Revitalize Your Thank-You Letter with a Good Story

Stories rule. Capture your donors' hearts with these steps.

By Vanessa Chase Lockshin

Your thank-you letter is one of the most vital fundraising and marketing tools you have. It's a best practice to refresh your donor thank-you letter (also known as an acknowledgment letter) at least twice a year.

An easy way to update your letter is to add a story. Just like appeal letters, thank-you letters that use a story are more emotionally engaging. They also demonstrate your organization's impact, which is crucial to retaining donors. To create a powerful, effective thank-you letter, follow these steps.

Step 1: Decide what kind of a story you want to use.

Our recommendation is to use a staff story or a client story. If you segment your thank-you letters, then you can collect a variety of stories to be used in different versions of your letters.

QUESTIONS THAT WILL HELP YOU TELL A GOOD STORY

You can use stories to great advantage not only in your donor letters but also in your newsletter, on social media, and in future appeals. Here are a few questions to ask donors when interviewing them for a story:

- **How did you first hear** about our organization?
- **What made you decide** to give your first gift?
- **Why do you enjoy giving** to this organization?
- **What's your favorite program or service** to donate to?
- **What do you hope to accomplish** through your philanthropy?
- **If you were talking to someone else about giving to our organization,** what would you tell them?
- **What do you wish everyone knew** about this cause?

> "This is what donors most want to hear about – change that they've helped facilitate."

Step 2: Ask three people if you can interview them.

We recommend three people because you may only get one who says yes. Plus, if you're unsure of exactly which story to use in your thank-you letter, this will give you an option or two. Here's a sample script you can e-mail to the three people you choose:

> Hi, (Name)!
>
> I'm in the process of updating our donor thank-you letters and would like to use a story in them. Our donors love to hear direct examples and stories about our organization's work, and I immediately thought of you. Would you (or a client in your program) be willing to be interviewed and have your story used in our thank-you letter?
>
> Hope you're having a great week!
>
> (Your Name)

Step 3: Conduct the interview.

It needn't take all day. In fact, you can keep your interview under 30 minutes. Bring a notepad and pen, or recorder – whatever your note-taking tool of choice is. Focus on having a conversation.

Once you've finished the interview, go through your notes and pull out any direct quotes or morsels of the story that speak to change. This is what donors most want to hear about – change that they've helped facilitate.

Step 4: Incorporate the story into the thank-you letter.

After you've reviewed your notes, pull up a copy of your current thank-you letter. Add a direct quote between the opening salutation and the first paragraph. Then thank

the donor and continue telling them the story and emphasizing their impact. Here's what this letter might look like:

> Dear (Donor Name),
>
> "Quote . . ."
>
> (Donor Name), this is the kind of change that you make possible in our community through your gifts. We are so grateful that you continue to support XYZ organization to . . . .
>
> As you can see in (Name)'s story, . . . (Tell them more about the person's story).
>
> But it's not just this one person that you helped. There are many other people like (Name) who need . . . .
>
> Thank you again for your support.

This is a skeletal outline of a thank-you letter, but it gives you an idea of the flow from the quote to the thank you and back to the story. Nonprofits that use similar letters have found great success in their fundraising efforts. We hope you do, too.

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The Power of Connection

For more ways to connect with your donors through thank-you letters, stories, and other creative channels, see articles such as these at NonprofitWorld.org:

Telling the Story: Exploring Clients' Lives (Vol. 17, No. 1)

What's the Best Way to Recognize a Major Donor? (Vo. 31, No. 2)

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

How to Energize Your Thank-You Letter (Vol. 26, No. 2)

Why Telling the Right Brand Story Matters So Much for Nonprofits (Vol. 32, No. 3)

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

Also see Learning Institute programs on-line: Resource Development and O for Opportunity: Exploring New Revenue Opportunities for Nonprofits (NonprofitWorld.org/LearningInstitute).

Creative Fundraising Ideas

Break a Record

Some nonprofits have found that breaking or setting a world record can help them stand out in a crowded marketplace and draw attention to the cause. A few recent examples:

- Ludington Hospital's "Be Someone's Angel" event shattered the record for the most people making sand angels simultaneously when 1,387 people gathered on the beach at Lake Michigan to raise awareness about cancer, honor someone battling the disease, and raise funds for local cancer services.
- The Uniting to Combat Neglected Tropical Diseases coalition, along with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, enlisted 10 pharmaceutical companies to donate an unprecedented 207,169,292 medications to set the Guinness World Records title for the most medications donated in 24 hours.
- Two nonprofits, the Rebuild Rowlett Foundation for Long Term Relief and the Garland Tornado Relief Fund, earned the Guinness World Records title for the largest toy pistol fight. The event organizer created a page on Tilt, where participants purchased tickets with proceeds going to the two nonprofits. Nearly 2,289 participants attended, breaking the previous record while raising funds for the nonprofits involved.

Nonprofits often turn to sponsors to underwrite the costs for the Guinness World Records attempt. Other nonprofits charge participants a portion of the registration fee. If the record is successful, Guinness World Records will leverage the power of its robust social channels and share the results on its website and social platforms, giving the nonprofit additional exposure. For more information, contact guinnessworldrecords.com.

Get Your Events off the Ark

How many of your fancier events are single friendly? Many single people don't like to come to an event alone. But they would be delighted to attend if your invitation said:

___ This year I'm coming solo. Put me at a table with interesting people.

Single women aged 20-54 give two-and-a-half times more money than their older counterparts. And more bequests are made by single people without children than any other demographic. So gain the loyalty of singles by reaching out and embracing them.

"Don't leave your single party animals on the dock," advises fundraising and board expert Carol Weisman (boardbuilders.com). Make it clear on your invitations that single people are welcome at your events and that you'll make sure they have a good time.