



## **Donor-Centered Direct Mail**

### *Creating Warm Fuzzies for Donors*

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#### **Direct mail really isn't about raising money.**

It's about requesting to come into someone's home with the hope of becoming friends. You're a guest in their home, so it's important to act like it. Your job as a guest is to create an authentic conversation, be entertaining, approachable, humble, and MAKE THE HOST FEEL GOOD. After you've spent weeks crafting just the right letter, devoted valuable volunteer hours to stuffing and addressing possibly thousands of letters and sent it out, you have one hope—to be invited in for a brief, persuasive "conversation in print" that will compel them to make a gift to your worthy cause.

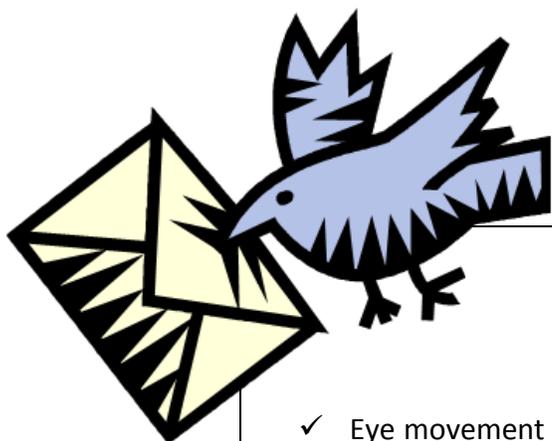
With the millions of pieces of direct mail sent out every year, your job is to have your letter rise above all the rest.

So, let's look at some ways to make your appeals outshine the rest and bring better returns!

#### **The Envelope**

The purpose of the envelope is to convince people that they want to rip it open and read what's inside. You have roughly 2 seconds to be noticed in the sea of mail and convince someone to take the time to read your letter. People don't open their "junk" mail because they're busy, tired or uninterested. You need to make the most of your two seconds to grab their attention and let them know that this letter is very important.

You want the reader's unconscious nod as they examine the envelope. You want them to nod when they check to see if it's for them and properly addressed. You want them to nod when they see that it's from a group they recognize and love. You want another nod when they see your text on the front that tells them that you have shared values. And you want one last nod when they see how their donation can make a difference on the back. With enough unconscious nods the recipient will find themselves saying, "Yes, this is something important for me to read!"



### **TIPS AND TRICKS for Envelopes**

- ✓ Eye movement studies show that when people look at a piece of mail they first look at the name to whom it is addressed. You **MUST** get their name correct.
- ✓ After checking who it's addressed to and who it's from, the next thing the recipient looks at is the back. Use this space wisely! Put a testimonial here, or a picture representing what their gift will support with a caption explaining how they can make a difference and improve the current situation.
- ✓ Use the front to ask a question and then tell them explicitly what to do next. A phrase like, "**Are you a true believer in wilderness? OPEN THIS!**", creates that head nod for someone who sees themselves as an advocate for wilderness, and it lets them know that what's inside is for people like them.
- ✓ Consider hand addressing the envelopes. Investing your time and energy in personalization may be worthwhile when compared to the cost of acquiring new donors. If it isn't feasible to hand address all of them, consider doing it just for high level, long-term and monthly donors.
- ✓ Use a colored envelope. Almost all nonprofits use white #10 envelopes, so anything unique or different will stand out when people are sorting through their mail. Yellow is a good choice for an urgent appeal as it is considered an "alarm" color.
- ✓ Research confirms that a letter with a stamp has a greater chance of being opened than one with a meter or permit imprint. To make your direct mail appeal **LOOK** like a first class letter without the first class price, use precancelled stamps. These stamps can be purchased by nonprofits for as little 5 cents each at the post office and will make your letter look first class!

## The Letter

A problem I often see in special appeal, acquisition and renewal letters is that they focus on convincing the reader that the organization is wonderful. While your organization is undoubtedly wonderful and worthy of support, the direct mail firm of Pareto Fundraising says that **the elements of a letter that move people to give are emotion, story, a repetitive and personal ask, urgency with a deadline, making it as long as it needs to be and using colloquial language.**

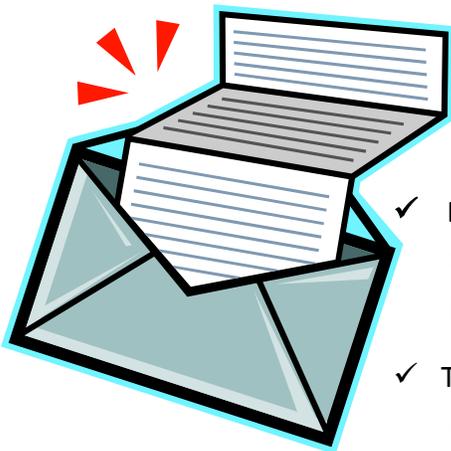
According to Tom Ahern of Ahern Communications, Inc., new versus existing donors need different types of letters. Here's a comparison of key questions donors ask themselves when reading these types of letters:

### **NEW DONOR LETTER TOUCHPOINTS**

*Who are you/how are you helping the world?*  
*What do you want?*  
*Why should I trust you?*  
*Why do you matter?*  
*How do you relate to me?*  
*What's the rush?*

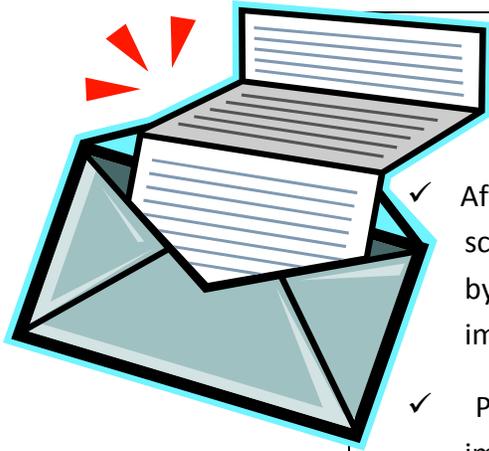
### **CURRENT DONOR APPEAL TOUCHPOINTS**

*What did you do with my last gift?*  
*Are you thankful and grateful for my support?*  
*What do you want from me now?*  
*Who are you again?*  
*What's the rush?*



### **TIPS AND TRICKS for Letters**

- ✓ Eye movement studies show that the first thing that a reader does after opening a fundraising letter is check the salutation. Be sure that you personalize it as much as possible. Use Dear “first name” if at all possible.
- ✓ The second thing that people look at is the signature line and P.S. Have only one person sign the letter so that it feels more like a personal conversation between the writer and reader.
- ✓ Begin the letter by using a shared audience attribute, such as: “As a person who values our planet, you know...” or “As a resident of...”
- ✓ Use “you” and “I” to create a conversational tone.



## TIPS AND TRICKS for Letters

- ✓ After the reader checks the salutation and signature, they will quickly scan the letter for anything that **STANDS OUT**. Capture their attention by using **bolding**, underlining, *italics* and CAPS to emphasize the most important points of the letter in case they don't read any further.
- ✓ People read the body of the letter last, so include the one most important thing you'd like them to do, why they should give and when they should give by in the first three paragraphs.
- ✓ Promote matching or challenge gifts. Studies show that the size of the match doesn't even matter—just having any kind of a match is enough to bolster giving.
- ✓ Add a hand-written note, even if you don't personally know the recipient. This is a wonderful use of your Board's time and can greatly increase the successfulness of an appeal.
- ✓ Use a story to draw the reader in and make them FEEL something. People really want to FEEL, and any feeling—anger, happiness, love, sadness—will help motivate them to act.
- ✓ Be risky! Write a letter from the point of view of a species you're working to protect. Do something new and different! You want to stand out in the sea of fundraising letters.
- ✓ Say thanks for previous gifts. Ways to do this are to acknowledge how long they've been a member and the amount of their last gift, if they're a monthly or known legacy donor.
- ✓ Send special appeals to your monthly donors. These loyal donors want to hold a special place in your organization's family, so recognize them as champions and then ask them to give above and beyond their monthly gift for a special project.
- ✓ Limit the number of people that edit the letter. Many people that typically have input into crafting fundraising letters don't actually know much about what really works in direct mail. Too many cooks in the kitchen can result in a weak package that won't make the strong impression needed to make your appeal stand out.

Here are some key elements in a successful fundraising letter to current donors...

1-2 sentences containing the letter's key message to grab the reader's attention, enticing them to read the rest of the letter.

*Handwritten note from volunteer, staff or personal contact.*

Dear \_\_\_\_\_, (first name)

State the problem you're working to solve—begin the story.

Use a conversational, personal tone and identify shared attributes between the writer and reader.

Dip them in donor love! Thank the donor profusely for their previous gift and let them know you can't solve the problem without them.

Advance the story and ASK FOR THE GIFT. Tell them how much you'd like them to give, why, and by when. Emphasize with underlining, CAPS, **bold**, ● bullets, *italics* and short sentences to set this paragraph apart.

Donor love: Continue to dip the donor in flattery. People want to feel good about themselves and that they directly make a difference.

Conclude the story and ASK again.

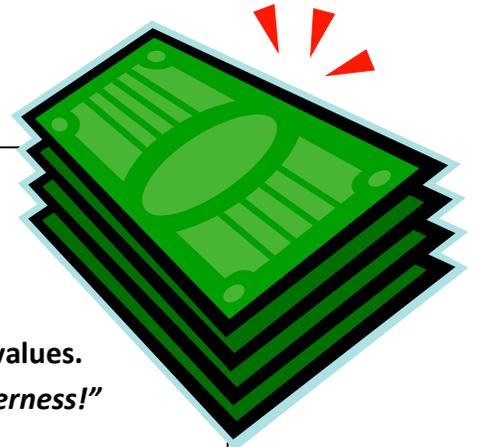
One more dose of donor love.

Signature, from one person

P.S. Hook to story and one more ASK.

## The Remittance Slip

Remit slips often seem like an afterthought in the mailing package. But they are a very important piece and you can't afford to be passive. ***Remember, recipient inertia is your enemy!***



### ***TIPS AND TRICKS for Remittance Slips***

- ✓ **Persuade people to give by connecting with their values.**  
Use language like, ***“Yes! I’m a true believer in wilderness!”*** at the top of the slip.
- ✓ Include your email and website address because more than half of your donors will check out your website before making a gift.
- ✓ Tell people **EXACTLY** what you want them to do and make it **EASY** to give. Try to keep the slip as simple and clear as possible. Don’t include any call to action other than to make a gift.
- ✓ **Do** make room for people to sign up for monthly giving.
- ✓ Consider raising the suggested gift levels. Tests show that increasing the giving amounts leads to higher average gifts. Also, try substituting “Surprise us!” for the “Other” category—this will increase the self-designated gifts, as well.

## The Thank You

As you have no doubt noticed by now, all donor-centered communications are about thanking people. The message is that you should thank, thank and then THANK them again! The most obvious and common thank you communication is the recognition letter sent after a donor gives. The problem is that a lot of these letters are rather formulaic, impersonal and cold.

So, now that a donor has responded to your amazing fundraising letter, how can you better thank them?



### ***TIPS AND TRICKS for Thank You Letters***

- ✓ Create a recognition process so that you can rest assured that every donor is thanked appropriately and promptly.
- ✓ Personalize your written thanks as much as possible with their preferred name and a handwritten note.
- ✓ Thank people promptly before depositing their money. Live by the old fundraising adage, **“Thank before you bank.”**
- ✓ Include thank-you inserts from volunteers or people positively impacted by your organization’s work. Or be creative and write a donor thank you from an animal or plant your organization works to protect.
- ✓ Include a P.S. to thank them again at the end. **“I know there are many worthy causes that ask for your help. Please know how honored we are that you’ve chosen to support the work of Friends of XYZ Mountain.”**
- ✓ Welcome new members with open arms! Making a first gift to a charity is like dipping your toe in the water. If it’s cold, you’re not going to go in any farther. After someone gives, they wait to see what it’s like to be a member of your family. Make it a warm, positive experience! They want to feel good about giving, like they made a difference and that they’re important to you. Imagine being a new donor and receiving a letter that says right on the front of the envelope, **“THANKS! Your XYZ Wilderness Alliance welcome materials are here!”** And the letter from the Executive Director says, **“I’ve just heard the wonderful news—you’re the newest member of the XYZ Wilderness Alliance family.”** Creating warm fuzzies for your donors will keep them in the family year after year!



**Elizabeth Hospodarsky**, Senior Associate, grew up exploring wild places like the Cascade Mountain Range and the Appalachian Trail with her mountaineer father. Though her pack was nearly as big as she was, she developed a deep passion for wilderness and biodiversity. Elizabeth brings this passion into her work at TREC by helping clients with fundraising planning, strategies and donor development. She has been a nonprofit professional since 1995, helping a wide range of organizations overcome challenges to fulfill their critical missions. Please contact Elizabeth for fundraising assistance at [Elizabeth@trec.org](mailto:Elizabeth@trec.org).