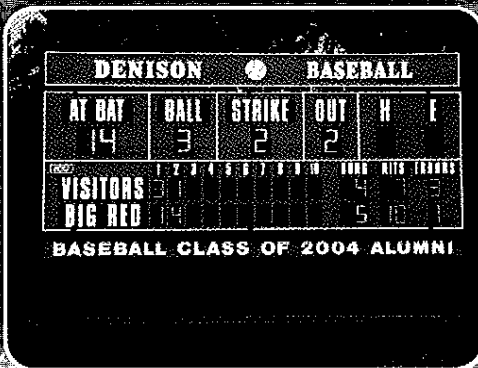
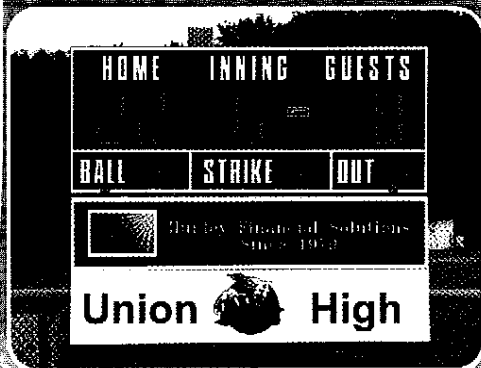
notes about their academic and athletic performance. Athletes are given the freedom to write as much or as little as they want, and the letters are all carefully read before being mailed.

At Vanderbilt's end-of-the-season banquets, donors are invited to share a meal with the athletes they've sponsored, and in one example, that meeting persuaded a contributor to triple his gift. "This donor had initially given a one-year scholarship," says Wyrick. "But once he got to know the student-athlete, he fully endowed that athlete's scholarship for the next three years. There's no doubt that the most powerful tools you have in asking for money are your student-athletes."

Bowling Green's Myers involves student-athletes in the department's annual reception for donors. "We usually have one or two student-athletes at the dais to represent the program in saying thanks," says Myers. "When we can find student-athletes who put some passion into their remarks, it's highly effective, much more so than if we had an administrator saying the same thing. People expect to hear that from

**Create Your Home Field Advantage with NEVCO**

*Scoreboards • Message Centers • Video Displays*



**Prepare for the Spring sports season with a new scoring and display system from NEVCO**



**Scoreboards • Message Centers  
Video Displays**

For the complete line of NEVCO Scoreboards, Message Centers and Video Displays, visit [www.nevco.com](http://www.nevco.com)

U.S. & Canada: 1-800-851-4040 International: 1-618-664-0360  
Fax: 1-618-664-0398 e-mail: [info@nevco.com](mailto:info@nevco.com)

**At Elma (Wash.) High School, where the athletic department is largely funded by local taxes, Athletic Director Steve Bridge doesn't feel it's enough to just thank contributors to the booster club.**

Bridge feels it's important to thank the entire town for its support of athletics. He does this by sharing the department's facilities with local groups and using service projects to demonstrate student-athletes' gratitude.

"We're trying to give something back and let everyone know how much we appreciate what they do for us," says Bridge. "We've created working relationships with groups around town, and if people need help, they know they can give us a call."

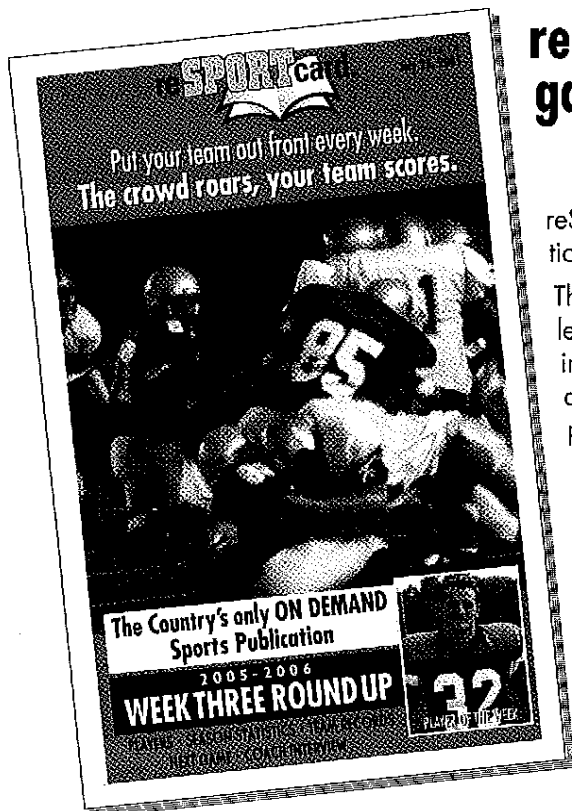
Over the course of the year, every varsity team at EHS spends at least one Friday working at the local senior center, where they set up the dining room, serve lunch, clean tables, and lead sing-a-longs for community mem-

bers. Last year, when the center found itself low on funds, the football team hosted a series of benefits that raised enough money to provide meals for an entire month.

Football players also act as tutors at the elementary school, where EHS celebrates the end of the season with a pep rally, complete with band, cheerleaders, and drill team. And at the holidays, a small, hand-picked group of student-athletes shops for presents to give to needy families, which are distributed anonymously through local churches.

"As corny as it may sound, we do it to teach our athletes about kindness, so they understand that giving to others is an important part of their responsibility as adults," says Bridge. "They learn about caring for people in their community, because that's who pays the bills. The next time people vote for a levy, they'll know that we're committed to giving back."

## THANKING YOUR COMMUNITY



**reSportCard™ puts your fans in the game and revenue in your pocket.**

*The crowd roars, your team scores.*

reSportCard™—the country's only on-demand sports publication—is the fundraiser that engages your entire community.

The reSportCard is a high-quality, inexpensive, full-color booklet that is published on demand, when you need it, with fresh info on any of your school's sports teams. You provide us with data and just two days later we ship a custom booklet packed with player and team stats, photos, game summaries, revenue-generating advertising, and more.

The reSportCard can be sold at school before games and at the event. At just 79¢ per copy\* it can deliver a 100%+ profit margin, putting you far ahead of ordinary fundraisers.

Contact David or Greg at 419-621-2139 or [sales@e-narratives.com](mailto:sales@e-narratives.com) to get the details on the reSportCard. Or visit [www.e-narratives.com/reSportCard.htm](http://www.e-narratives.com/reSportCard.htm).

**reSPORTcard.**

reSportCard  
by eNarratives, LLC  
419-621-2139  
[www.e-narratives.com](http://www.e-narratives.com)

\*plus S&H when used with the SportsWriter service

administrators, but when they hear a student-athlete sincerely thanking them, it can be very persuasive."

Myers also has student-athletes welcome donors to the reception. "We've started using student-athletes as greeters," she says. "We're careful to only use them in safe, protected ways, because we don't want them in a situation where there's alcohol present. We have them greet people at the door, and they always wear a tag with their name, sport, and major on it. It helps donors to keep our student-athletes at the front of their minds."

**INVOLVING COACHES**

A thank-you from a coach can also have a lasting effect. Vanderbilt's Wyrick asks the head coaches of football, baseball, and men's and women's basketball programs to maintain regular contact with their team's largest donors. He gives each coach a list of 10 to 20 donors, along with a schedule for monthly communications. "We've set up a system where coaches telephone one month, e-mail

**"Out of the blue, each of our donors gets a call from a coach thanking them and saying, 'You're really making a difference in the lives of our young people.'"**

another month, send a media guide a third month, and so on," says Wyrick. "And we have a fundraiser in our office who works side by side with the coaches."

At South Dakota State, Smith enlists coaches' help in telephoning supporters of their programs. "Out of the blue, each of our donors gets a call from a coach thanking them and saying, 'You're really making a difference in the lives of our young people,'" says Smith. "And no matter how many times we do it, it still amazes people to get a personal thank-you phone call from a coach."

The key in making these calls work, says Smith, is to give each coach a list of talking points to express in their own words. "It's not a scripted situation, because we all know what it sounds like when someone reads a script," he says. "A coach's thank-you has to come from the heart, not from a piece of paper."

Myers uses a similar approach, asking coaches to send handwritten notes, invite donors to their homes, or have their photos taken together at social events. "We constantly work with coaches, encouraging them to step outside what they normally do to reach out to donors," she says. "It's important to find ways that aren't labor-intensive, so we help compile an e-mail list, or ask them to visit one more table at a public event. We tell them, 'If you meet one more person, that's another donor who's likely to pay attention to your program.'"

**ONGOING EFFORT**

The final component of thanking donors is that it must be a continuing process. Smith calls it "being perpetually grateful."

"Being perpetually grateful is an all-the-time feeling," he says. "When people see you in a social situation, or talk with you on the telephone, they know by the look on your face and the sound in your voice that you're thankful for their support. They know because you're listening. In this business, you can't listen too much."

It also means personalizing your com-

**COMMANDER™**  
**Portable Sports Score-Clocks**  
 • 4-SIDE • 3-SIDE • 2-SIDE • 1-SIDE  
**TRIPOD DISPLAY MODELS**

**The NEW Commander™ line of portable tripod score-clocks are Smaller(17"x16"x16"), Lighter(15lbs) and Cheaper (\$2,495\*) than other products and will immediately "command your respect" with their unmatched features & quality.**

\* (Model W34311 3-Side Mat Commander™)

- Wrestling ⇒ **Mat Commander™**
- Basketball ⇒ **Court Commander™**
- Volleyball ⇒ **Net Commander™**
- Cheerleading ⇒ **Cheer Commander™**
- Soccer ⇒ **Field Commander™**

**Custom Models Available**

Visit our website at **www.score-clocks.com**  
**1-800-945-8881** for more information

**SPECIAL OFFER FOR ATHLETIC MANAGEMENT READERS**  
 Call and Order before November 30, 2005 with Code  
**AM1105 and Save \$250 with INSTANT REBATE!**

**SCORE-CLOCKS INC.**  
(Formerly Boutronics Corporation)  
 3000 Lillian Avenue Murrysville, PA 15668  
 1-800-945-8881 • FAX 724-733-7609

Circle No. 128

munication with them by remembering what is important to each of them. One way that Smith individualizes his contacts with donors is by adding a brief handwritten note to the bottom of his standard letters, usually making reference to the last time they spoke. "Rarely do I send out a letter that isn't personalized," says Smith. "A lot of people will skip the printed text because they know it's standard and they'll immediately go to the handwritten note because they think, 'This is meant for me.' That makes it meaningful."

At Bowling Green, Myers looks through

her files to help personalize a letter, then mentions the donor's favorite sport, hometown, or years at the university—even if she and the donor have never met. To go above and beyond expectations, Myers also sends occasional notes and newspaper clippings highlighting events on campus that may be of interest to a particular donor. "Clipping an occasional article can really make an impression, especially when it feels like a spontaneous, spur-of-the-moment gesture," she says. "It's a powerful way to show someone that you care."

Showing ongoing thanks also means providing your donors entertainment and a sense of belonging. At South Dakota State, fundraisers invite their donors to regional events, hosting road trips to professional sports events as far away as Minneapolis or Denver, where they hold pregame receptions. "If we know of something special happening in the region," says Smith, "we ask people if they'd like to come with us. We constantly make sure to include donors, in particular our elderly donors, who might not go someplace because it's too far, or because the event is at night. It's important for us to communicate that, 'Just because you've given your gift doesn't mean we're done thinking about you.'"

**MAKING CONNECTIONS**

Ultimately, saying thank-you is a lot like the cultivation process that appealed to your donors in the first place: The emphasis should

***"The key is to avoid doing the same things the same way all the time ... And whatever you do, make sure the feeling is genuine, because if it doesn't ring true, the person on the other end can tell."***

be on the impact people can have in the lives of your student-athletes. It's about finding new and different ways to make connections among people, which keeps them giving to your program.

"The key is to avoid doing the same things the same way all the time," says Myers. "What will make a lasting impression is something that's a little bit different. And whatever you do, make sure the feeling is genuine, because if it doesn't ring true, the person on the other end can tell. People want to know that their gift made a difference, that their contribution was valued, and that somebody appreciated the gesture they made."

"A lot of people think that giving thanks ends when you send a form letter saying, 'We appreciate your gift,'" says Smith. "Really, that's just the beginning." ■



Circle No. 129