

# How to Captivate Donors' Hearts

A celebrated nonprofit shares three secrets to its success.



*Jessie's House, a shelter for homeless families, raises money by creating emotional ties with donors. The strength of these ties comes from the shelter's evocative name, its inspiring story, and the ease with which people can see how the program works.*

By William D. Diamond

Despite the daunting environment for fundraising, some organizations are successful. It's interesting to ask people to describe the nonprofits that captivate them — that make them want to donate.

In Northampton, Massachusetts, people often report being captivated by a homeless shelter called Jessie's House. Despite its small endowment, Jessie's House raises enough money from the community to run an excellent program for homeless families.

How has this organization taught the community to love its work? What makes it so effective at binding itself to the community's

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heart? Here are three keys to its success:

**The Story.** The community of Northampton loved Jessie Benoit, a restaurant owner who provided refuge, free coffee, and free or discounted food to Northampton's homeless people. Starting a shelter called "Jessie's House" gave the city a chance to build on that story of how one person can make a difference. Although Jessie died in

2003, her story lives on through the shelter's direct-mail pieces and other communications with the public.

While your organization may not have a "Jessie," see if you can tie your organization's story to an individual. Begin with your founders. Who were they? What was their dream? What did they set out to do?

Identify myths, legends, historical benchmarks, anecdotes that inspire. Who are your organization's heroes? Who has had the biggest impact on your organization's goals?

Use focus groups to answer these questions and come up with a

story that will touch people's hearts. Then use pictures and words to create messages that inspire.

**The Name.** A second success factor is the name, Jessie's House. In his book, *Influence*, Robert Cialdini notes that certain names trigger automatic responses from people. We know that brand names (Air Jordan, Range Rover, Ivory Snow) lead us to make inferences about products. Likewise, some names trigger compassion. The name of a shelter could lead us to see it as warm and supportive or as cold and institutional. The name Jessie's House connotes a nurturing place and leads us to ask about Jessie's story. (Possibly Aunt Jessie's House, in Arkansas, has an even better name!)

A shelter within half a mile of Jessie's House was originally called the No Homes Inn. Does that name trigger the same emotional response as Jessie's House? The city might have named Jessie's House the Bridge Street Shelter. Would it have been as successful?

Does your organization's name form an emotional bond with donors? If not, consider changing it. Many nonprofits report a surge in support after changing their names. (Example: Donations to the Association for Biodiversity Information leaped after it changed its name to NatureServe.) Again, use focus groups to help you find the best name for your organization.

**Certain names trigger automatic responses from people.**

Try to make your name as short and memorable as possible, and don't use an acronym for your name. No donor's heart is stirred by an acronym.

**The Mechanism.** Social-psychology literature says that altruism occurs when the need and the

helping behavior are both clear. That means presenting donors with a simple, tangible way to help. It means cutting the problem down to size and making the solution crystal-clear. Donors should be able to say, "I can see how it works."



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Consider the example of Christian Children's Fund. After the first handwritten letter from a sponsored child, there's no doubt in donors' minds how they're helping someone. The mechanism of support is clear when described in terms of one child or family.

Simple, tangible mechanisms can take many forms. Alumni from the University of Massachusetts reported in focus groups that untargeted donations resemble "throwing money in the pond." Ask them to contribute toward a computer lab or student activity, however, and they're very generous.

A good way to personalize the problem and the solution is to send out a newsletter, as Jessie's House does. *Jessie's House News* tells us that "Carmela" arrived at Jessie's House with three young daughters and three goals — to pay off old debt, save money toward an apartment, and acquire a driver's license. When we learn that she accomplished all three in

a few months, we see the program's success in action. We see how effective Jessie's House is in providing a comprehensive life-skills program, including tutoring, workshops on budgeting, and mandatory savings toward rental arrears or a security deposit.

Use the personalization principle in all your communications. Consider creating a video or slide show about your organization's work, featuring your clients. Use your annual report to focus on people you've helped during the year. Invite the media to report your successes. Be sure your Web site includes pictures and stories of individuals. In your fundraising letters, use testimonials and photographs of real people. (Note whether you're using real names with permission or changing names and details. Either is fine, as long as you let people know.)

If possible, give donors the chance to "purchase" a specific part of a program. Show them where their dollars will go and how they can turn someone's misery into health, comfort, and joy. ■

### Tools for the Journey

Use these resource tools from *Nonprofit World* ([www.snpo.org/members](http://www.snpo.org/members)) to put the three keys into action:

- **Telling the Story: Exploring Clients' Lives**, Vol. 17, No. 1.
- **Success Starts with Your Name**, Vol. 22, No. 2.
- **Brands: They Need to Work Just as Hard as You Do**, Vol. 20, No. 1.
- **Picture Your Organization on Videotape**, Vol. 8, No. 4.
- **Are You Using the Power of Focus Groups?**, Vol. 14, No. 5.

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