

What to put in your donor newsletter by Tom Ahern

Here's the easiest explanation I've ever come up with. These are the *few* things you really *must* remember, to make your donor newsletters succeed at: (1) retaining donors and (2) increasing gift revenue.

#1. Donors should *feel* something as they read your newsletter. Something. Glad, angry, relieved, hopeful, happy, proud, satisfied . . . *something*. Judge everything you put in your newsletter by one standard: Is this news item, anecdote, statistic, or photo likely to make the donor *feel* something?

#2. Are you marinated in "donor love?" Do you make the donor feel like a VIP? Have you switched from the "donor-negligent" voice ("We did this. We did that. And, oh by the way, if you sent a check, thanks!") to the proper "donor-centric" voice ("With your help, we did this and that. And without your help, we can't.")

You simply cannot flatter a donor too much. In fact, "flattering donors too much" is right at the top of a fundraiser's job description, in my opinion. Why? Because flattery stimulates more revenue.

And it's *not* a cynical ploy. Donors are never really gulled. They *know* flattery for what it is. But they *don't* reject it. Truth? They *like* the feeling. And, truth, *you* like the feeling. Fact: *We all* like the feeling. Flattery reminds us, in case we've forgotten, that we're worth *something*. That we're *important*. And that feels *really* good.

#3. They want to trust you. They're just not sure they can. We have something like 1.5 million 501(c)(3) nonprofits in the U.S. but almost no regulatory oversight. Charity fraud is common in the news. You need to reassure your readers *repeatedly* that your organization is business-minded and trustworthy.

#4. Surprise me. This is mere neuroscience: Our brains tend to pay more attention to anything new. Even the word "new" excites us. Show me something I haven't seen before. Tell me something I haven't heard before. The rule: *Do anything except bore me*. The reality: Ninety-nine out of 100 donor newsletters violate that rule religiously. No wonder your newsletters produce so little.

#5. Prepare to be skimmed. More science: First, we look at all the bigger, bolder, briefer things in a publication, like headlines and photos, *before* we dig into the articles. And we seldom *ever* dig into the articles: No more than one in five readers will penetrate the first paragraph of any story. Plus, there's the BI vs. AI phenomenon: Before the Internet vs. After the Internet. The Internet tossed a grenade into people's attention spans and blew them all to shreds.

#6. If you want response, you need to make offers. It's simple cause and effect. What kinds of offers? Information. Tours. Matching gifts. Special fund drives.

#7. Is it *easy* to give? Inertia is the *real* enemy in fundraising, I am totally convinced. Simply getting someone to act (write a check, go online and donate) is hard. *Convenience is key*. Include a reply envelope. Remind the reader on every page of your newsletter that online donations are fast and safe. And then make sure they *are* fast and safe. I tried to give \$350 online to a favorite charity the other day and their PayPal mechanism required me to set up an account first. No, thank you.

#8. Collect email addresses so you can send e-newsletters. An effective donor communications program will field *both* (not either) printed newsletters and e-newsletters. Brief emailed updates let you keep your supporters informed at almost no cost. Yet most charities I know have email addresses for no more than 20% of their donorbase. Boo hiss.

#9. There are key messages you need to repeat *over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and . . .* Some of those messages will be specific to your charity. Though some are apt for almost all charities, messages like: (1) *The success of the mission depends on donors.* (2) *Your support is vitally important.* (3) *Nothing feels better than helping your neighbors and your community.* (4) *The more you give, the more good we can do.*

Takeaway: A good donor newsletter stirs pleasure in its readers. It reassures them that the mission is still urgent and relevant. And it renews in them the certainty that they are accomplishing something worthwhile by continuing their support.

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