

Anatomy of an Award-Winning Campaign

A case study offers winning direct-mail fundraising ideas.

By Courtney Lewis & Kelly Potchak

What's the special something that sets a winning marketing effort apart? Certainly there are objective characteristics that are readily apparent in package design. Then, too, there are subjective qualities that capture people's hearts, minds, and imaginations. Guide Dogs for the Blind (GDB) combined the two in a package that has won multiple awards and is growing GDB's donor file by leaps and bounds.

So what comprises the "secret sauce" that powers this and other successful campaigns? Read on and we'll dissect the elements that underlie the anatomy of an award-winning campaign.

Turn the Familiar into the Extraordinary

Many organizations find a formula that works for them and then stick with it for years. While such workhorses sustain an organization, they do little to help the nonprofit achieve its full potential. It's important for nonprofits to have an adventurous spirit and be willing to try something new.

When contemplating a new strategy, test various concepts before committing to one. GDB, for instance, tested four packages before making its choice. The ultimate selection took GDB's long-time formula – the testimonial – and stood it on four paws, so to speak, by adding an out-of-the-box element: The testimonial came from a dog.

Execute Your Winning Concept

Once you've created and tested a novel concept, be sure to articulate that element throughout the package. It isn't enough to find a "hook" and rely on it alone. Look for ways to take it to another level.

Beyond relying on an atypical testimonial source (a dog), the GDB package also incorporated a rather unconventional tone for a direct-mail letter – one that was decidedly positive and full of excitement. The enthusiastic style of the letter mimicked the unbridled excitement of a puppy. In being so different from the characteristic direct-mail letter, it captivated readers' interest, held it, and motivated them to donate.

Central to the goal of acquiring new donors is the need to position an organization so that people want to lend their support. No one wants to read a dull mission statement or a dry bullet list of "what we do." It's critical to convey key information in a compelling way so that recipients will read and digest it.

The "Letter from a Guide Dog" campaign used a guide dog's voice to tell his life story from puppyhood till placement with his human partner. The letter subtly conveyed what GDB does, its needs, how donations are used, and the impact of each gift. More than that, it spoke to GDB's two primary audiences: dog lovers and those who want to help people who are blind or visually impaired.

Incorporate the Tried and True

In addition to the letter, GDB's direct-mail package included adorable puppy photos and three other elements with a proven track record of success:

An insert reinforced the impact of donor gifts by explaining in greater detail GDB's financial needs and how gifts are used.

A liftnote, penned by the dog's human partner, used the tried-and-true testimonial technique to demonstrate donor impact in a personal way. While the tone was emotional, it was neither dramatic nor depressing.

Last but not least was the use of a front-end premium (a small gift sent along with the mailing). Testing consistently confirms that including a mission-oriented premium boosts




response rates in nonprofit acquisition packages. In this case, GDB's premium was a branded mixture of address labels and stickers featuring guide dogs.

In devising your own direct-mail package, develop creative ways to improve on what has worked for your organization in the past. Always remember that there is no substitute for high-quality writing. Know your recipients, and produce a letter that's meaningful for them. Then revise your letter, and revise again. Set your letter aside for a few days, reread it with fresh eyes, and revise it still further. The impact of careful revisions can be astronomical.

Developing Your Award-Winning Package

Not everyone has the option to use a cute puppy to build rapport. Still, a similar touchpoint exists for every nonprofit. Find that opening, and put a fresh spin on proven strategies as you incorporate new ones.

Don't forget package design and execution. Develop an attractive design and infuse that creative approach in a consistent but non-repetitive way throughout the package. Use high-quality photographs, bolded text, display quotes, teasers, white space, and color to achieve a visually appealing package that invites, dare we say commands, recipients to open and read. 

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More Keys to Direct-Mail Success

Learn more about successful campaigns with these articles at NonprofitWorld.org/members:

55 Direct-Mail Secrets (Vol. 25, No. 1)

How to Write a Fundraising Letter (Vol. 29, No. 5)

Making the Mail Work (Better) for You (Vol. 21, No. 2)

Think Out of the Box for Fundraising Gains (Vol. 29, No. 5)

Choosing the Right Typeface Means Cash for Your Cause (Vol. 15, No. 6)

Top Five Tips to Improve Direct-Mail Fundraising and Cement Your Future (Vol. 29, No. 2)

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