

Tips for fundraising letters

Clients regularly ask me what goes into a good fundraising letter sent to previous donors.

Here are some tips, in no particular order:

- Spend time thinking about the opening sentence or two. It should be engaging, interesting, and provocative. Don't save your most engaging material for a third of the way into the letter. Open with your strongest stuff.
- Make the ask. At least once per page in a multi-page letter. Letters that provide an update and then just softly suggest donations are almost never effective.
- Make the ask specific. Don't ask for "generous support" or other similar wishy-washy terms. If you can, segment your list to make the ask at an appropriate level for different levels of past giving. If not, you can ask for a several specific levels (e.g. "give \$35, \$50, \$100, or whatever you can afford.").
- Personalize it. Don't send it to "Dear Friend." Send it to "Dear Susan."
- Thank them. If the thank you can be personalized, all the better. For example, some organizations as part of a mail merge can personalize based on how much they last donated (e.g. "Thank you for your most recent gift of \$50" – with \$50 being a field inserted from the mail merge unique to that donor).
- Write it from a person, not the organization. It should be first-person singular from the author, not "we" from the organization.
- Create urgency by noting some monetary need of your organization with a deadline. Create an artificial deadline if necessary. Make it clear donations in the next few weeks are critical.
- Tell a story with visually arresting language. But the story shouldn't be over – the ending should depend on donors stepping forward to complete the story. The donors should be the hero(s) of the story, not the nonprofit.
- Focus on the mission-impact you'll be making on the world with more resources, not the process or internal organizational benefits.
- Close with a strong repeat of the ask.
- If the author has time to actually sign each individual letter instead of printing one, then it's worth doing so. I found this to be a painless activity to do while watching a movie or tv show at home and am pretty sure donors appreciated when they could tell an individual signed it, not just the computer. This also gave me a chance to write 1-2 sentence personal notes on any letters where I knew the person receiving it.
- Use a PS that once again repeats the specific ask and the urgency/deadline.
- If the volunteers are available, experiment with having half your letters hand addressed by volunteers and sent first class. See if the extra dollars generated by higher returns justifies the extra postage and volunteer time. If so, make this part of your standard practice.

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