



How to ENERGIZE Your Thank-You LETTER



The thank-you letter should be your first step toward gaining your next gift. Here are 10 ideas to vitalize it.

By Sandy Rees

The thank-you letter is often created without much thought. It may seem routine, the last step in getting a donation. But it's actually the first step in securing the next gift.

Thank-you letters can help you steward your donors and provide another way to communicate with them. Make sure you're getting the most from your thank-you efforts with these ideas:

1. Get the letter out quickly.

The faster you get out your thank-you, the better. Donors want to know you received their gift, and a thank-you letter is the best way to let them know it arrived safely. If possible, let no more than 48 hours go by from the time you receive a gift until you send a letter. If it takes a little longer and that's the best you can do, work with it. Figure out what will work for your organization, and put a priority on getting the letters out the door.

2. Relate your thank-you letter to the ask.

Instead of sending out a generic letter, customize it to the solicitation used to generate the gift. You may need to write several

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types of letters — one related to your special event, one for monthly givers, and another for donors who respond to your newsletter, for example. If a gift comes in response to a direct-mail package, refer to the story you used in that package. Tying your thank-you to the appeal lets donors know you're paying attention.

3. Use a real signature.

Digital signatures eliminate signing a stack of letters by hand. But technologically-savvy donors know the difference between a digital signature and a live one. Have your president or executive director sign the letters, or ask a volunteer to sign them on behalf of the executive or president. And use a blue pen so that donors can clearly tell it's a real signature.

4. Tell donors what you'll do with their money.

Text such as "Your gift will ensure that 15 children go to summer camp for a week" makes the process of donating more tangible. Donors can envision 15 kids going to camp, and that image creates a feeling of satisfaction.

5. Include year-to-date or lifetime-giving data.

This information can be enlightening, showing donors how their gifts add up over time. Sometimes donors forget when they last gave. Including year-to-date information can be a gentle reminder if they have pledges or commitments to fulfill.

6. Make it clear that the letter is also a receipt.

Don't you hate getting thank-you letters that never spell out the gift you made? (By the way, if you aren't giving to other organizations, you should. It's a great way to put yourself in the donor's shoes and lets you see how other organizations handle the thank-you process.) One way to clarify how much the donor gave is to draw a line on the page below

CREATIVE FUNDRAISING IDEAS

Capitalize on “Dancing with the Stars”

Thanks to the popularity of the TV reality show “Dancing with the Stars,” people are once again interested in traditional dances like the waltz, tango, and quickstep. You can capitalize on the new craze by asking local dance instructors to be part of your fundraising event. In Rockland, Maryland, for instance, the Pen Bay Healthcare Foundation (www.penbayhealthcare.org) invited ballroom-dance instructors to their “Shall We Dance?” gala. Throughout the evening, as the band played, the instructors encouraged guests to dance, held demonstrations, and judged dance contests. As an added benefit, many of the instructors’ students attended the event and enjoyed the chance to showcase their skills on the dance floor.

Create a Unique Catalog

The idea of producing a gift catalog as a fundraiser took off when Chicago’s Beverly Arts Center (www.beverlyartcenter.org) asked its staff of professional artists (painters, dancers, singers, and so on) each to donate something. The result is a unique catalog offering original works of art, performance gifts, and private parties, ranging from under \$30 to over \$4 million. For \$300, for example, you can buy a walk-on role in one of the theater’s productions. For \$500, you can have an original song written and recorded on a CD. For \$4,635,000, you can add your name to the front of the art center building. Not only are the gifts selling well, but the idea has provided great exposure to the art center as people bring the catalog into their homes and share it with friends.

Design a Memorable Home Tour

If you’re considering a tour of homes as a fundraiser, offer an extra something special to make your event stand out. For example, have on-site artists volunteer to give demonstrations. Or have volunteer musicians entertain in the homes, as the Pee Dee Coalition against Domestic & Sexual Assault (www.peedeecoalition.org) of Bennettsville, South Carolina, did. They matched different types of music to individual homes, bringing in a pianist to play in a home with a piano, for example, and a bluegrass band to perform on the front porch of a rural-area home. For more creative fundraising ideas, see “Special Events Galore!”, published monthly for \$79 per year by Stevenson, Inc., www.stevensoninc.com.

the text of the letter, add the gift information, and title this section of the letter “Gift Receipt.”

7. Add a reply envelope. Many donors will keep these envelopes and use them for future gifts. It’s not uncommon to receive thousands of dollars from these “bounce-back” envelopes. Code the envelopes so that you can track the number, size, and amount of donations received using this technique.

8. Offer a guided tour of your facility or program site. Even if donors don’t take you up on this offer, they’ll remember it. You’ll probably get a few people who want to visit you. Seeing your work firsthand can make all the difference in the world to a donor. It can also mean the difference between an average-sized gift and a major gift.

9. Include the name and contact

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information of someone the donor can call with questions. Make sure that person is available. Donors want to be able to talk to a real, live, knowledgeable person when they have questions.

10. Have the president or executive director go through the letters and add personal notes. While it may seem like a chore, the extra time is worth it. Donors who receive a personal note will be thrilled. The small investment of time can bring big rewards in terms of stewarding donors. ■

Resources

Keller, Thomas K., “The Dirty Dozen: 12 Questions Nonprofit Leaders Ask about Direct-Mail Fundraising,” *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 19, No. 3.

Levinson, Nick, “What’s Wrong with Thank You? Plenty,” *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 22, No. 2.

Robinson, Andy, “Twelve Ways to Say Thank You,” *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 16, No. 6.

These resources are available at www.snpo.org/members. Also see Learning Institute programs on-line: Resource Development (www.snpo.org/li).

Sandy Rees, CFRE, has worked as a fundraiser for over six years and raised hundreds of thousands of dollars for Second Harvest Food Bank and Knox Area Rescue Ministries before becoming director of development for Joy of Music in Knoxville.
