

Appeals that Work: Proven Practices for Increasing ROI on Direct Mail Solicitation for Non-profit Annual Funds and Membership Organizations

The average person receives more than 250 pieces of direct mail each year. Of all that direct mail, nearly half—44%—is thrown away unopened. But, when done effectively, direct mail appeal letters can make a powerful impact on your fundraising results.

In this paper, we'll identify specific practices that take direct mail appeal letters to a higher level, increasing response rates, total dollars raised, average gift and overall return on your investment.

The Personalization Imperative

The key to a one-to-one relationship is speaking in a way that is meaningful to each individual recipient. Maximize every significant field in your database, and take advantage of variable printing technology that allows for segmenting messages within your recipient list using different criteria, such as donor status, age, and geographic location.

To achieve one-to-one communication in a direct mail appeal:

- Include the current contact information you have on file for each recipient to review and update. Make a special, noticeable request for information you don't have, like email address.
- Address each recipient personally, always, by their name. First ask: Are you on a first-name basis? Should you be? Is it more of a formal, business-style relationship? Do you need to use a specific salutation?
- Acknowledge each recipient's current relationship with your organization. Is he or she a regular donor, a first-time donor, a major donor, a lapsed donor? Does he or she serve in a volunteer capacity with your organization? Is this the first time you've solicited this individual, or have they received other appeal letters from you?
- Include the specific of each donor's giving history. When was his or her last gift? In what amount? Specifically acknowledge the commitment of long-time, consistent donors by including their gift dates and increased gift amounts over time. Show lapsed donors that you notice their absence and that your organization will miss their gifts by including their last gift or cumulative giving.
- Use photos and images that present your organization on a personal level to each recipient. Include photographs of people, places and things that have significance to the recipient, or even better, include photos that include the recipient. Using variable image printing, we are now able to include a unique photo for each recipient or for groups of recipients, as part of the same print run.

Data as the Foundation

Contact information is your lifeline to your audiences. The more you have, the better your chances of building a lasting relationship. Collect everything you can about your members and donors, and make sure its current. The records in your database—whether members, donors, prospective donors, friends, or business—are your most value asset. You must keep track of them and their every move as it relates to the success of your fundraising efforts.

- It goes without saying you should collect home, business and any other contact information, such as a second home where an individual may stay for a significant part of the year.
- Ask for occupation and job title. This knowledge may help you when recruiting volunteers to fill specific roles on your board or for special projects.
- Carefully and thoroughly track giving on a per person basis. Record the gift date, amount, and payment method.
- Track giving results and responses per appeal mailings. Knowing who gave how much in response to which mailing will enhance your overall marketing strategy as well as give you donor-specific information to make appeals more effective.
- Ask for information that will help you create a dialog with your recipients through direct mail. For example, an alumni-based organization should collect information on activities in which their alumni were involved as students; when soliciting alumni with direct mail, use activity-related information and images that apply to each alumnus. Make sure you take time to properly record rich information like this in your database so it can be used effectively in your appeal mailings.
- Designate your past and current volunteers in your database so that you can easily pull this information into your appeal mailings. Volunteers have a special affinity for your group that should be recognized.

Capturing and tracking as much information as you can about your direct mail audiences requires making an investment in your database management and maintenance. Your database is the foundation of your direct mail appeal program, so this investment is extremely worthwhile.

Recognizing the Value of Content

Telling your story in words and images is a prime opportunity to engage your recipients in your organization. Using your stakeholders—members, donors, and volunteers—to craft your story through their own stories (and photos!) is even more effective. Make sure content is developed by thinking “outward” toward your direct mail audience, not “inward” toward your organization’s staff, leadership and board.

- Answer the recipient’s question “what’s in it for me if I make a gift?” Whether it’s personal fulfillment or the continuation of services, events or activities that he or she enjoys, address this question directly.
- Drive and collect member-generated content that can be packaged for future solicitation and cultivation. Our alumni-based organizations, for example, collect stories and photos through class notes that are used to personalize solicitation mailings with photos and stories unique to each alumnus or groups of alumni, like grad year segments.
- Be solution-oriented vs. not problem oriented. Always describe in detail how you are attacking challenges head-on and how each individual gift will contribute to the solution.
- Recognize individual donors and identify specifically how their gifts impacted your accomplishments, achievements and results.
- Give current and potential donors confidence in your ability to maximize their gifts by illustrating how well you manage your finances.

- Share your long-term vision for your organization and paint a picture for how each donor will help you achieve it.
- Use graphics to create visual representations of your fundraising progress and goals. Create charts or graphs that are meaningful to your direct mail audience. For example, compare your results to other similar organizations, or show fundraising participation of segmented groups within your audience.
- Make sure your direct mail appeal calls recipients to a very specific action: make a gift. Tell them how to do it and give them a deadline to drive a sense of urgency.

Consistency and Adherence

Consistency in communication will help you achieve consistency in donor relationships. To build lasting relationships with your donors, you must combine regular and consistent direct mail appeals with frequent communications aimed at cultivating your audience.

- Create a habit of giving among your direct mail audience by creating an annual solicitation schedule.
- Sticking to a program can be difficult, especially if your organization is managed by volunteers. Make a commitment to adhere to a program that includes regular solicitation and cultivation.
- On average, Americans move every five years. If you are mailing to your members often and consistently, you can collect forwarding information from the post office. A regular mailing schedule is a big part of keeping your data accurate.

If you communicate only when you need money, your audience hears more about your needs than about the accomplishments made possible by their gifts. Balancing solicitation and cultivation gives members a big picture view and allows them to see their dollars at work.

Our clients are experiencing the elements of successful direct mail firsthand. Meaningful content used on a one-to-one level inspired a member of an alumni organization to make a gift for the first time in 15 years. When he read a short memory submitted by another alumnus from his class year, he was inspired to send in his own stories, along with photos, and a gift.

It's a common misconception that highly personalized solicitations are more expensive to produce than non-personalized ones, most of which begin "Dear Friend of <insert organization name here>." But our clients who utilize our personalized, variable printing products actually pay **as much as \$400 less than clients who send non-personalized solicitations. In as little as two weeks, 95% of the clients who mailed personalized solicitations saw a return on their investment.**

Conclusion

Solicitation is part science, part art, and all-important. Bottom line, how you ask for money will determine how much your members give. Direct marketing solicitations can help you exceed your annual fund goals and increase the return on your investment if you follow these guidelines.