

The Most Deadly Fundraising Mistake

Be sure you never make this disastrous error.



By John Minges

What's the biggest mistake you can make in your fundraising practice? It's a shockingly common error – forgetting to say “thank you” properly. Although too many fundraisers consider it a trivial matter, it isn't. It can hurt your fundraising success more than anything else. Here are some countermeasures to keep in mind:

Be instantaneous. In today's super-charged age of speed, it's crucial to be as prompt as possible with your thanks. A call, text, or e-mail the same day you receive the support would be ideal. Then you can follow up later with a longer thank-you.

In the United States, there are 228 nonprofits for every individual. Donors have options. They need to feel good about the contributions they make. Otherwise, they'll move on to another worthy cause.

That's why it's so important to make a solid connection with each donor. Nothing does this better than genuine, heartfelt, swiftly given gratitude.

Your responsibility doesn't end when you receive a gift. In fact, it has just begun.

Be multi-faceted. Thanking donors once isn't enough. You must connect with them, in some way or another, at least seven times, before they'll feel adequately thanked.

If you feel this unwritten rule is excessive, ask yourself this: Have you ever heard a donor complain about being thanked too many times?

Successful nonprofits know the secret to keeping a donor: Keep finding new ways to keep their interest alive. For example:

Have board members call and thank donors. This simple act is one of the best ways for board members to use their time. It will go a long way in strengthening donor relationships. It's imperative to learn your donors' interests so that you can further involve them in your organization. What better person to find out that information than a board member who is already excited about your cause?

Send notes hand-written by board members, expressing appreciation. These notes should reinforce the true spirit of the gift. They should explain why the gift truly matters and how it is an investment in the lives of others.

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Acknowledge donors in your newsletter, Web site, annual report, social media, and any other communication vehicle you can think of. Such thoughtfulness will pay huge dividends.

Be thorough. For tax purposes, it's essential to provide the donor with the amount and date of the gift. That's the bare minimum of what you must provide in your thank-you letter.

Also include as much detail as possible about the donor's history with your organization. Donors especially love to hear how you've used previous gifts and how you hope to use this one. The more tangible information you can give, the happier – and more likely to give again – your donors will be.

Be diligent. How many of your donors are sticking with you through the years? How many are leaving? The only way to know for sure is to measure your retention rate. Be sure you have a donor tracking system in place, even if it's something as simple as note cards in a filing box. Your system should track every gift made. It should also assure that all donors receive a series of thank-you communications.

Be constant. Keep trying different ways of involving donors. Continually ask for their feedback and pay attention to their input. Don't make gratitude a one-time, two-time, or ten-time thing. Turn it into a relationship that lasts.

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