

What Are the Three Most Boring Words in Fundraising?

If you want to raise money with your appeal letter, avoid these words like the pox.

By Gail Perry

Way too many fundraising letters are full of hackneyed phrases that have been used and re-used until they have no meaning. They're like pabulum, with no seasoning, no fire. Let's talk about three of the worst ones.

The #1 Most Boring Word

The award for the most boring word used in fundraising goes to: "underserved."

Many nonprofits use "underserved" in their daily vocabulary. It's such a normal part of conversation that it creeps into their fundraising materials.

Where's the emotion in this word? Where's the specificity? Instead of "underserved," how about using a real word, like desperate, hungry, lonely, scared, worried, anxious, frightened, starving?

The 2nd and 3rd Most Boring Words

The second and third most overused words are "programs" and "services."

How often have you heard these phrases? "Please support our xxx program." Or "Please support our xxx service."

Here's the problem with "programs" and "services." These words are watered down. They're not specific enough to have any impact. This is the shortcut language of a lazy person who doesn't want to go to the effort of describing what the organization is actually doing.

Here's an example: Say that you operate a program to teach illiterate prisoners how to read. The lazy fundraiser would say, "Support our prison literacy program." The smart fundraiser would say, "You can help prisoners learn to read."

Now, which phrase has more bang? Which has more energy? Which is more compelling? Which can break my heart? Which would open my wallet?


And, note the donor-centered approach from the smart fundraiser ("you") versus the organization-centered approach ("our") from the thoughtless fundraiser.

Other Words to Avoid

Let's skip these too: impact, output, scalable, sustainable. These words deaden the emotions. So they're no use to you in fundraising appeals. You can't raise money with these words.

In Short

Ditch the lofty tone and treat me (your donor) like your best friend. Remember that you're not writing a formal letter to someone you don't know. You're writing to a true believer in your cause, someone with a passion for your work. So don't talk down to me.

Choose words that grab me. Get my attention with language that has power and punch. Never use professional jargon and cliches in fundraising appeals. Using a word like "underserved" to describe your work doesn't help me understand what you do one bit. Just use plain talk. Please. 



Gail Perry, MBA, CFRE, is the best-selling author of Fired-Up Fundraising: Turn Board Passion into Action. She writes a blog at gailperry.com, from which this article is adapted.

What Really Works with Donors

For more ideas on creating the best possible appeal package, see these articles at NonprofitWorld.org:

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

How Jargon Undermines Communication (Vol. 27, No. 2)

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

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

How to Foster a Positive Funding Relationship (Vol. 32, No. 4)

Breakthrough Tips to Boost Your Fundraising (Vol. 33, No. 2)

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