Although the benefits offered to library friends or regular donors are often called “perquisites” (“perks” for short), the term is troublesome when it implies that the goods, services, or privileges offered in exchange for an annual payment are justly due the donor. Managers of library friends groups who view benefits as “just deserts” may not take advantage of their full potential. Instead of wondering what a library benefactor deserves in exchange for a contribution, we ought to look for the best use we can make of an opportunity to give something to a regular donor. We need to ponder how to make an advantage out of what is frequently viewed as an obligation.

In most cases library friends groups are created to help support a library’s operating budget through fund raising, to disseminate information about a library, and to foster goodwill in the community. And while the benefits and gifts offered to supporters should express gratitude, they should also be wisely designed to help achieve some of the library’s goals in establishing and sustaining an effective friends group.

The goals for a friends group naturally include the contribution of unrestricted annual gifts, one hopes in quantity, to support book purchase funds or the operating budget. But such a group is also a magnet for new supporters, serving as an open, easily accessible, clearly explained way of giving money to a library to help with its work. Through membership recruitment efforts, friends groups can create important, high-quality publicity, while individual members provide access to power and influence in the community. Finally, and most important, a friends group can be the means to upgrade modest or casual donors to leaders of trustee caliber, or to bring these people to the status of major institutional benefactors through bequests, trusts and annuities, or major lifetime gifts.

In short, an effective friends group is not only a money-raising endeavor. Equally important, it is an interest-raising and interest-sustaining enterprise. And, one should be calculating: a “perk” should be offered to stimulate a friend’s generosity to, or his interest in, the library. Keep in mind that if the friend is not interested in your library he will not make a gift; if he does
give, most of the time he is signaling that he wants to be further informed about you.

While it is wise to be competitive with other libraries, museums, or cultural institutions when drawing up a benefit package, it is wiser still to make sure that the “perks” offered will communicate your library’s special character. Let them be more than appropriate to the image of your institution; make them apt.

This means that before you decide what “perks” to offer, you must determine what it is about the library that interests your donors. In the friends business it is likely that, in some shape or form, the primary interest is books. After that the problem becomes more difficult; the interests vary from institution to institution and among donors. Your library’s special appeal may be its role in research support to a college or university; its status as a conveyor of library services and information to the reading public, to children, or to the disadvantaged; or that it has an important collection on a subject of interest, such as genealogy or seventeenth-century English literature.

Once the particular appeal of your library is identified, you must then decide what your friends are like, or could or should be like. This does not mean asking how wealthy they are at the outset; one almost never knows a library friend’s giving capacity. On an absolute scale a $15 or a $150 annual gift — often, in the library’s view, the difference between an ordinary and a special donor — may not be indicative of the donor’s wealth. That $15 may be less than 1 percent of his total giving; the $150 may represent 90 percent of his annual gifts to charity. Furthermore, the actual wealth of a friend, at least at the beginning of his membership, has little to do with the amount he gives. His first gifts are made to become one of your donors, to get his name on the list, to establish membership, but not to endow or sustain your operations. But from little acorns grow mighty oaks. Eventually, if the friends group effectively motivates generosity and interest, the wealth of some friends will become obvious and, over time, with the proper cultivation, they may move beyond the realm of benefits and memberships to the status of VIP donors and very good friends.

In establishing a profile of your library’s friends, consider first what classes of interest they represent, and how they came to be friends. The most obvious category of friends includes current and former readers. They know the library very well, probably both its strengths and weaknesses, and they may have followed its activities for a long time. In general, this is the least wealthy category of donors; and given the well-established view that library access is an American birthright paid for through taxes or tuitions, this can be the hardest group to persuade that they ought to support their library.
But to earn anyone else's support — corporate, governmental, foundation, or personal — you ought to prove that your patrons value the library enough to contribute. A second group of friends includes tourists, visitors, and people who view your exhibitions, attend your public programs, or use your facilities for meetings or other events. This might be regarded as the casual trade in the library. There is probably also a group of "nonreaders" who believe in libraries. These people often collect books themselves or they may, for personal or historical reasons, be particularly attached to your library. Generally, this is the wealthiest and most generous class of friend. Finally, there are community leaders who routinely support good cultural causes. These people may be politicians, socialites, or business and professional people. Their wealth will vary greatly, as will their interest in your library's work.

A second important characteristic of friends is the extent of their actual contact with your library. Are they locals who frequent the neighborhood and can be counted on to view exhibitions or attend events? Do they live in Europe, or on a far coast? Or are they of a profession or disposition that makes them unlikely, though they live nearby, to take advantage of social offerings?

A friends group may be all of one or the other sort, but this is unlikely if there has been a good member recruitment effort. Therefore, a package of benefits must appeal both to the "foreigners" and "locals" in the membership. And any one "perk" will do well to appeal to several classes of friends at once. Furthermore, the good benefit offering, like the Horatian ode, should have as its end instruction and delight: its goals are to provoke interest in your library and generosity to it.

Of the several classes of friends just outlined, the ones most reliable, potentially generous, and responsive to "perks" will probably come from two groups: the current and former readers who know the institution but may not be very sophisticated or charitable givers and the nonreaders who like the library because it is an important charity in the community, who like what the library is doing, or who have some other personal reason for their interest. So, if the goal is to develop benefits that reach the most people who can do the most good for your library, you now know who your "perks" audience is.

Perquisites can instruct and delight these people with descriptions of your book collections and materials, or of your research, education, and community service activities. You can give them inside acquaintance with aspects of library business that are of special interest to the layman, such as a conservation or binding project, or a subject of widespread interest, like genealogy. You can have them help celebrate a particular triumph, such as the acquisition of an important collection, the receipt of a special award
by your library, or a library-related award or accomplishment of a staff member; or enlist them to observe special events in the library's history. Always choose events and gifts which will say in a discreet, nonverbal manner that a special and enlightened class of people support the library, people with whom friends should be pleased to associate either socially, as at receptions and lectures, or as a name on a list of honored donors.

As friends become more knowledgeable about your library, the exigencies of your financial situation may come to interest them. Then the race is nearly won, because in the dynamics of a library friends group, the act of giving should become a "perk" in itself. Your best friends will become interested in the library's welfare rather than in their own rewards. Friends can then be encouraged to furnish a room for the library; to sustain a special outreach or research program; to buy a book that is expensive, rare, or beautiful and especially desired by the library; to run a volunteer program or a bookshop or docents program; or to help meet a challenge grant to recruit new friends. Afterward they can join in celebrating their generosity with a special public event or publication that is more commonly recognized as a "perk" or benefit.

By now it should be clear that I favor receptions, dinners, exhibitions and exhibition openings, lectures, concerts and other performances, newsletters, calendars, keepsake and commemorative publications, special appeals, and sponsored tours. Bookshop discounts, special lending or other library privileges seem less appropriate as friends benefits (though if your competition offers them you may have to follow suit) because they are relatively passive offerings. You are not engaging the attention and goodwill of a friend on behalf of the library with bookshop discounts. In the case of lending privileges, you are bordering on a contractual relationship with a donor that may seem to compromise your free library status in the view of your general readers (though in truth that may not be the case). Such an offering may take the edge off the generosity-invoking nature of the relationship you want to foster.

Once you have a general sense of the appropriate perquisites, how do you assure that the ones you choose are "cost-effective"? This, of course, is one of the hardest questions to answer. You can determine how much benefit offerings cost, and you will know how much money you raise through the friends group in a fiscal year. That may give a rough estimate of the effectiveness of your offerings from year to year. But given the other factors involved in friends' giving, that is a rather crude measure of effectiveness. Furthermore, "perks" are offered in order to find, to keep, and to develop friendships; and from that perspective their cost-effectiveness must be viewed over a longer term than one or three fiscal years.
A better measure of effectiveness may well be the number of members. If enrollment is declining or if the renewal rate is poor (be aware that a renewal rate of only 80 percent is not uncommon, especially in the wake of a membership drive), you ought to evaluate your offerings in a colder light. If you hold events and only a fraction of your friends attend, it is time to retrench. And if you make a special appeal and get little or no response, look to the nature of your appeal, your publicity, and the kinds of things you are giving your members.

The cost of a “perk” is frequently easy to determine; it is far more difficult to assess its value and impact. There is one certain factor in evaluating a benefit: a shabby or otherwise second-class offering simply should not be made. It is better to make the main benefit of membership the federal income tax deduction available to the charitable giver than to pain a donor with a less than competent offering. Remember, everything given a donor as a benefit is, in the eyes of the Internal Revenue Service, a reduction of his charitable gift. If membership costs $10 and the friend gets $6 in benefits, the IRS may only let the donor count $4 as a charitable gift. The value of the benefits offered in exchange for membership in charitable associations is a frequent focus of discussion among donors, donees and tax men.

Another caveat: make the highest priority “perks” those that reach the greatest number of friends. Most obviously, do a newsletter — of high quality editorially, but not lavish. And be sure that its content hews to the instruct-and-delight, motivate-and-recognize theme. Consider offering an occasional keepsake publication or, an application especially suited to libraries, a calendar based on illustrated books and other materials in your collections. If you are lucky they will hang it on a wall by the phone and think of you every day.

By all means have offerings that get friends into your building, into the presence of your senior or most interesting staff and readers, into the interesting business of the library, and into the presence of one another. Give those who like belonging, in addition to supporting, a sense of the friends as more than a bank account for the library’s benefit. Exhibition openings are an easy and natural way to do this. Occasionally (once a year may be sufficient) have an event, widely publicized, for friends only. It should make the membership realize again with pleasure that your library is a place for learning, with enough influence in the intellectual community to bring important, learned, or famous people to speak or perform for them. This is often expensive, though not necessarily so; but it will have a major impact, when properly publicized, not only on those members who attend, but on those who did not attend, and on your all-important potential membership.

In sum, benefits offered to annual donors should be an important part of an overall strategy for accomplishing the goals of a friends group. It takes
a lot of work to run such a group, and the "perks" substantially increase the labor and expense. So take care to use your resources of time, money, and energy in an efficient and productive manner. This means that if you see your friends group as a fund- and support-raising arm of your library, membership in the friends group should be marketed on the basis of helping a great library to grow and to remain great — or some such high-minded goal. Allude to perquisite offerings, but do not use them as a primary selling point. Then offer perquisites that are attractive to new donors, that make regular donors feel good about belonging, and that are designed to entertain members while instructing them about your library in a manner that will increase their concern for your welfare and financial stability. This is no small task, but "perks" are an excellent device for sustaining your annual budget and paving the way for larger gifts by recruiting and cultivating donors at the entry level. In these days of shrinking foundation and personal fortunes, the support of the multitudes, despite the high costs of getting and keeping it, is essential to the survival of cultural institutions like libraries.