



Education  
Advisory  
Board

Advancement Forum

# Silent Phase Gift Announcement Strategy



Research Brief

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# Advancement Forum

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# 1) Executive Overview

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## Key Observations

**During the silent phase of a campaign, advancement communications administrators use gift announcements to target a small group of repeat donors.** Administrators typically only announce gifts of a million dollars or more to inspire major donors. Administrators use fewer types of announcement platforms (e.g., email blasts, university newspaper ads) during the silent phase. However, the smaller audience allows for more involved announcement formats (e.g., event invitations, live announcements).

**Administrators increase the frequency of gift announcements immediately prior to the public launch.** Communications administrators release gift announcements in a steady stream during the silent phase until the season prior to the public launch. Increased announcement frequency during this season builds momentum towards the launch. Administrators often strategically save one major gift to use as a launching gift for the public campaign. Frequent gift announcements should continue immediately following the campaign launch to maintain momentum.

**Press releases and internal newsletters are the most common forms of gift announcements during the silent phase.** Administrators cannot guarantee external media coverage to donors and use internal promotion media (e.g., website, newsletter) to generate desired publicity for donors.

**Administrators emphasize on-campus impact and organize short-term campaigns to motivate smaller donors.** During gift announcement, administrators try not to stress the size of the gift unless it is a priority for the donor. Instead, administrators highlight the impact (e.g., scholarship recipient, endowed professorship) of the gift. Advancement staff also organize short-term campaigns (e.g., campaign with a donor willing to match all donations given within a 24-hour window) to inspire small donors in both the silent and public phases.

## 2) Targeting Gift Announcements

### Announcement Audience

#### **Target an Audience of Large, Repeat Donors with Silent Phase Announcements**

Silent phase gift announcements target a small group of major repeat donors and the board of trustees. Advancement administrators hope these donors will give during the silent phase and help shape the future campaign. For example, at **Institution E** advancement officers target 7,000 key donors during the silent phase and invite 300 to participate in a focus group to select the campaign's key strategic initiatives and develop a campaign brand.

Because the target audience is major donors, advancement communications officers typically only announce gifts above one to five million dollars.

#### **Public Phase Audience**

The public phase of a campaign targets all university affiliates (e.g., alumni, faculty, parents), a group that includes over 50,000 at **Institution D**.

Contacts at **Institution A** report that impressive research and technological initiatives often attract the most new donors. The initiatives that inspire the most giving can help advancement administrators select the strategic initiatives for the campaign.

#### **Strategic Exceptions to the Monetary Threshold for Gift Announcements**

- 1 Impressive Campus Impact**  
e.g., new building, endowed professorship
- 2 Institutional Strategic Initiative**  
e.g., endowed sustainable energy research position
- 3 Stewardship Considerations**  
e.g., donor for whom publicity is the primary motivator

#### **Announce Gifts Live at Donor Events to Generate Excitement About Giving**

Advancement administrators often choose to announce silent phase gifts live because the target audience is small enough to invite to key advancement events. Advancement administrators also occasionally announce gifts at board of trustees meetings. Contacts at **Institution E** also use gift announcements as invitations to 'Gold Envelope Events' held for a select group of repeat donors. Events generate excitement about giving and build momentum towards the public launch.

## Emphasize On-Campus Impact to Motivate Smaller Donors

Although faculty and staff are usually smaller donors and as such do not respond well to emphasis on gift size, contacts at **Institution B** stress that faculty and staff also need to see a return on campus units' investment in advancement activities. Administrators thus may stress gift size to this group of small donors to demonstrate the campaign's success.

Contacts note that the greater publicity of large donations can disincentivize smaller donors. Communications officers emphasize the on-campus impact of philanthropy and de-emphasize the size of gifts. This mitigates smaller donors' major concern that their smaller gift will lack impact. Administrators often feature scholarship recipients and endowed faculty members in gift announcements. One contact reports administrators occasionally stress the connection between annual giving and institutional rankings. Contacts recommend administrators allot the same word count to gift announcements for smaller donors (e.g., \$25,000) as larger donors during the public campaign to show appreciation for all levels of donors.



### Impulse Giving Opportunities

Contacts note smaller donors respond strongly to impulse giving. For example, advancement administrators occasionally organize 24-hour matching campaigns. An amenable donor will match all smaller gifts donated within the allotted time. Small donors can thus see the impact of their gift multiplied and feel part of a community of donors. Advancement administrators hold short-term campaigns in both the silent and public phases. Administrators at **Institution A** secure a donor to match the senior gift every year.

## Announcement Medium

### Announce Gifts with Internal Newsletters and Press Releases

Communications officers use fewer announcement mediums during the silent phase of a campaign. Typically, administrators develop a press release for each gift, include the press release in an internal newsletter for donors, and occasionally post an announcement to the university website. Contacts communicate to donors that administrators cannot guarantee external media coverage. In some cases, communications officers contact higher education-specific reporters (e.g., The Chronicle, Inside Higher Ed). However, these organizations typically only take interest in gifts that allow a university to develop something innovative (e.g., a new program).

### Public Phase v. Silent Phase Gift Announcement Media

Media used in both campaign phases.

#### Silent Phase Media

- Press release
- Event invitation
- University website
- Internal donor e-newsletter
- Advancement website

#### Public Phase Media

- Press release
- Event invitation
- University website
- Print newsletter
- Campaign website
- Parent website
- University magazine
- Email blast to all university affiliates
- Exclusive 'campaign insider' email
- Social media (e.g. Twitter)

## ***Use Internal Promotion Methods If Gifts Do Not Garner a Donor's Desired Publicity***

Contacts report it is more common for donors to desire less publicity than the advancement office desires.

No contact institution reports donor dissatisfaction with the amount of external publicity a gift received. However, contacts highlight their use of internal media to publicize gifts, particularly university website posts and ads in the university magazine. No profiled institution places ads in external newspapers. However, contacts at **Institution E** suggest communications officers contact media in the donor's hometown or the donor's professional organization as they may have a vested interest. Contacts at **Institution C** also provide donors with copies of press releases as proof of administrators' publicity efforts.

### **Measures of Announcement Success**

The majority of contacts collect anecdotal metrics of gift announcement success. Administrators typically qualify a successful announcement as one that satisfies the donor's publicity expectations. No contact institution collects metrics on likelihood of giving again or number of gifts linked to increased press attention.

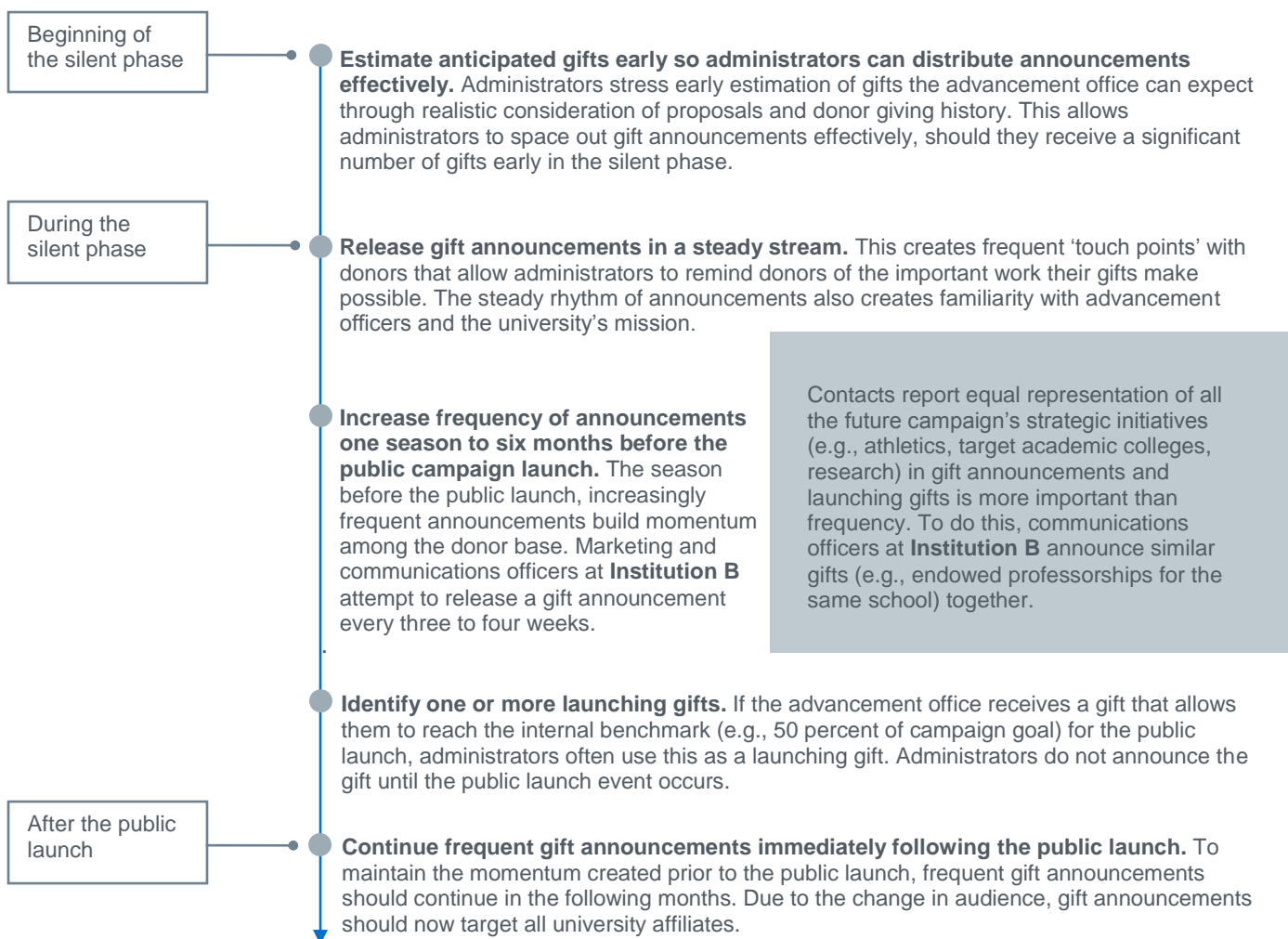
### 3) Gift Announcement Planning

#### Timing Considerations

#### ***Release a Steady Stream of Announcements During the Silent Phase to Remind Donors of the Importance of Philanthropy***

Administrators ideally distribute announcements evenly throughout the silent phase and increase the frequency of announcements immediately prior to and after the public campaign launch.

#### **Gift Announcement Time Line**



#### **Announcements of Endowed Faculty Positions**

Although contacts prefer to announce gifts once administrators can highlight their effect on campus (e.g., after administrators fill an endowed faculty position) contacts announce the gift earlier depending on the donor’s wishes. Administrators at **Institution D** announce gifts of endowed faculty positions twice: once at receipt of the gift and again once the position has been filled.



## ***Maintain Consistent Gift Announcement Procedure so Donors and Advancement Officers Can Set Expectations Appropriately***

Not all profiled institutions distribute the timing of silent phase gift announcements strategically. Contacts at **Institution D** prioritize timely announcements after the receipt of a gift to ensure donors receive prompt recognition of their gift. This timing also helps communications administrators manage the expectations of both donors and gift officers. Although contacts note donors are usually amenable to a strategic announcement delay, administrators at Institution D prefer to announce gifts a maximum of two to three weeks after its receipt.

## ***Work With Local Press Contacts to Develop Gift Announcement Schedule***

Because press release success depends upon external media, communications administrators need to avoid poor news periods (e.g., holidays) when news organizations may be understaffed. Media relations administrators at **Institution B** reach out to reporters with whom they have relationships to identify optimal times for press releases (i.e., when reporters expect greater capacity to produce articles about campaign progress).

## Staffing

## ***Communicate with Stewardship and University Communications Officers to Meet Donor and Institutional Priorities***

Administrators within an advancement communications office develop gift announcements at both **Institution D** and **Institution E**. At **Institution C**, administrators within university public relations manage gift announcements. At all institutions, administrators who develop gift announcements must collaborate with a range of university administrators to ensure donor needs are met and the university presents a unified message.

## **Participants in Gift Announcement Development**

### **Advancement Office**

- Stewardship director
- Principal relationship manager
- Media relations staffer
- Corporate and foundations relations manager (if applicable)



### **Advancement Communications Administrator**

### **Other Campus Units**

- University communications officer
- Campus unit communications officer
- Dean of receiving academic department (if applicable)

Advancement communications officers at **Institution D** meet monthly with stewardship directors to oversee gift announcement development.

## 4) Research Methodology

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### Project Challenge

Leadership at a member institution approached the Forum with the following questions:

- In what cases do advancement administrators make gift announcements during the silent phase of a campaign?
- Do administrators prefer to announce gifts after their impact can be demonstrated or upon receipt of the gift?
- What considerations influence an administrator's decision to delay a gift announcement?
- How do advancement administrators share gift announcement responsibilities with the marketing and communications department?
- How do administrators notify the media during gift announcements?
- How do administrators respond to donors who desire publicity but whose gifts do not warrant external media coverage?
- In what ways do administrators use online outlets to publicize gifts? In what ways do administrators use print-based outlets to publicize gifts?
- How do advancement administrators time gift announcements during the silent phase to build momentum towards the public launch?
- How do administrators select gift announcements that will encourage further giving?
- What metrics do administrators use to evaluate the effectiveness of an announcement?

### Project Sources

The Forum consulted the following sources for this report:

- EAB's internal and online research libraries ([www.eab.com](http://www.eab.com))
- The Chronicle of Higher Education (<http://chronicle.com>)
- National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (<http://nces.ed.gov/>)

The Forum interviewed advancement marketing and communications officers.

## A Guide to Institutions Profiled in this Brief

Institution	Location	Approximate Institutional Enrollment (Undergraduate/Total)	Classification
Institution A	Northeast	4,500 / 11,200	Research Universities (very high research activity)
Institution B	Midwest	9,400 / 21,200	Research Universities (very high research activity)
Institution C*	South	3,800 / 6,500	Research Universities (very high research activity)
Institution D	Northeast	5,800 / 10,500	Research Universities (very high research activity)
Institution E	South	4,800 / 7,400	Research Universities (high research activity)

Source: National Center for Education Statistics  
\*Information gathered via email correspondence.