
The Direct Mail Fundraising Letter

By KIM KLEIN

Most people who are good at fundraising are also good writers. Since most of our work is done through writing, a grasp of decent writing skills is essential. However, being a good writer will not automatically make you a good writer of direct mail letters, or indeed of many kinds of letters. The basic tenets of direct mail writing are often not the basic tenets of good expository writing. A brief look at what a fundraising letter is and is not will show why this is so.

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 increasingly acclimated to disposable goods of all kinds — from diapers and cameras to contact lenses. The function of the fundraising letter, then, is to catch attention and hold it just long enough for a person to decide to give.

Keeping this in mind, whenever you decide to sit down to write a fundraising letter (or, indeed, a grant proposal, which is basically a really long fundraising letter), first think for a minute about who you are writing to. Ask yourself these questions: Do the recipients of the letter read well? Do they like to read? Where will they receive the letter (i.e., home, office) and what are those environments like?

For example, imagine a person coming home from work, picking up the mail, figuring out what to make for dinner, making sure the kids are doing their homework, and perhaps vacuuming or dusting while dinner cooks. How receptive will such a person be to your request? When will he or she even read your letter?

Think of the mood of the whole country. Working people are concerned about losing their jobs, paying their

bills, crime, health care, the declining quality of schools, pollution — to say nothing of the international scene, with its daily pictures and articles about war, starvation, murder, refugees, etc. How crucial or relevant is your message given all the other things going on in people's lives and in the world?

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

And finally, keep in mind that the recipient of a fundraising letter reads this letter on their own time, for free, as a volunteer. It is not their job to read the letter, and if the letter has its intended result, they will wind up paying money for having read the letter.

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF LETTER READING

A fundraising letter has a very difficult job with no power whatsoever. 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. Before you even begin to write, keep in mind the following three premises:

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 "So what?/Now what?" seesaw is a strong screening device for filtering out trivia, boring details, and rhetoric.

To be sure, what is trivial or boring to one person may be profound or lifesaving 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 each sentence in your letter in 6 to 15 seconds. Each sentence must be informative or provocative enough to merit using the next 6 to 15 seconds to read the next sentence.

3. More than anything else, people love to read about themselves. This is partly because of #1, the “So what — Now what?” question. “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 someone who is already a donor to solicit another gift or a renewal, 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. The subconscious cannot tell fact from fantasy and believes everything to be real. (That’s why dreams seem very real, why affirmations work, and how you can make a child smarter or more graceful by telling her that she has those qualities.)

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

fundraising letters, you are not so different from the people you will be writing to.

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 long), the closing paragraph, and the postscript. As many as 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 your group has helped, some situation your group has helped rectify, or about the reader of the letter. There is a saying in fundraising, “People buy with their heart first, and then their head.” Programs and outcomes need to be described in “people” terms (or animal, if that is your constituency). This can be done without being condescending or melodramatic. The stories should be short and should end with something about your organization. Here are some examples:

Someone the group worked with:

Tony and her children, five and eight, have been homeless for two years, moving in and out of shelters. Tony occasionally gets work, but is never able to save enough to pay the security deposit on an apartment or to afford child care while she is at work. This week, because of Homes Now, Tony and her children will move into a two-bedroom home, and Monday morning she will start a full-time job. Her children will be cared for at our day care program.

The paragraph ends here. The body of the letter goes on to explain the philosophy of this group and provide a description of their work, which includes helping people find and move into appropriate housing, and use job placement, job training, and day care services.

A situation the group helped rectify:

To some people it looked like a vacant lot, full of weeds, old tires, and paper trash. Kids play baseball there and sometimes families have picnics there, but when Dreck Development proposed a parking lot, few objected. After all, it is a poor neighborhood and a parking lot would be useful to the commuters who work in the industrial park a few blocks away. To Joe Camereno, the lot looked like a park. He called Inner City Greenspace and asked us how to go about protecting this vacant lot. How did this come about?

The opening ends here. The rest of the letter lets people know how Inner City Greenspace can help them transform vacant lots, treeless streets, and abandoned buildings into more livable community spaces.

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 this 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 a story or offering additional incentive for acting immediately.

A story:

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 the donation today.

Incentives:

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

Or,

If we hear from you by April 15, we will send you two free tickets to our dance May 1.

The Rest of the Letter

The rest of the letter is used to tell more stories, provide backup statistics, describe philosophy, and stress the need for money. The letter needs to be two to three 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-sized type, and space between paragraphs.

The tiny percent of response that we can expect from a direct mail appeal shows how little power the appeal has. However, appeals do educate the public, raise consciousness, and plant the idea 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.

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