

How to Write Fundraising Materials that Raise More Money

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CHAPTER 1-2 – Communicate to spur Action, and be pessimistic.

Fundraising communications are NOT about getting people to read...
they are about getting people to ACT.

Reading is **OPTIONAL**...Acting on your writing is imperative. Would you rather have people read your newsletter, or give, if you could only pick one?

I bring up the distinction between reading and acting for a very important reason having to do with your workload: to release you from the burden of worrying so much about writing lots of stuff. Why? Because people are casual readers at best. If you think your donors are hungry readers, you will be tempted to fill pages for them. But they are not hungry readers. They need to know what to do and why.

If communicating with donors and prospects is about causing action to occur, what kinds of actions are we referring to? A partial list might include:

- Giving to your current appeal.
- Making a matching gift.
- Giving to your building campaign.
- Buying a membership.
- Signing up for a monthly giving program.
- Make a bequest.
- Contribute to an endowment.
- Volunteer.
- Sign a petition.
- Attend an event.
- Write a letter in support of a project.
- Answer a survey.
- Subscribe to your e-newsletter.

You must realize however that time is limited and donor probability of reading AND responding to your written info is VERY low. So, don't be unrealistic about what you are expecting.

Chapter 3 - The predisposed

The predisposed are your donors of tomorrow. Your job is to seek them out. They are those who intrinsically agree with your mission and vision. Sometimes they are called "prospects". They might now know your organization yet or anything about what you do. They might now

have even given your issue any thought. But, when they hear what you have to say, in their hearts, they know you are right. And therefore, they are likely to make a gift.

Chapter 4 – Make it interesting

In every case, the decision to read or not read your stuff will come down to one thing: are they interested in what you are saying? If you don't somehow interest them, they won't read what you send.

How to interest people...

Be donor centric.

- say amazing things about what the organization did or would do with the gift. Mention worthwhile results and real accomplishments.
- link these accomplishments back to charitable results.
- celebrate the donor as the hero...say this work would not be possible without their help.
- talk about the organizations cost efficiency. Donors are often skeptical about how charities are run...reduce this skepticism.

Take advantage of human psychology.

- tell and show people they don't know. Make it unique and innovative. Use surprising photos.
- Make it bold, passionate.
- Aim for the heart and use emotional triggers.
- Use the word "you"
- Make the tone conversational rather than formal.
- make it easy for skimmers.
- is it a quick read. Use short sentences, action verbs, and eliminate jargon.
- are you using anecdotes to illuminate the most pressing issues.
- use statistical evidence like a spear to make a single important point.
- Can you use a testimonial to inspire the faithful and calm doubters.
- Make at least one offer they can respond to.

Chapter 5 – the offer is king

The purpose of an offer is simple: it gives the reader a reason to respond to you right now. Find the right offer, and response pours in. Conversely, without any offers, expect no response. Plenty of newsletters contain no offers at all (and you wonder why no one ever calls or writes?)

Don't bury the offer...make it big bold and easy to spot. Try to make the offer as tangible as possible. Link it to something specific...like cost per counseling session...or number of babies born over 10 years.

Chapter 6 – Why fundraising communications fail

6 ways to guarantee poor results that have nothing to do with your writing or design.

#1 – you don't target your audience narrowly enough.

You have three basic audiences.

- Donors – real donors have given at least twice.
- Prospects – have shown some interest in your mission. Maybe they have made an initial gift. Maybe they joined your mailing list. Prospects also include lapsed donors.
- Suspects – people you suspect might make a gift, yet you have no proof they are really interested.

Of course, when considering your target audience you also have to consider demographics and psychographics.

Donors sort of love you. Prospects wonder if you are worth loving. Suspects barely know you exist. Donors are a bit skeptical. Prospects are furiously skeptical. Suspects assume you are not worth their time or money until you convince them otherwise.

#2 – You don't know what your BIG message is. You don't really know what you want to say to your target audience. You don't have "the message" clear in your own head. The message that you need to repeat over and over and over again.

Or you can take the opposite approach, the one that leads to failure. Instead of sending the same BIG message over and over again, you send lots of different messages. Instead of amassing conviction over time by returning to the same BIG message from lots of different angles (which is the secret to keeping "THE MESSAGE" fresh and interesting) you serve up lots of different messages that aren't mutually reinforcing and lead nowhere special. Choose one message for each target audience and beat that message to death for a few years. That's how you get results. Which brings me to #3.

#3 – You don't repeat your messages often enough. Repetition until you are blue in the face is the secret to success in advertising and every other form of consumer communications including fundraising.

#4 – You don't have real goals. Instead you chase soap bubbles: vague, pseudo-goals such as "raising community awareness". A real goal reads something like, "adding more than 500 millionaires with an interest in community philanthropy to our house mailing list."

#5 – You think bland is the safe choice. It isn't. You have to be BOLD to get attention in today's hyperactive media environment.

#6 – You have unreasonable expectations. You hope for blockbusters. You don't understand that each new fundraising channel you open will likely contribute just a trickle. Take heart though. Those trickles will converge over time into a mighty river of support.

Chapter 7 – Writing your Strategy

Writing a strategy is not an option. It's essential to your success. There are 3 preliminary questions you'll need to answer in order to write a strategy:

- who is your specific target audience?

- what do you want that target audience to do once they read it?
- what's in it for them if they do the action you are proposing they do?

A simple formula for a strategy:

This (enter name of communication item) will convince (enter target audience) that (enter name of action you want them to take) could (enter name of benefit).

Example: This brochure about our new program will convince our one time donors to become regular monthly donors in order to launch this exciting new outreach to high school teen girls reducing the number of teen pregnancies and reducing the tax burden on the city.

Chapter 8 – On the delicate subject of committee and board approvals.

Beware who gets approval rights. It's unusual to find the kind of professional expertise in board or committee members or even in executive directors required for high quality writing. Yet, we often cede the weighty responsibility of "blessing" our fundraising communications to higher authorities: boards, committees, etc. It's irresponsible. Uninformed opinions and second-guessing can, without malice or intent, easily ruin competent work and undermine your ability to raise money. When untrained people have the final say on what goes out the door, you run a serious risk. That's why it's often important to have an experienced and trained person in charge of development.

Chapter 9 – what is branding, really?

Your brand is essentially how your target audience feels about you. It's a person's gut feeling about a product, service, or company. A brand is not what YOU say it is. It's what THEY say it is. One of the most important goals of branding is to build trust in your target audience: prospects and donors in our case. Anticipate the most pressing questions of your target audience and deliver frank, forthright answers.

Be especially conscious of what happens at points of contact between your organization and your target audience. One community foundation director re-titled her receptionist position "Director of First Impressions"

Chapter 10-11 – warning, you are an intrusion...unless you interest a donor.

You are besieged by voices eager to get a piece of your time, loyalty and money, and your defenses are up. Non-profit communications don't employ any exemptions. Your materials are part of the onslaught. You are an intrusion too. And each time you send something you are guilty until proven innocent...of wasting the reader's time, and the only way to overcome this intrusion is to interest your reader.

Donor's have special interests and here's a short list of things they care about deeply.

- your accomplishments – what did you do with my money? Are you making a difference?
- your vision – if I give you money, what amazing things will you do with it?
- recognition – are donors like me vital to your work?

- your efficiency – can I trust you with my money?

Accomplishments – this is the most critical. It is your responsibility to keep your investors well informed of your progress. Investors want to back winners and the little engine that can't deserves no further support. Linked to accomplishment is NEED. You'll raise far more money with news of a setback that leaves you in desperate need and your mission yet to be accomplished, than you will if all you report is how things are all going great. You should celebrate your triumphs, but always leave room for accomplishing more, if only you had more resources.

Recognition – donors want to feel they're important to the attainment of your mission. They want to feel they authored some change in the world when they made the decision to believe in you and write you that first check. Tell donors how important they are to your mission. Be gloriously "donor centric".

Vision – raise tomorrow's dollars today, by preparing your donors and prospects for goals ahead. For instance, write about the problems you can't change yet, but wish to change within another five years, if donors choose to fund you. Visions don't have to be complicated, either. The greatest visionaries in the world are farmers because they see a bountiful harvest in their minds months before it appears. In other words, not every vision requires a strategic plan to back it up.

TAPE THIS TO YOUR FOREHEAD – it's not about funding your agency. It's about realizing the donor's dreams and needs. They don't support you. The support your mission and vision because they mean something to the donor.

Chapter 12 – Being Donor Centric

- Donor OPTIONAL point of view – “we did this, we did that. We were amazing. Oh, by the way, Thanks!”
- Donor CENTRIC point of view – “with your help, all these amazing things happened. And without your help, they wouldn't have.”

** Moving the responsibility onto donor's shoulders can be a very profitable shift. Donors feel good when they know they've made something worthwhile happen. They'll seek that good feeling again and again by making more gifts. Writing in a donor centric way isn't idle flattery. Donor-centric communications sincerely celebrates the actual and potential contributions donors make to your mission and vision.

Chapter 13 – Communicating on all Four Wavelengths

Imagine you have 4 sets of ears...

amiable ears – this set responds to other people. We share emotions, we're responsive to others, their warmth, their smiles, their stories, their greetings. We want to help. We like to nurture, we like community.

expressive ears – this set responds to anything new. They are addicted to the new. The burn for the new. They crave the new, the different, the unique, the only, the urgent, the desperate.

skeptical ears – this set is suspicious. We are quite untrusting and cautious by nature, and our culture tells us that's a good thing, a safe thing.

bottom-liner ears – this set wants to know what to do next. They've heard enough. Tell them what to do next and make it obvious. Make it convenient.

**When you speak to all 4 sets of ears in your materials, you give yourself four chances to hook reader's interest, no matter what happens to predominate at that moment. Your messages will...

...glow with humanity and heart...radiate news and urgency...anticipate and answer predictable objections...never forget to tell people exactly what you want them to do next.

Now...some more detail.

Chapter 14-15 – What the Amiable Side Responds to and Using Anecdotes

Faces and anecdotes are two of the best ways to appeal to the Amiable side of your audience. Eye contact has a powerful effect, but make sure they can see the eyes, that the photo is large enough, otherwise you lose the benefit.

Tell good stories...a mental picture is worth 1000 words. As a tool for persuasion, an anecdote can easily accomplish as much as a lengthy essay ever will, only far faster and more memorably.

Types of Anecdotes:

Before and after storie

“Now and what's possible” stories – this version conveys your vision and invites participation.

Testimonial – can tell a story and offer proof of a program that works.

“Look at the lives you've contributed to” material.

“Surprise” anecdote. – you point them in one direction – then head the opposite way. Ex. What's the hardest part of prison? Staying Out!

Chapter 16-17 – What the Expressive Side Responds to and Newsletter Story Ideas

A dose of news in the first paragraph of an appeal letter, on the home page of your site, on the front page of your newsletter, or wherever else eyes happen to land – causes more people to pay more attention.

What is news? News is merely information that was 1) previously unknown to your readers, and 2) of special interest to them because they care about a certain issue. For example:

- Thing happen in your organization all the time: “daring new program promises to cut teen pregnancies in half, but challenges loom...”
- Lives change thanks to your work: “Once homeless mom, now an entrepreneur.

- You witness emerging trends: “Soaring real-estate market floods shelters with priced out working poor.”
- You see problems long before “Fifty different languages spoken at home turn schools into towers of Babel”

Try these:

- Program Stories – talk about why the program MATTERS, not so much how it works.
- Tip – as a specialist in your field, some of your unique knowledge might be helpful to others.
- Previews and Reports – what’s ahead? What are the latest findings from authorities.
- Client Case Histories – show how your programs have changed lives for the better.
- “Staff are people, too” stories – What are the people on the front line really like?
- Milestones
- Research and Development – what’s coming down the pipeline? What programs are you planning to meet new demands?
- Publications – what do you have to offer?
- How to pieces – what do you know that a reader might be interested in?
- Financial news – people are curious about your finances. If for no other reason, openly discussing your financial information signals to donors that you have nothing to hide and that you have been a wise steward.
- Photos with captions
- Columns – letters from the ED have their place, but also try FAQ’s, Q&A, Myths and Facts, A donor talks about why she gives, etc.
- The “Update” Story – follow up on a earlier issue.
- The “Did you Know” story – reveal surprising and relevant facts.
- Press Releases
- News about you in the news
- History
- Offers

Chapter 19-20 – What the Skeptics Respond to and Reassuring Them

The donor amiable side says, “Go ahead. Take a chance, trust them, and send a check” But the skeptical voice is never silent for long. It’s smart to play strong offense and answer objections before they arise. Here’s an idea:

Gather your colleagues and ask everyone in the room to list any and all bad things they have ever heard about your organization. Misperceptions, suspicions, doubts, objection that are in the minds of your target audience, the public, reporters. Also, make a list of the top questions you hear people ask. Lastly, list the things that strangers never get right about you.

When the meeting ends you have a basis for a good FAQ page with answers that seem to really anticipate, in a graceful and honest way, the real unspoken questions hovering out there.

- Those who are strongly skeptical include:
- Prospects considering a first time gift or first time donors considering a second gift
- Donors of modest gifts considering an increase
- Anyone thinking about leaving you a bequest

- Reporters

You must dispel skepticism. In your FAQ's, web visitors expect to find answers to their foremost doubts. They don't expect to find answers to fake questions like "How do I give more money to you?" FAQ's calm jitters, correct misperceptions, challenge falsehoods, overturn wrong assumptions, reassure, help you brand you organization as trustworthy, honest, sincere, humble, worthwhile, thoughtful and visionary.

Good Recommendation – search online to see how organizations similar to yours deal with the issue of fundraising efficiency. Simply type into your search engine a cluster of key words such as "FAQ fundraising efficiency child family service" You'll be amazed. Or limit the search to "fundraising efficiency".

Testimony dispels skepticism. Credible testimonies leap tall doubts in a single bound. Use them often and everywhere. They will quickly switch off garden-variety, low grade skepticism.

Chapter 21 – What the Bottom-line Side Responds to.

When you make calls to action (which you should often) give me a way to quickly and easily complete the action. You want a check?; send me an envelope. You want my email address?; give me a response card. You want me to volunteer?; give me a warm welcoming human I can call anytime.

Chapter 22-24 – The Emotional Imperative and Emotional Triggers

People mostly give from the heart; the head is the bit player. But we usually assume the opposite. People don't give to your organization because they have made a coolly calculated decision to support you. They give because you've moved them somehow, sometimes in ways that don't sound very "charitable" Flattery and greed are important emotional triggers, for instance, but then, so are hope and joy.

Short list of the 7 most common emotional triggers:

- Anger
- Exclusivity
- Fear
- Flattery
- Greed
- Guilt
- Salvation

Emotional Twin Sets are like two emotional triggers strung between two poles flapping in the breeze. Find a problem and solve with an emotional twin solution.

Anger – compassion

Fear – hope

Guilt – Relief

Duty – Salvation

Flattery – Exclusivity

Etc...

One of the things I think about on any new project is which emotional twin set can we swing our message between? And you can use multiple sets.

Chapter 25 - 26 – The most important ? – Why your Org. matters.

You should be able to answer this question in a 30 second elevator statement, which presents a:

- Dramatic problem
- An intriguing solution
- News value
- Urgency
- A critical need

All in a fast lean speech.

How you do what you do is not as important to the donor as you might think. If you could do it with a magic wand they would be just as happy. Ignorance of the working details of an org is NOT a barrier to giving. What donors DO care about is how much you've accomplished.

Your case is NOT meant to educate your donors about the deep, operational details of your organization. That's like trying to sell cars by handing out owner's manuals instead of sales brochures. Your case is meant to inspire so that people will give through you to change the world.

The kind of education therefore that yields gifts has to do with mission, vision, and values: why you do the work, why your org matters to the rest of the world, why you are unique. Keep these distinctions in mind as you hunt and gather info.

Not sure why you matter? Ask yourself this. "If we disappeared tomorrow, what would go away that is of real value in the world because of us?"

Chapter 27 – AIDA: a formula for an elevator speech

AIDA

Attention: first get their attention – "there's a crisis in kids healthcare"

Interest: add interest – "50% will get cancer"

Desire: stimulate desire – "we found a cure"

Action: issue a call to action – "if we have your help, a cure will come faster"

Chapter 28 – Make a case – step one: collection information

The first step is to do some good old fashioned homework. Build a database of info that collects in one place everything you suspect a donor might need to know, would find interesting, or would find persuasive.

Sometimes you can get by with a phone call, an annual report and a little Web research. But if you can get it, use the following:

- Mission statement
- Vision statement
- Values statement
- Organizational history and accomplishments
- Program and service descriptions
- Data on those who are served
- Proof that the program are worth doing (anecdotal and statistical)
- News clippings
- All existing brochures
- All communications over the past few years
- Overview of the org's governance (board, "friends of" groups, supporting foundations, etc)
- Staffing and info on key players
- Financial info
- Interviews with "key informants" – major donors, ED, program directors
- Strategic plan and goals and objectives
- Info on emerging or increasing needs
- Monetary goal for the campaign and what that money will buy.

Chapter 29 – Make a case – step two: answer the 3 big questions donors have

The goal of this step is to reduce all the info to just the best stuff...about your campaign and why it matters to the rest of the world, or about your mission and how it's important to the world.

Why us? – accomplishments, uniqueness,

Why now? – create urgency and a need

Why you? (as a donor) – emotional triggers, make donors the heroes. Offer hope.

How long should your case be? It could be just a tagline, but it should be no more than 3000 words.

Chapter 30 – Make a case – step three: tell your story

- 1) dramatize the problem
- 2) present your mission or project as the solution
- 3) beginning to end speak of the donor as a hero whose gift will help solve the problem
- 4) inside, build conviction and interest.
- 5) ask for the money over and over again

Chapter 31 – The smallest case there is...your tagline.

A slogan is a war cry and comes from the Gaelic word "sluagh-ghairm" meaning warcry.

Examples:

- "Because facts matter in the fight for economic justice" – for a poverty institute.
- "A place of our own at the corner of hope and health" – for a capital campaign for an AIDS clinic
- "Home. There's no place like it" – for a housing for the poor campaign

Chapter 32-34 – Headlines – they are Critically important

People browse a little, then go on with their lives. If people don't get the message in your headlines, they are not going to get it at all. It's a pass/fail situation. A good headline has enticing words, good action verbs, the best possible summary of what the content is about, and, if possible a surprise or hook that pulls us in.

Pay attention to your choice of verbs. Avoid sluggish verbs: support, identify, provide, protect, organize. Find new words. New is always a good word, and will never get old, so to speak. Also good are words like revealed, secrets, discovered, unexpected, surprise, all signaling to them "you're telling me something I don't know"

The second point has to do with "donor-centrality" In an effective donor communication piece, every headline should answer the question "Why in the world would the donor care?"

Example:

Before: Why do you support Audubon? Survey identifies top two reasons

After: New survey reveals: Land Conservation Ranks #1 on Donors's wish lists. Audubon announces drive for war chest to save more land.

Few are the headlines that tell the whole story (Titanic Sinks) Very often you'll need more than a few words to summarize the whole story and introduce a good angle.

The original headline above had no point of view, no angle. Few people will read your articles and those that do will not always draw the right conclusions.

Chapter 35 – Write for Browsers

Focus your writing effort on what is called the browser level, where most eyes will rest first, what most people read. It's different from piece to piece. The browser level for an appeal letter might consist of:

- The salutation
- The opening paragraph
- Underlined words – use sparingly
- Boldfaced words – use sparingly
- Bullet lists
- The closing
- The P.S.

For a newsletter it might include

- Headlines
- Lead Sentences
- Photos
- Captions
- Pull Quotes

For a website:

- Search feature
- Persistent navigation

- Utilities (about us, contact us)
- Things to click on
- Headlines

I often write my browser levels before I write the articles. I assume no one will read my articles, but that they will all read tidbits. Spend your time on the browser levels.

Chapter 37-38 – the “you” test and the dangerous “and”

Again, your goal is not to get them to read, but to act.

People like to read the word You. We hear you more than we hear our own name. Spread the word you all around if possible.

Be careful of the word and. It has a purpose of course, mostly as a way of saying “oh, one more thing I forgot to mention”. But it also creates fuzzy thinking, dangling sentences, untrimmed thoughts that douse a reader's interest.

Instead drop the word “and”. Use shorter sentences. Make your thoughts stand out.

Chapter 39 – will I ever be a good writer?

Good writers are good self critics. Writing is not about writing, it's about interesting the reader and sustaining that interest. So stamp out self-indulgence. Do fancy words tickle you? Use smaller words. Do extended metaphors thrill you? Write your tale in as straight-forward manner as possible. Feel that a little digression never hurt anyone? Well, get to the point.

Learn what you need to say in simple, transparent, speedy prose. The most important question you can ask of any word, phrase, sentence, paragraph or passage is this: “do my readers really need to hear that?”