

Questions I'm Most Often Asked about Direct Mail Fundraising

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Is the Internet the death knell for direct mail?

Not even close. Direct mail is a long way from death. It's still the most effective fundraising medium (after the church offering basket) and it's many times more effective than email.

But the way it works is changing. One important change is the way direct mail and the Web are becoming intertwined. Donors are moved by the warmth and personal touch of direct mail, then going online to give. It's the best of both worlds when they do that: The higher average gifts we get from online donors, combined with the higher frequency and retention we see with direct-mail donors. This is on its way to becoming the typical way giving happens. To be effective in that world, we need to make sure our direct mail and online communications are tightly integrated: Same look and feel, same language, same offers.

Since at heart direct mail is about one person writing to another, offering them a chance to change the world, why all the emphasis on technique?

I think we label as "techniques" things that seem unfamiliar to us. Things like underlining, short paragraphs, colloquial language, and handwritten margin notes. Formal business writing (and English teachers) discourage these, so they may seem like artificial techniques. But they're just conventions that help us connect with donors. We know that from years of testing and experience. You'd be a little crazy to ignore this knowledge. That said, any fundraiser who focuses on "technique" and not on the more important person-to-person aspect of the work will never really succeed.

What's the best way to thank a first-time donor?

Quickly, specifically, emotionally, and by phone and/or mail if at all possible.

Speaking of thank-you letters, ours are pretty drab. What constitutes a great one?

The most common problem with thank-you letters is they aren't heartfelt and specific. They're just receipts. They don't match the passion and focus of the ask, so they miss the opportunity to bring home to the donor what her gift meant. A great thank you letter drips with emotion and thanks the donor for the same thing she was asked to do in the first place. It should be full of attention-grabbing "techniques" and emotional triggers. Your thank-you messages might be more important than your appeals in the long run.

How subtle should our letter be in terms of asking?

Don't make donors guess what you're getting at. And don't assume you have their full attention. Ask clearly, ask repeatedly, ask with confidence and passion. Fundraising is for believers and fanatics who can hardly be subtle if they try. Your cause is too important for caution or pussy-footing. Being subtle is the quick route to fundraising failure.

I've read that recipients don't really read fundraising letters, they scan them. So what do we do!?

Make it your goal to write letters that hook readers, pull them in, and entice them to read every word. But understand that few donors will start with your first sentence and read to the end without skipping.

First, make sure your letter is easy to read -- with large type and no silly design tricks like hard-to-read fonts, type over color, or reverse type. Create lots of visual entry points, like underlining, highlighting, boldface type, oddly indented paragraphs, subheads, and other interruptive elements.

Second, write in a simple, colloquial style that's effortless to read. Be repetitive, with your main point - the ask -- voiced several times.

Finally, be irresistible by making your main topic the donor and how SHE can change the world, not your organization and its awesome programs.

Do those things and you'll get more response, because more people will read more of your message -- and even those who skim or skip around will get the message clearly.

What advice do you have about the opening sentence of a letter?

Cut the one you've written. Almost everybody, including me, starts with a weak first sentence. Don't warm up. Start with action -- whether that's telling a story, asking, or saying something nice about the donor.

Can I assume that our mailing to acquire donors is going to be a losing proposition?

That's a reasonable assumption. You are fortunate indeed if you realize net revenue while acquiring new donors. It happens, but it's not normal anymore. Fundraising is about building relationships, not getting people to drop some money in your bucket and walk away. The "profit" comes from ongoing donors, who give more often and give larger amounts. Money-losing donor acquisition is the way you find those profitable donors.

How many times a year can we mail our current donors? I read that donors dislike getting too much mail and we drive them away by asking too often.

Most of the organizations I work with send 12 to 18 appeal letters a year, plus three to six newsletters. A few do more than that. If you're communicating with donors much less than this, you're probably not maximizing your fundraising, and all your metrics, from net revenue to donor retention are likely not where they could be.

There is no evidence that more contact drives away donors. In fact, low fundraising frequency causes not only less net revenue in the short run, but worse donor retention, which will limit future revenue and crush your efficiency in the long run.

More important than how frequently you mail is how relevant your material is. If you're speaking your donors' language and repeatedly giving them opportunities to change the world in ways that matter to them (and then thanking them well), you can keep a very high frequency of communication and it will be worth it for everyone. If your fundraising is self-focused, all about how great your organization is, then even one or two appeals a year will be too much.

Should we sometimes send mail that doesn't ask for a gift?

Rarely. But your donors should get a steady diet of mail that doesn't *primarily* ask for a gift. Your thank-you letters should be all about thanking, but include a reply device and return envelope. Your report back vehicles (like newsletters) should focus on showing donors the difference their giving makes, but also have an ask.

Donors like to give! That's why it's appropriate to make it easy for them. When you're thanking or reporting back make donors feel good, they'll want to give again. Why would you consider not cooperating with that?

Those experts who talk about asking like it's toxic or harmful are really missing the boat. Don't let them lead you astray and away from what donors are all about. Giving feels good!

You say in your book, *The Fundraiser's Guide to Irresistible Communications*, that the key design element in a direct mail appeal is the outer envelope. Why?

The outer envelope is the one piece that has the most impact. If you wonder what you should test, that's it. And here's a tip: One of the best bets is no copy and no image just your return address (maybe not even that). That comes out on top three-quarters of the time.

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