112 Tips to Raise More Money by Mail

Direct mail is the source of most gifts to nonprofits. And it’s one of the most important communications vehicles your organization will ever have.

Raise all the money you need by following these best practice tips:

THE BIG PICTURE - Top 10 Tips

1. Use the same appeal message and call to action in your mail solicitations, on your web site, and in your email communications – and reinforce your message over and over.

2. Focus more on your donor and what he or she wants to accomplish than on your organization.

3. The appeal letter can have only one objective: a clear ask for support. It is not a newsletter, an end-of-year report, an update or mixed in with other communications.

4. Your top priority is always to renew your past donors. They are your customer base – your “money in the bank.” Don’t let them slip away.

5. Don’t solicit any donors until you have shown them what results you have accomplished with their first gift. Donors say they will give liberally but only after they know what their first gift accomplished.

6. Be sure to communicate with your donors frequently between solicitations, so they are up to date and feel connected to your organization. How well you stay in touch with your donors will determine whether they give again.

7. Maintain control. Don’t let a committee approve or edit your letter. If you let well-meaning but unknowledgeable people help write your appeal, they will ruin it. Guaranteed!
8. **Update your web site and make your donation page easy to use.** Many donors who receive a letter will go to your website to make their gift. Be ready to welcome them there with an easy to follow online donation process.

9. **Create an entire campaign.** Use phone, postcards, letters, emails and social media to build a series of appeals. Don’t rely on only one letter to do the work for you.

10. **Create a budget and look at it as an investment.** Know that, if well executed, your direct mail program should yield a 400% return. That is, if you invest $20k in direct mail to your donors, you should receive $80k back.

THE LETTER: HOW TO DRAW YOUR DONORS IN

11. Use the word “you” immediately in the first sentence or two of your appeal.

12. Your goal in the first part of the letter is to get your reader’s attention. (Tom Ahern)

13. **Start with a story** to draw your readers in.

14. Make your first two sentences so compelling that your donor will want to keep reading. (You can easily lose them in the very beginning.)

15. Use a **sad story that transforms into a happy one.** The sad emotion is what will pull on your donors’ heartstrings.

16. **Be sure to thank donors** for their past support early in the letter. It reminds them of their partnership with you.

17. **Pretend you are writing to your grandmother.** The most generous group of donors are the older ladies. A recent study found that for every $100 men gave, women gave $258.

18. **Don’t use a lot of photography and fancy layout** in your letter or accompanying materials. Too much design makes it much less personal.
19. If you use any pictures, be sure they are of people, not buildings. It’s what happens inside the buildings that counts.

BE PERSONAL and INFORMAL

20. **Always (of course) send out personalized letters.** (Dear Mr. Smith rather than Dear Friend). Make sure your letter is really addressed to the reader.

21. Write to only one person and not a group of people. Emphasize your one-on-one connection with the reader. Don’t use “you” in the plural sense.

22. Use contractions – it’s less formal. Formal doesn’t work!

23. Make your letter as **personal and conversational** in tone as you can. Make it sound like you sat down and wrote it to a friend. (~Jerry Panas)

24. **Repeat the word “you”** frequently: it’s most important word in your letter.

25. **Use the word “I”** in the letter to make it more personal and friendly. It does wonders changing your tone from “institutional” to “personal.”

26. Always make it about the donor – not about your organization. Help your donors imagine what they can achieve with their gifts.

UPGRADE YOUR DONORS

27. Focus on **more frequent gift opportunities** each year as a way to upgrade your donors to higher giving levels.

28. Establish a **monthly giving** program. People who give monthly will give much, much more.

29. Use **gift clubs** to encourage higher-level donations. Ask donors to move up to the next level.
30. When you ask for an upgraded gift: talk about an increased or enhanced partnership with the donor.

CREATE A DYNAMITE CASE FOR GIVING

31. Talk about opportunities – it’s never about your needs. “We have the opportunity to . . .”

32. Make your message emotional. Donors give out of emotion, then justify it with logic.

33. Use stories in your copy but only one story. One story is more powerful than three stories. (~Tom Ahern)

34. Make your story SHORT but powerful. It can even be a one-sentence story such as, “Monday morning little Johnny woke up, hungry again.”

35. Flatter your donor: Tom Ahern says that you should ask (and flatter your donor) and you thank (and flatter) and report (and flatter.) Neuromarketing studies say that flattery WILL make your donor love you more.

36. Share measurable results of what you have achieved with other donors’ gifts. (~Penelope Burk)

37. DON’T use the words “programs” or “services” any more than you have to. They are boring and too generic.

38. Repeat the need and its urgency – several times in the letter. That’s your case for support!

39. Use statistics to build credibility and make the cause more concrete.

40. Describe your project as “innovative,” trailblazing” or “groundbreaking,” and your work as “wide-ranging, or extensive.”

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WRITE A LETTER YOUR DONORS WILL READ

Assume your reader will . . .

pick up the four page letter, look at their name in the salutation, flip over to the P.S.,
then shuffle the letter around in their hands, maybe start reading here, maybe start
reading someplace else, jump around a bit, and then, after this ragged scanning,
MAYBE start reading at the beginning. (~Happy donors blog)

41. Make your letter easy to skim and still deliver its message.

42. Break up your letter copy in every way possible. Use headings. Use bullets.
Vary the indentation. Use boldface type. Use ellipses . . .

43. What will your reader really see? Artwork: 80%; photos: 75%; headlines: 56%;
captions: 29%, and very little text! (~Tom Ahern)

44. Have plenty of white space on the letter, which makes it easy to read. Wide
margins will help.

45. VERBS matter: Use snappy action verbs that convey action.

46. Use present tense. Never use the passive voice when you can use the active
voice. (~George Orwell). I.e.: “people are being helped.”

47. Use short, concise sentences and paragraphs. Vary the length of your
sentences and paragraphs for interest.

48. Write choppy, jumpy, repetitive copy. (see the reader’s profile above) (~Jeff
Brooks)

49. Very short paragraphs: No more than three sentences per paragraph.
(~Jerry Panas)

50. Very short sentences: No more than 6 to 8 words in each sentence. (~Jerry
Panas)
51. Write on the 5th grade level for easy reading. (like these tips.)

52. Use type large enough to read easily. 12 point type is the minimum size for fundraising material. The average age of a donor in a “house file” is 67. The average age requiring reading glasses is 43 yrs old.

53. Eliminate every possible word – including adjectives and descriptive phases - in your copy. “If it is possible to cut a word out, cut it out.” (~George Orwell)

54. Write your letter. Then remove the first paragraph and see if it isn’t stronger. You don’t need a long preamble. (~Tom Ahern)

55. Longer letters with more pages are more successful than one page letters. The letter needs to be as long as it takes. Don’t make it too short. (~Harvey McKinnon)

CREATE A KILLER ASK

56. You’ve got to tell your donor explicitly:
   - Why this organization? Why this program? Why NOW? Why me?
   
   If your letter doesn’t lay this out – then go back to the drawing board.

57. Your call to action is the most important part of your letter. Make it clear to donors what you want them to do. And repeat it!

58. Give the donor something worth doing that is easy to do. “Restore sight for $25.” (~Tom Ahern)

59. Use the MPI formula to ask: Please consider a gift of $MONEY for a specific PROJECT that will great a specific IMPACT.

60. Ask several times in the letter. It’s ok! Especially if it is a long letter – you can ask 4 or 5 times.
61. Explicitly tell your donor exactly what THEY can accomplish with their gift. And tell them HOW you will spend the money – what project, what purpose. (~ Penelope Burk)

62. Make your ask as specific as possible. Donors will give more if they can designate their gift in some way.

63. Use a matching or challenge gift opportunity and tell your donors it will make their gifts go further. Play up the concept of “leveraging your donor’s gift.”

64. Always ask for a specific amount or “the largest contribution you can make.”

65. Place your ask in the first part of a paragraph. Don’t bury your ask at the end of a sentence or paragraph – it will get missed.

66. Don’t ask for a “gift,” ask instead for an investment, a contribution, for help, or to supply something special. (Mal Warwick)

67. Create a sense of urgency by asking for an immediate contribution or asking for help with an urgent or critical situation.

68. Use please such as “please send your gift today” or “please consider a leadership contribution of xxx.”

69. Give the donor a deadline for responding and a reason for the deadline.

70. Give the donor the option not to give. Recent studies (http://ow.ly/jrswh) have found this increases donor response. Say:

- Please don't feel obligated...
- Whether you give is entirely your choice...
- Any amount you want to give will help...
- You are free to say no -- I will understand...

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RAISE MORE FROM YOUR TOP DONORS

71. Send your **Top Donors** special, custom-tailored personal letters and appeals.

72. Have board and staff members **write or visit them** personally with an individualized appeal.

73. Thank them in the opening sentence for their continuing and steadfast support. Emphasize their **partnership** with your cause.

74. Be sure these donors get many **warm, personal touches** during the year!

75. Come right out and ask these donors to make a leadership gift.

CREATE A PLAN and SCHEDULE YOUR MAILINGS

76. Set up a **calendar of mailings** and plan ahead.

77. **Segment your mailing list and mail personalized appeals to specially targeted groups.** (i.e., past donors, volunteers, people who have attended your auction, corporate sponsors, board members, past board members.)

78. **Mail to donors** more often than nondonors.

79. **Track your LYBUNTS** (people who gave “Last Year But Unfortunately Not This”) carefully and send them repeated, cheerful and enthusiastic appeals to be sure they renew. Once a donor has given for two straight years, they are likely to remain a donor for the long run.

80. **Develop a series of appeals to SYBUNTS.** (People who gave “Some Year But Unfortunately Not This Year”). “We’ve missed you!”

81. The letters you send to your LYBUNTS and SYBUNTS should remind them of their **past support** and remind them how much they have helped create your success. (“We love you, we miss you, we want you back!”)
FOLLOWUP MAKES A HUGE DIFFERENCE

82. Send a followup letter a few weeks after your appeal: “we didn’t hear from you and we hope you will respond.

83. Studies show that followup letters are the most important factor in securing the donor’s gift.

84. Followup letters need to be short and play on urgency and the emotions.

85. Write your followup letter at the same time you write the first letter.

86. Organize the board members to make phone calls to follow up appeals to donors. You can’t lose by following up with a personal call.

WELCOME NEW DONORS

87. Your brand new donors are the least likely group to renew next year. Only 23% of new donors will typically renew. (~Blooomerang data). Go all out to welcome them!

88. So create a dynamite welcome packet for new donors. This will help them renew when the time comes to ask again.

89. Craft an ENTIRE special thank you and communication program for first-time donors. Celebrate the beginning of this partnership!

90. Invite new donors to get involved. Move quickly to develop the relationship to keep them on your bandwagon.

91. Go all out to welcome online donors just like your mail donors. New online donors are even less likely to renew their gifts than paper donors. Don’t let them fall thru the cracks.
LINK TO YOUR WEB SITE

92. Include your **website address**. Donors, even when they give with a check in the mail, will **probably check out your website**.

93. Use different landing pages and urls to track donors’ responses to individual appeals. It’s easy and it’s important.

94. The most important page on your web site from a donor’s perspective is “**your gift at work.**”

CREATE A MAILING PACKET THAT BRINGS RESULTS

95. Try bright colors. **Target Marketing** says “using standard #10 white envelopes will guarantee a low response rate, unless you are giving away money.”

96. Size matters. Try larger sizes to get your reader’s attention. Or smaller sizes.

97. Everything in your mailing should be easy to read and understand.

98. **Your mailing packet** should include four pieces:
   - The solicitation letter
   - A reply/pledge card
   - A return envelope for the reply card
   - The outside envelope.

99. **Your outside envelope** needs to grab your reader’s attention. Put something attention-getting or startling on the outside. NOT a self-serving tagline though.

   Try putting teasers like these on your outside envelope: (~Jeff Brooks)
   - DO NOT BEND
   - MESSAGE ENCLOSED
   - TUESDAY
100. **Always include a return envelope.** It is critically important to make sure it is easy for people to give.

101. Be sure your **mailing label** is attractive and not full of computerized numbers. A “mass market” look to your mailing label can put your letter in the trash immediately.

102. Don’t include **fundraising brochure. They almost always decrease response.** See “How Brochures Kill Direct Mail Fundraising,” by Jeff Brooks.

103. The reply slip needs to **stand out** in the package.

104. Put a **headline** on the reply card such as “Yes! I want to help!”

105. Don’t give your donor more than four choices to consider. More than that will drive your donor away.

106. Use **checkboxes** on your reply slip, rather than fill in the blanks.

107. **But limit the amount of information** you request. The more boxes on the reply card, the more confusing it is to your donor. If you confuse your donor, the more likely she is to abandon your donation card.

108. Make sure there is **room** for handwriting on the reply card. Don’t make your donor cramp to write on your card.

109. Make the reply card **paper** easy to write on. And remember to have a large **font** so your donor doesn’t have to reach for her reading glasses!

110. **Circle the amount** you are requesting from the donor on the reply card.

111. Don’t forget to ask for **recurring monthly donations!**

112. Offer as many payment options as possible without confusing your reader: All major credit cards, checks, recurring monthly donations.
Now use this list as a checklist – review your mailing program against it and then highlight the tips that you need to implement.

GOOD LUCK and may you raise tons of money!

Gail

“How Brochures Kill Direct Mail Fundraising”

Does Size Matter? By Target Marketing

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I LOVE THIS OUTLINE OF A SAMPLE LETTER FROM JEFF BROOKS

-Introduction: Why I’m writing to you.
-Ask.
-Why your gift is important today.
-Ask.
-How much impact your gift will have.
-Ask.
-Story that demonstrates the need.
-Ask.
-Remind the donor of his values and connection to the cause.
-Ask.
-Another story.
-Ask.
-Help the donor visualize what will happen when she gives.
-Ask.
-Conclusion: Thank the donor for caring. Ask again.