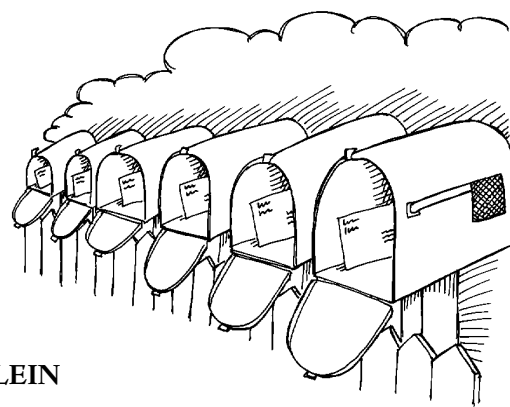


The Fundraising Letter



BY KIM KLEIN

Many people have used the insights gained from years of research on direct mail to make their letters of inquiry to foundations more interesting; others have used what they learned in writing heartfelt letters to friends to create effective mass appeals. Being able to write a compelling fundraising letter is imperative to being a good development director, but it's not as simple as it seems. This article describes how to write a fundraising letter that could be sent to one person or to hundreds.

Writing a good letter is only part of using mail as a fundraising strategy; the outer envelope, the return envelope, and the list to which the letters are sent are also critical components. Moreover, there is no point in sending a letter unless you are also able to send a thank-you note and keep good records so that you can ask donors again. But the letter is central to any effort involving mail.

WHAT THE LETTER IS NOT

Keep in mind what a fundraising letter is not. A fundraising letter is not literature. It is not designed to be lasting, or to be filed away, or to be read several times with new insights emerging from each reading. It is disposable, and it is part of a culture acclimated, for better or worse, to disposable goods of all kinds — from diapers and cameras to contact lenses. The function of the fundraising letter is to catch the reader's attention and hold it just long enough for them to make a decision about whether or not to give. It may take you two hours to write it, but it will take your reader five minutes at the very most to read it!

WHO ARE YOU WRITING TO?

Think about the kind of people you are writing to. Be as specific as possible. For example, if you are writing to someone who is coming home from work, picking up the mail,

figuring out what to make for dinner, making sure the kids are doing their homework, perhaps vacuuming or dusting while dinner cooks, your request will differ from a letter to a small business owner who receives the letter at work and reads it between phone calls or customers or while eating lunch at their desk. Both requests, however, have in common that the person does not have much time to figure out what you want and whether they want to give it to you.

Factor in the mood of the country. People are worried about an enormous range of things over which they feel they have little or no control — another terrorist attack,

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losing their job, paying their bills, the rising costs of health care, global warming, and so on. How crucial or relevant is your message given what else is going on in people's lives and in the world?

Keep in mind also that, unlike program officers at foundations who are paid to read proposals and letters of inquiry, recipients of a fundraising letter read the letter on their own time, for free, as a volunteer.

On top of all this, your letter arrives with anywhere from one to six other fundraising letters. What will make yours the one that is read and responded to positively?

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF LETTER-READING

You can see that a fundraising letter has a very difficult job and little power to do it. Using letters to ask for money, whether on a mass scale or in one-to-one personal appeals, requires reflecting on the psychology of letter-reading. Keep in mind the following three premises before you even begin to write:

1. When reading, watching TV or a movie, listening to a lecture, or even to a lesser extent listening to someone they care

about, adults subconsciously go back and forth between two questions. The first question is, “So what?” If this question is answered satisfactorily, they move on to the next question, which is, “Now what?” This seesaw is a strong screening device for filtering out trivia, boring details, and rhetoric.

There is a saying in fundraising, “People buy with their heart first, and then their head.”

To be sure, what is trivial or boring to one person may be profound or life saving to another, so the answers to these questions will vary somewhat from person to person. However, details about when your organization was founded or the permutations of your organizational structure may not pass the “So what?” test, and the myriad problems that led to your current budget deficit will only bring on a fit of “Now what?” questioning.

As you write your letter, imagine your reader asking at the end of each sentence, “So what? What does this have to do with me, my problems, or the people I care about?” If the sentence stands up under that scrutiny, then read the next sentence while asking, “Now what?” Does this sentence offer a solution, provide more information, create confidence in the group?

2. *People have very short attention spans, particularly for the written word.* A person should be able to read every sentence in your letter in six to fifteen seconds. Each sentence must be informative or provocative enough to merit using the next six to fifteen seconds to read the next sentence.

3. *More than anything else, people love to read about themselves.* This is partly because of the first point — the so what-now what questions. “What does this have to do with me?” is an underlying question. But it also reflects a desire to be treated personally. The reader of a fundraising letter wonders, “Do you know or care anything about me?” “Why do you think I would be interested in this?” “Will giving your group money make me happier or give me status, or relieve my guilt?” “Did you notice that I helped before?”

Therefore, the letter should refer to the reader at least twice as often and up to four times as often as it refers to the organization sending it. To do this requires drawing the reader into the cause by saying, “You may have read,” “I’m sure you join me in feeling,” “If you are like me, you care deeply about....” When writing to solicit another gift or a renewal from someone who is already a donor, use even more references to what they have done. “You helped us in the past.” “Your gift of \$50 meant a great deal to us last year.” “I want you to know that we rely on people like you — you are the backbone of our organization.”

Of course, in the case of a form letter, the person receiving it knows it is not directed to him or her; but at a less conscious level, there is a belief that he or she is being addressed personally. It seems our subconscious cannot tell fact from fantasy and believes everything to be real. (That’s why dreams seem very real, and why affirmations work, and how you can make a child smarter or more graceful by telling her that she is that.)

Work with those three premises as you write your letter. Notice letters that you read and try to figure out why you take the time to read them. Notice also what parts of the letter you read, and why. As a consumer of individual fundraising letters, you are not so different from the people you will be writing to, so you already have some expertise about what makes a good appeal.

THE FORMAT OF THE LETTER

People generally read fundraising letters in a specific order: the opening paragraph (or only the opening sentence if the paragraph is too long), the closing paragraph, and the postscript. Up to 60% of readers will decide whether or not to give based on these three sentences and will not read the rest of the letter. The remaining 40% of people will skim the rest of the letter. Only a tiny handful of people will read the letter all the way through.

Given this pattern of letter-reading, you should spend most of your writing time on the sentences that are most read. Write the rest of the letter to make sense if skimmed.

The Opening Paragraph

Use the opening paragraph to tell a story, either about someone or some situation your group has helped, or something or some idea your organization has created or caused, or make the story about the writer or the reader of the letter. There is a saying in fundraising, “People buy with their heart first, and then their head.” The stories should be short and should end with something positive about your organization. Here are some examples:

Someone the organization worked with:

Anthony made a really bad decision. On a dare, he stole a city official’s car. He was in a lot of trouble, but because he is only 17, the judge assigned him to the Second Chance Project. We are helping him use his ability to take risks to risk applying for scholarships to college and to dare to fulfill a childhood dream of being an engineer.

The letter goes on to describe the project and its philosophy of using the elements that get young people in trouble to get and then keep them out of trouble — boldness, desire to perform well in front of a group, and imagination.

Where the writer is part of the story:

When I was a child, I went to the library every day after school. When I needed a job, I wrote my resume on the library's computer. When I needed to do research for my job, I did it at the library. Whenever I went, I found dozens of other people who were also using the library. All kinds of people from all walks of life. So, when city budget cuts meant cutting hours at the library, I said no. Hundreds of people joined me, and the library stayed open.

This letter invites people to continue this important work by joining Friends of the Library and is signed by a prominent community member.

Where the reader of the letter is part of the story:

As a resident of Rio Del Vista, you were probably as shocked as I was to learn of the toxic waste dump proposed for Del Vista Lake last year. Working together, we were able to save the lake, but now the dump is proposed for Del Vista Canyon. We've got another fight on our hands.

The letter goes on to explain how and why this town must gear up and fight this dump battle again.

The Closing Paragraph

The last paragraph of the letter tells people what to do. It is specific and straightforward:

Send your gift of \$25, \$50, \$75 or whatever you can afford. Use the enclosed envelope — and do it today.

Or,

Don't delay in responding. Your gift will be put right to work. We need it as soon as you can get it to us. Thanks.

The P.S.

The postscript ties people back into the letter by telling another story or offering an additional incentive for acting immediately.

A story:

P.S. An independent study showed that the quality of our schools has improved because of Community Concern. It also showed we have a long way to go. For the sake of the children, please make your donation today.

Incentives:

We have a donor who will give \$1 for every dollar we are able to raise between now and October 1.

Or,

We will send you two free tickets to our auction on November 7 if we hear from you by October 15.

The Rest of the Letter

The rest of the letter is used to tell more stories, provide back-up statistics, describe philosophy, and stress the need for money. The letter needs to be two to three

Make the letter easy to read, with wide margins, decent-size type, and space between paragraphs.

pages long so that readers get the sense that you have enough to say, and that all of the information they might want is in the letter. This length also gives you room to make the letter easy to read, with wide margins, decent-size type, and space between paragraphs.

The tiny percent of response that we can expect from a direct mail appeal — 1 to 2% — shows how little power the appeal has. However, appeals do educate the public, raise consciousness, and plant the seed that your organization deserves to be supported.

By using mail carefully, you will not only gain new donors, you will also build a network of people who have heard of your organization and might support its work. **GFI**

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