



# Sponsor my science

Philanthropists will sometimes give large sums of money to support science — but researchers have to learn how to sell themselves first.

BY HEIDI LEDFORD

Asking someone to give you a million dollars is not easy. In 1995, Bruce Walker was seeking philanthropic support to expand his HIV research programme at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston. He had identified a possible donor: a venture capitalist and the brother of one of his patients. He had teamed up with a personal coach in fund-raising and rehearsed his pitch over and over. But during lunch with the prospective donor, he still nearly choked. “I couldn’t quite get it out to say, ‘Would you give us a million dollars?’” Walker recounts.

Eventually he spat out his request — and was astonished when the venture capitalist agreed to the entire sum. “At that point, I fell off my chair,” Walker says. He then raised another US\$100 million from philanthropists Terry and Susan Ragon to launch the Ragon Institute of MGH, MIT and Harvard in Charlestown, Massachusetts, in 2009. He and his colleagues are now planning a formal seminar series on raising philanthropic support. His success at fund-raising, he says, “is not because there’s something special about me. It’s because I got a little bit of training and I put in a lot of effort.”

Walker is not the only one with a determined approach to philanthropy. As public funding for research dwindles, scientists are increasingly seeking private benefactors (see page 252). But they have a lot to learn if they are to win trust and

money: how to schmooze contacts, promote their science and deliver results to deadline — all without over-promising on the work (see ‘How to woo philanthropists’). Much of this does not come naturally to scientists. “You have to sell yourself,” says Cheryl McEwen, who, with her husband Rob, donated US\$10 million to found the McEwen Centre for Regenerative Medicine in Toronto, in 2003. “But if you can build a case that we can understand, we’ll be there for you.”

To help build that case, research institutions — particularly those in the United States — are becoming savvier about how to approach philanthropists. In April 2010, Steve Rum, the vice-president for development and alumni relations at Johns Hopkins School of Medicine in Baltimore, Maryland, started training faculty at the school in fund-raising techniques. Elsewhere, scientists are enrolling in classes provided by external institutes. Researchers are happy to have the help, and not just because it can bring in new income. It can also allow them to pursue projects that government funding committees would find too risky to support. “When you come to the government agencies with their

committees and extreme accountability and taxpayer dollars, everything tends to come out a bit plain vanilla,” says Tim Hunt, a Nobel-prizewinning biochemist at Cancer Research UK in London, who credits philanthropic support with helping him to continue his basic cell-biology studies even when applied research was more in vogue. “It’s valuable to have funding that’s a little bit out of the mainstream.”

## PERSONAL APPROACH

Philanthropy is supporting a growing slice of science: donations from US foundations to science, technology and medical research have grown from \$793 million in 1999 to \$1.7 billion in 2010, according to figures from the Foundation Center, an organization based in New York that analyses information about philanthropy. But although many scientists have experience in sending grant applications to foundations, few try to win multimillion-dollar donations from rich and generous individuals.

Convincing a philanthropist to fund a programme means cultivating a personal relationship with them. “It’s an old adage, but it’s

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completely true: people give money to people,” says Thomas Pierson, chief executive of the SETI Institute, an astrobiology research centre in Mountain View, California. After SETI was cut loose from NASA in 1993, it relied on Bernard Oliver, a well-connected member of its board and a former head of research and development at the computer firm Hewlett Packard in Palo Alto, California, to take its case to local entrepreneurs. The result: support from a who’s who of technology luminaries, including Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen.

Most scientists will need to look outside their usual network of colleagues and supporters for prospective donors, says Robert Klein, a real-estate magnate who helped to raise \$34.5 million in the 2004 campaign for California’s \$3-billion stem-cell initiative. Most of that, he says, came from wealthy families with a vested interest — usually a sick relative — in seeing stem-cell technologies succeed. To reach these families, Klein recommends first building contacts with patients and those who support them. “Have a patient advocate call ahead, and sit next to you while you make the pitch,” says Klein. “Better yet, if you can get them to do it, have the advocate make the pitch for you.”

Walker urges researchers to be on continual alert for new contacts. “When you travel, always try to get upgraded to business class,” he says. “Then talk to the people around you about what you do.”

This type of schmoozing takes time and a certain personality. Rum says that Morton Goldberg, an ophthalmologist at Johns Hopkins, is a fund-raising “superstar” — helping to build an endowment that now funds more than 30 professorships. The secret to his success, says Rum, is his willingness to forge lasting relationships with philanthropists. Goldberg says he considers many of his donors to be close friends. He has travelled with them, spending weekends on their boats and in their vacation homes. “It has been an extremely rewarding experience, far beyond any connection with money,” he says.

Many physicians are reluctant to solicit their former patients, and with good reason, says bioethicist Sheldon Krinsky of Tufts

University in Boston. “It’s not OK for a doctor who is actively treating a patient to do it.” Even after a patient has left the hospital, he or she may return, says Krinsky, and a physician who has received that patient’s support may now be expected to provide special treatment.

Another pitfall of philanthropy, Krinsky says, is donors who attach strings to their gifts. When the Charles G. Koch Charitable Foundation in Arlington, Virginia, agreed to fund a faculty position in economics at Florida State University in Tallahassee, it demanded the right

**“Try to get upgraded to business class.”**

to determine the criteria used to pick a professor, and to veto candidates it did not like (S. Krinsky *Nature* 474, 129; 2011). “It was so egregious,” says Krinsky. The university accepted the terms in 2008, but has argued that input from the foundation during the hiring process has not compromised its academic integrity.

Krinsky worries that tough economic times can make researchers and their institutions more willing to accept intrusions into academic freedom in exchange for funding. Scientists agree, but several who have received philanthropic support point out that they appreciated the sound financial and strategic advice the donors offered.

For many scientists, the most difficult step is pitching their work as if they were an entrepreneur in need of investment, says Garen Staglin, who, with his wife, Shari, donated some of the family’s earnings from their vineyard in Napa Valley, California, to mental-health research after their son was diagnosed with schizophrenia. “You have to go into sell mode,” he says. “You have to be able to say ‘there are no guarantees here but if this works, this is the kind of stuff we think is possible in our lifetime.’” But that type of sell tends to be easier for applied projects, such as potentially life-saving medical studies, than for basic research.

Selling research can also require a

willingness to set deadlines. “In difficult economic times, the philanthropies become very goal oriented,” Klein says. It’s a practice that many scientists resist, because science rarely goes according to plan. When it doesn’t, fund-raising specialists say that it’s best to acknowledge the failure and stress the importance of the lessons learned. “You will still give them the confidence that there are incremental improvements,” says Klein.

## PHILANTHROPY SCHOOL

Research institutions often rely on professional fund-raisers to approach philanthropists, but Johns Hopkins isn’t alone in training faculty members. Advancement Resources in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, has seen a fivefold increase in demand for its fund-raising training over the past four years, says chief executive Joe Golding. Institutions pay \$17,500 for a four-hour workshop of lectures and role-playing exercises.

Golding says that basic researchers would do well to target entrepreneurs. “They are, by definition, risk takers,” he says. “And they value leverage.” Stress that a \$30,000 investment now could lead to a million-dollar government grant later, he advises, and emphasize the impact a project would have on a topic that is close to the entrepreneur’s heart. Golding, Rum and other experts also tell their trainees to listen for clues to how much a donor might be willing to commit. “If I ask for \$100,000 and they say ‘yes’ right away, then I didn’t ask for enough,” says one fund-raiser at a large research university who asked not to be named. “It’s a common mistake.”

Rum even conducted a trial to find the best way to teach faculty members about how to approach former patients. He divided faculty members into three groups. One received only weekly fund-raising lessons by e-mail. The second also attended a lecture on the topic. The third received individualized coaching, including how to prepare an ‘elevator pitch’ — a brief description of research so compelling that it could capture someone’s attention in the time it takes to travel between floors. Three months after coaching, the first two groups had brought in no money. The third had collected five gifts totalling \$219,550 (S. Rum and S. M. Wright *Acad. Med.* 87, 55–59; 2012).

Walker says that this type of personal coaching — not to mention the agony of asking for money — has been more than worthwhile. “I think we as a scientific community don’t do a great job in articulating the transformational power of philanthropy,” he says. “But that funding has allowed me to do things that I never could have considered if I’d been trying to do it through traditional sources.”

Too few researchers take advantage of philanthropy, says Goldberg. “The most common mistake is not to try.” ■ SEE EDITORIAL P.238 AND COMMENT P.260

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## FUND-RAISING 101

### How to woo philanthropists

Advice from successful fund-raisers on how to sell science.

- Network outside your usual circles: look for contacts — and contacts of contacts — who can strike an emotional chord with philanthropists.
- Learn how to frame your research and its importance in a few sentences. Practise this ‘elevator pitch’ in front of the mirror, and with anyone who will listen.
- Aim high: look for hints about how much a

donor might be willing to commit.

- Establish deadlines: break projects into small chunks and assign completion dates for each step. Explain the vagaries of scientific research to your donor and don’t be afraid to adjust timelines.
- Reward your investor: send regular progress updates, acknowledge their sponsorship in publications and presentations and encourage contributors to come to the lab for visits and tours. **H.L.**