How to Write Amazing Fundraising Appeals

A quick guide to inspiring more donations with a compelling message.

About this Guide

To raise more money online, you need a great appeal that grabs donors' attention and inspires them to give. How do you create fundraising letters that stand out and get results?

We've got you covered.

This short guide will give you practical tips for:

- Focusing on the key things donors want to know
- How to tell a compelling—and effective—story
- Crafting an irresistible call to action
- Simple tactics for improving donor conversion and increasing your average gift size

Ready to create your best fundraising appeals ever? Let's get started!

First Things First

Before digging into your fundraising appeal, let's take a step back to understand exactly what you hope to accomplish. Yes, the primary goal is to inspire donations, but think about the unique conditions of your campaign to better your odds of success.

Goals

As you finalize your campaign plans, know whether your overall goal for each appeal is to add a specific number of new donors or to reach a certain donation level. Have a clear and measurable end result in mind. Decide how you will define success, such as "Raise $20,000," or "Add 200 new members."

Audience

Who is the audience you're trying to reach? Are you attempting to activate lapsed donors? Younger donors? Turning annual donors into monthly donors? Have a target in mind and do your research on what makes your particular audience unique. You can then tailor your appeal to make it more effective.

Timing

When will you send your appeals and how often? Consider holidays and other events that may affect how likely your messages will be opened and read. Remember that it will likely take more than one appeal during a campaign to get a substantial number of donors to act. Decide how you will space your appeals and build a consistent story as well as a sense of urgency.

Past Performance

As you craft your appeals, don't forget to look at previous asks and how they performed. Look at open rate, click-through rate, as well as completed donations and total donation amounts over time. Note any trends and apply your learnings to your next appeal. You're likely sitting on a goldmine of data that will help you reach more donors!

The Most Important Ingredient

While it's important to remember the all of the components of an effective fundraising appeal (a clear call to action, a sense of urgency, statements about what a donation will do), what will ultimately make your appeal stand out is an attention-grabbing, emotionally compelling, authentic story.

Why are stories so important?

- Stories are a natural form of communication and have been for thousands of years.
- Stories allow us to feel by creating an emotional (and oftentimes physical) reaction—think about a tearjerker movie or suspenseful novel.
- Stories are proven to be easier to remember (in fact, 22x more memorable than straight facts).
- Stories also are more likely to be shared, which is important for spreading your message beyond your core supporters.

Your cause's story is the heart and soul of your fundraising letter. It's how your appeal will have a personality that allows you to connect with your donors and inspire them to give. Without it, your appeal will read like many other cookie cutter letters your supporters will receive.

As you plan your appeal, think of your organization's most interesting and moving stories, and then distill them down into key talking points that you can insert in your fundraising letters to make your work come alive in the mind of your donor.

The Key Characteristics of Your Online Ask

Once you have a good story on which to base your fundraising ask, it's time to think about how to frame that story in a way that helps donors take action once they're inspired to give. Beyond the mechanics of your appeal, it's important to include these characteristics in every ask:

Clarity.

Keep your email appeals as simple as possible, both in format as well as in language. Offer clear statements about what a gift can do, as well as what action you want your reader to take: donate! Remove anything that causes confusion or weighs down your message.

Specificity.

When your appeals are specific, they can be more relevant, interesting, and authentic. Tell your donors exactly what they will support, why it matters, how much they should give, and how they can complete their donation online.

A Sense of Urgency.

It's crucial to create a sense of urgency and immediacy in your appeal. Why should donors give now? What will happen if they act immediately? What might happen if they do not? You can create a sense of urgency for donors with a deadline or by introducing a matching gift

A Trustworthy Messenger.

Consider who will tell your story or sign your appeal. The messenger is often as important as the message. Who are the messengers that wield more influence than you when it comes to your organization? It may not be your executive director. Stuck for ideas? Here are 10 alternate messengers for your next appeal.

Your Call to Action

Any successful nonprofit fundraising campaign has an effective call to action. Your call to action is the actual spot where you ask your supporter to give. When it comes down to your call to action, there are five key attributes that can transform any run-of-the-mill pitch into a fundraising dynamo.

1. Be highly specific. Having large global missions and lofty goals for changing the world is great, but these kinds of statements can make a potential donor feel they can't make a difference or leave them wondering exactly what steps they can take. Focus on a very tangible impact and a realistic donation amount that will help make an impact.

2. Be feasible. Your action needs to be something that is very easy to do so as not to overwhelm any potential donors. Create a momentum of compliance, wherein once somebody does something small they are more willing to do something larger later on. Not everybody is ready to donate a large amount right away and it's important not to alienate those people.

3. Have a first priority. Don't bog your fundraising appeal down with too many requests or distractions. Your first priority is to inspire someone to give. Think about how you can build your community of potential supporters and about enticing ways to get your foot in the door with a entry-level donor who could become your next major donor.

4. Be free of barriers. This is where usability of your emails, website, and the actual donation process comes into play. Watch somebody make an online doantion to your nonprofit and see where they get hung up, Are there are unnecessary steps and is everything is easy to understand? Honor your audience's time by making everything as straightforward and quick as possible.

5. Be filmable. Consider this your test: Imagine yourself with a video camera and ask, can you film the action you are asking somebody to take? Your audience needs to be able to visualize what they will be doing. If they can't picture themselves doing it, they won't be likely to do it. Think "Give $20 today to help clean up the beach." vs. "Save the earth!"

How to Stand Out in Your Donor's Inbox

Make it visually appealing.

If your emails look like every other message in your supporter's inbox, you're making it easy for readers to ignore you. Spend as much time designing your emails for your readers' inboxes as you spend writing the contents of your email.

What you can do: Create subject lines that make them want to open and read your message, and think about what shows up in the preview pane and from whom your email is sent. No one wants to get an email from "donotreply@thisnonprofit.org".

Remember that giving is personal.

Charitable giving among donors who regularly or sometimes give to new causes/charities is heavily motivated by affiliation and existing donor knowledge of an organization and is somewhat unresponsive to solicitation.

What you can do: Don't try to blast your message to the "general public" and expect successful results. Tailor your outreach for different segments— different audiences will need different messages to be convinced to give to your cause. Use your nonprofit's marketing efforts and fundraising materials to make the connection between your work and the affiliations and identities your community cares most about.

Show the real impact of a potential gift.

When making a charitable donation to a nonprofit, donors are interested in information beyond metrics of financial stability (such as fundraising and overhead costs). As many as 75 percent of donors use information about the nonprofit's impact, and 63 percent use information about the social issue the nonprofit addresses.

What you can do: In your fundraising appeals, make a clear tie between a donor's gift and what that donation will accomplish. Make it easy for donors to find information about the results of your work on your website with benchmark reports about your issue area, annual reports, and updates on your programs. Once they've found this information, make sure it's simple to use by presenting your results in easy-to-understand formats like one-page summaries, fact sheets, and graphs.

Offer evidence of trust and transparency.

Most donor research relies on disclosures from the nonprofit, peer recommendations, 3rd-party endorsements. Donors use multiple sources to gather information instead of relying heavily on one particular source. Donors who frequently or occasionally look for information about nonprofits use the nonprofit itself as the most common source, followed by friends or family, and then independent third-party organizations.

What you can do: Provide information about your impact in multiple locations and formats. Include third-party ratings, such as a Charity Navigator or GreatNonprofits badges, in your fundraising appeals, on donation pages, and throughout your website. Encourage your supporters to spread your message by providing them with easy ways to share, recommend, and review your organization.

Provide a feeling of connection to your charity.

For your appeals to be effective, you must answer the question of "Why me?" Your need alone is not enough. You are competing with many messages and many appeals. Think about why your cause is personally meaningful to your audience.

What you can do: Understand why your donors give. Invite them to tell you their stories to gain insight on what motivates people to support your programs. In-person events, thank you phone calls, and online surveys are all easy ways to collect this information.

Also, be sure to segment and target appropriately. Don't use the "spray and pray" method of marketing to win support for your cause. Tailor your

messages to speak to each type of supporter. In addition to personalizing emails with your reader's name in the subject line or greeting, segment and tailor your emails to align with their experience with your organization. Treat recurring donors different from those who haven't given. Send program-specific information to those supporters who have indicated a passion for a particular part of your mission.

Make it mobile friendly.

Over half of all email opens now happen on mobile devices, so it's critical for your emails to be easily opened, read, and actionable from smartphones and tablets.

What you can do: Be sure to simplify your outreach, increase font sizes, and make your buttons and calls to action easy to click with a fingertip or thumb. Applying mobile friendly design principles to your emails will make your organization's messages easier to read and act on, no matter how they're being read. This will also improve the readability of your emails for older eyes.

A Simple Template for Your Next Fundraising Appeal

Ready to put it all together? Now that you have your sights set on a fabulous appeal that shares your story, focuses on the donor, and is ready for inbox stardom, use this template to jot down the key parts of your appeal letter.

From

Your appeal should come from a real person, or at least use the full name of your organization. Acronyms, technical jargon or a "do not reply" style email address will make your message more likely to be deleted.

Subject Line

The subject line is the most important part of your email appeal. Its purpose is to make your message stand out in a reader's inbox and entice them to open your message. Keep your subject line short, relevant and compelling. Front load your subject line with key terms in the first 50 characters, to account for the way different email programs might display your message.

Salutation

If possible, use the recipient's name, spelled correctly.

The emotional, interesting opening

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Don't start with the typical "we need your help". Open your appeal with a vivid, emotional image that illustrates the need or the impact a gift could have. Or show supporters the difference they are making. Try to focus on an individual story rather than overwhelming the reader with mind-numbing statistics or massive scale.

1st call to action

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Include a short call to action that allows readers to quickly click make a donation. Vague calls to action like "support us" are more likely to confuse than to motivate.

Example: "Please make a year-end gift so more children like John can graduate this year" with a big donate button next to that call to action.

How to help

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Provide detail about what the donor's gift could make possible. Clarity and specificity are vital. This is where you can suggest a gift amount and designation.

Example: "Your gift of $100 will mean one student like John will be tutored every day till graduation this school year," or "Your donation will help us buy

*sonogram machines and vitamins to ensure every mom and baby is healthy."
Include information on the specific impact a donation will have, but be sure
not to mislead your reader if donations will go into a general fund instead of
being earmarked for a specific individual.*

2nd call to action

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Provide a clear call to action that tells the donor exactly what you want them
to do and how they can do it.

Example "Click here to make your tax-deductible donation now."

Closing

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Thank the reader for their attention and sign a real person's name, along with
several ways for your donors to contact you: i.e., by replying to your email,
your phone number as well as listing your physical address.

P.S.

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In the P.S. reinforce the sense of urgency.

*Example, "Remember, you are our best partner in advocating for abducted
children. Please give now so we can train 600 police this year" or "We are
nearly to our goal. Your gift will help put us over the top. Thanks for your
support."*

Beyond Your Appeal

After you get your appeal just right, your work doesn't stop there. Don't let your efforts go to waste by ignoring what comes after the appeal.

Your online donation experience should:

1. Make giving easy. This can't be stressed enough, so we'll say it again and again. Don't make your donors think too hard about giving to your organization. This includes enabling your supporters to quickly interact via mobile and social: does your donation page offer donors easy ways to give and share on the go?

2. Keep donors in the moment of giving. When a prospective donor lands on your donation page, each component should reinforce their decision to give while making it quick and easy to complete their donation. This means it should closely match your nonprofit's branding, campaign materials, and message. Make your donation page an extension of the conversation you're having with your potential donors so there's no disconnect.

3. Start your donor relationships off right. Donor retention really begins before a donation is made. If it's confusing, difficult, or frustrating to give to your cause, you're not starting your donor's experience with your organization on a positive note. Your donation page should also help you quickly thank donors with a powerful post-donation experience and email acknowledgement, plus give you the information you need to cultivate these supporters over time.

Network for Good has effective and affordable online fundraising software that makes it easy for fundraisers to meet their goals, including branded, mobile-friendly online donation pages that inspire donors to give more and more often.

Ready to upgrade your online tools? **Contact us today for a free demo** and get insight on improving your online fundraising strategy.

Six Donor Communication Mistakes to Avoid

Now that you know the secrets to writing a more effective appeal, what else can you do to improve how your messages are perceived? One of the best ways to improve your fundraising appeals is to improve your overall approach to donor communications. When supporters have a positive impression of your ongoing outreach, they'll be more open to reading and acting on your appeals. Here are six of the worst donor communication mistakes, and some tips for how to avoid them:

1. The "One and Done"

Sadly for some donors, the only "communication" they receive from the nonprofits they support is a automated donation receipt. Others may receive a nice thank you letter, but not much else. This doesn't really inspire your current donors to give again.

How to avoid: Plan a series of ongoing communications with your donors. In addition to your nonprofit newsletter, provide quarterly updates for donors on the impact of their gifts, and show what goes on behind the scenes to make it happen. [Create an editorial calendar](#) and include your donor outreach as one key component to track.

2. The "Me Me Me"

Some causes suffer from nonprofit narcissism. They mean well, but their messages are devoid of one key ingredient: the donor. The people you ask to support your work also want to feel like part of your team.

How to avoid: Instead of talking only about the work *you're* doing, reframe your communications to underscore how the donor can your work possible. Use the word "you" more than "we", and highlight your donors' impact to bring these stories to life.

3. The "Broken Record"

All too often, organizations share the same updates over and over. This is great ... if you want to bore your potential donors. Unless you're sharing success story after success story, your donors may wonder if you're doing anything new or making any progress.

How to avoid: This is another way an editorial calendar can help you improve your donor communications. Create a list of stories, events, announcements, and seasonal topics that are relevant to your cause—and your donors—then, plot them out on your calendar to incorporate variety in your newsletters, impact updates, and social media outreach. Stuck for ideas? Ask your donors, volunteers, and beneficiaries for their input. They have a different perspective than you and probably have some fresh suggestions.

4. The "Word Vomit"

Are you guilty of sharing too much information? When it comes to your fundraising appeals, is "verbose" an understatement? If your messages feel like solid walls of text, your supporters are less likely to bother reading them—and may feel like you don't respect their time. And if those two things are true, you can bet they're not going to act on your appeals.

How to avoid: In most cases, people scan more than they read. This means that short, skimmable text works best, especially online. Use a "tease and link" strategy in your emails to draw people in and get them to take the next action. To make your messages even more readable, cut any acronyms, jargon, or insider language that will leave donors scratching their heads.

5. The "Disconnected"

Do you ever feel like you're talking, but no one seems to be listening? Most often, this is because you're not communicating in a way that reflects what your donor wants to hear. This often happens when organizations aren't in sync with why their donors give.

How to avoid: Talk to your donors to understand why they care about your issue and what prompted them to give. Ask for feedback on your communications and let your donors have a say in how they hear from you.

Try [segmenting your donors](#) by how they came to your organization, their level of giving, or by the specific programs they support. Then, communicate with them based on these parameters to make your appeals more relevant—and effective.

6. The "Show Me the Money"

You know that relative who never calls,never writes—except when he needs something from you? Don't be that guy. When donors *only* hear from you when you have an appeal, they may start to wonder what happened to the money they already gave you. Yes, this *is* a guide about appeals, but sometimes the best way to reinforce your ask is by not *always* asking.

How to avoid: Implement a "share vs. ask ratio" in your organization's communication sequence. Plan to send a certain number of cultivation or update messages for every time you send an appeal.

Want more tips on writing your donor communications? [Check out our library of free resources and templates](#).

Email Appeal Cheat Sheet

Is my subject line compelling?
The subject line is the most important part of your email appeal. Keep it short and relevant. Good subject lines pique curiosity and compel readers to open your message.

Does my email seem like it's from a real person?
Your appeal should come from a real person or the full name of your organization. Acronyms and "do not reply" email addresses will make your message more likely to be deleted.

Is there an emotional, interesting opening?
Open your appeal with a vivid, emotional image that illustrates the need or the impact a gift could have. Focus on an individual story rather than overwhelming the reader with statistics.

Is there an early and clear call to action?
Include a short call to action that allows readers to quickly click to make an online donation. Vague calls to action like "support us" are more likely to confuse than to motivate.

Is there a way for supporters to help?
Include information on the specific impact a donation will have, but be sure not to mislead your reader if donations will go into a general fund instead of being earmarked for a specific project.

Is there a second call to action?
Provide a clear second call to action that tells the donor exactly what you want them to do and how they can do it. For example "Click here to make your tax-deductible donation now."

Is there a strong closing?
Thank the reader for their attention and sign a real person's name.

P.S. Did I remember a postscript?
Many readers jump straight to the "P.S." so include a special message that reinforces urgency.

Is it mobile friendly?
Many readers may first open your message on their smartphone, so make sure your email is easy to read on the small screen.

About Network for Good

Network for Good powers more digital giving than any other platform. Since 2001, we've processed over $1 billion for more than 100,000 nonprofits. We are Level 1 Audited PCI Compliant and our Donor Advised Fund is accredited by the Better Business Bureau Wise Giving Alliance, meeting all 20 of its standards for charity accountability. Plus, we're registered in every state for online fundraising.

We're a mission-minded organization, like you, and we're passionate about seeing good causes succeed. We also believe in the power of communities to do great things.

Our online fundraising solutions come with all of the support and coaching you've come to expect from Network for Good. We're here to help you connect with donors and create more successful fundraising campaigns.

Ready to get even more from your online fundraising campaigns?

We've got you covered.

We'd love to hear about your fundraising goals and how you're reaching out to donors online. We'll offer suggestions on the tools that are right for your organization and show you some great campaigns for inspiration. To schedule a demo or find out more, **contact us today: 888.284.7978, option 1**

Or, <u>visit us online</u> to reserve a time with one of our fundraising consultants.