**1. The Introduction**

Personalize Letters – You never ever want to address your letter: “Dear Supporter.” Using the person’s name is important. In their eyes, it means the letter was intended for them, not just some supporter, so it makes them pay attention. You can automatically personalize fundraising letters with donor information like name, address, salutation, and donation history. Find out how here.

Grab the reader’s attention – Start your letter with something that will captivate the reader: a bold question, statement or story of a specific person or situation that your charity has helped. Telling a story and creating a scene is one of the most successful ways to get your message across. It gives the reader a glimpse into your world and reminds them why your mission is so important.

Update reader on what their last donation achieved – Research shows that telling donors what their last donation achieved before asking for another gift is the key holding onto your donors and moving them up the donor pyramid.

Focus on a specific program or initiative – Organizations that have multiple project areas may be inclined to include information about everything they do in one letter, but this is a mistake. Talking about everything is likely to overwhelm the reader. Instead, focus on a particular project or theme and provide details and stories to make it real for the reader.

Thank donors and tell them they are necessary – If you are writing to previous donors, be sure to thank them for their previous contributions and tell them that they are still needed; that you require their help to keep your services going.

**2. The ask**

Explain the cause – You want to leave people with the impression that it is absolutely critical that you continue to do what you do. In order to do that, you need to show that there is a need and that your organization is critical in effectively addressing that need.

Suggest donation amounts and what it will achieve – You should list suggested donation amounts that are appropriate for the particular donor. Also, be sure to state the impact of the gift so donors know exactly what they are giving. For example: your donation of $25 will feed and clothe a hungry child for a month.

Detail the consequences of not acting – In order to show the donor that their donation is important, you may also want to state the impact of not acting. For instance: “Every donation is important and the need is always great. Without donations like yours, more children will have to go without; without shelter, food and clean water.” You have to be very careful, however, not to sound like you are whining. If the message focuses too much on negative impacts, it will be a downer and will be much less effective.

3. **The Closing**

Thank donors in advance for their support – Make sure to thank donors in advance. It subtly assumes that they will contribute to the cause and shows that you have faith in them to do the right thing.

Tell them again why their contribution is so important – You may also want to reinforce here why you need their help and what are the consequences of not acting.

**Tips**

**Only send a fundraising letter after a thank you letter** – A fundraising letter that is received before an appropriate thank you letter, will not be very well received. Therefore, always send a thank you letter after every single donation and within a couple of days if possible. While a fundraising letter is a good place to reinforce your appreciation, it does not replace the need for a thank you letter.

**Choose your audience** – Before you even begin to write a fundraising letter, you have to chose your audience. Are you writing to current donors? Is this an acquisition mailing? You also want to target your letters depending on gift range. After all, donors giving $50 gifts will be interested in different information than donors making $5000 gifts. Targeting fundraising letters to particular audiences vastly improves response rates.

**Make it a package –** Always include a stamped return envelope and a reply card to make it as easy as possible to donate. The reply card should list gift options and also include a blank space so they can enter a different amount. You may also want to give them the option of pre-authorized monthly payments.

**Make it friendly** – Write the letter as if you were speaking with a friend. Don’t worry about writing perfect sentences. If it’s difficult to write or taking too long, you are thinking too much. Let the words flow from you.

**Include a P.S.** – Including a P.S. allows you to reinforce the message or to add additional information that ends on a positive note.

**Make it authentic** – Be sure to use a real signature from someone of importance in the organization and whom people will recognize. On the envelope, use real stamps and labels. Labels work better than peek envelopes which appear mass produced.

Suggest appropriate gift amounts – Targeting fundraising letters depending on past giving patterns is incredibly important since you need to be able to recommend appropriate gift amounts. For instance, if someone usually donates $20, you might want to suggest $20, $50 and $100 and if someone usually donates $100, you might want to suggest $100, $200 and $500.

Do not offer gifts – offering items like t-shirts, mugs, and personal mailing labels as gifts for donating is a bad idea and has an overwhelmingly negative impact on people’s decision to give. (See “Research Shows New Dos and Don’ts of Fundraising”)

Written by: Sumac Research. January, 2014.

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