

This Is How It Feels when You Don't Acknowledge a Donor

Take a walk in a donor's shoes, and you'll never make this devastating mistake again.

By Zach Shefska

Four weeks ago, I made a donation to a local hospital in memory of my mom, Suzanne Shefska, who passed away there. I was excited to give the hospital what to me was a large amount of money, and I even urged everyone in my network to consider donating to the hospital, too.

Sadly, in the four weeks since, I have yet to receive a “thank you” letter or e-mail (I don't mean to discount the automated e-mail with my tax receipt, but yeah, I'm not counting that).

It's safe to say I'm disappointed. This kind of experience leaves a bad taste in a donor's mouth. More often than not, emotion is the driving force when making donations. That puts donors in a vulnerable position. If they don't feel validated for their decision to give, they're likely to feel a range of powerful, disturbing emotions.

It's a difficult exercise, but put yourself in someone else's shoes for a moment. Do your best to be in mine.

The Three Stages of Donor Emotion

There are three stages of donor emotion after not being acknowledged:

Denial: “Maybe they just haven't had time yet to acknowledge my gift. I'm sure they won't ignore me. I'll hear from them soon.”

Two weeks after sending the check and getting no response, I was in full-out denial. I expected to hear from the hospital at any moment. I was more than willing to give them the benefit of the doubt.

I caught myself frequently thinking, “They have a lot of donors. They'll get to you soon; just be patient.”

Unfortunately though, this sense of denial began to wear off. Soon enough, I moved to step two of this donor journey.



Anger: “How could they not acknowledge me? I did something very meaningful, and they're just going to forget about me?”

After three weeks or so, I started to feel angry. Whenever I thought about it, I felt frustrated and resentful, wondering what had happened to the money I'd given and if anyone cared.

Anger stems from pain. Not acknowledging a contribution will elicit strong emotions, including the feeling of being hurt, ultimately leading to anger.

Regret: “I shouldn't have donated to them. Next time I'll try another organization and see if they treat me better.”

When anger begins to fade, a donor will feel regret. It's only natural to feel this way after making a decision and not being pleased with the outcome.

I personally regret my decision to contribute to the hospital. I wonder if my donation would have been better received elsewhere. When I decided to donate, there was no question in my mind that I was making the right decision. Now, it looks like a mistake.

Applying the Lesson

You may be thinking, “Am I reading an article on grief? What does this have to do with fundraising?” Yes, denial, anger, and regret are three of the five stages of grief, but they're also the most relatable emotions your donors will experience if they feel ignored. Unacknowledged donors are dealing with loss: They're grieving over a relationship they thought they were beginning with your organization.

This feeling of loss is a primary reason that retention rates are low in nonprofit organizations. Too many donors feel overlooked, leading to feelings of betrayal. When they don't feel valued, they won't want to continue the relationship.

With that in mind, here are key takeaways to bring back to your office:

Make an effort to acknowledge your new donors in a personal way, not just with a tax receipt.

Empathize with the emotional experience your constituents go through when making a donation (“I just lost someone dear to me,” “I don't have much money, but I'm giving because it makes me feel good,” or any other number of emotions and reasons).

“Emotion is the driving force in making donations.”

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Remember that you can never thank someone too quickly or too often. Call or send a note as soon as you receive a donation. Continue to grab every chance to thank the donor, sending updates about how you're using the money and what a wonderful difference the funds have made for your organization and the world.

Find tools and resources that help you prioritize who to reach out to and when to do so. Not every donor can, or should, be reached out to in the same way, but creating processes and empowering staff with the proper tools to acknowledge new donors will go a long way. Make your donors feel good. Impress upon them that what they've done matters. Then, they'll keep coming back for more. 

HOW QUICKLY SHOULD YOU THANK A NEW DONOR?

The answer, according to fundraising expert Tom Ahern: within 48 hours. Research from the Christian Fundraising Consultancy shows that first-time donors who received a personal thank-you within 48 hours were four times more likely to give again.

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The Most Important Two Words in Fundraising

For more on those all-important words – “thank you” – take a look at articles such as these at NonprofitWorld.org:

Twelve Ways to Say Thank You (Vol. 16, No. 6)

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

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

Relationship Marketing: Guaranteeing the Future (Vol. 14, No. 5)

Deeper Donor Relationships = Increased Contributions (Vol. 26, No. 4)

33 Top Tips for Building Donor Bonds (Vol. 26, No. 1)

Creative Fundraising Ideas

Connect with Women to Raise Extraordinary Funds

A new fundraising platform, 100 Extraordinary Women (100extraordinarywomen.com) offers an easy way to raise funds among women (and men who want to honor and support women). This unique giving platform boosts the impact of fundraising by reaching new donors and cultivating first-time gifts at higher than traditional levels. According to the website, this “user-friendly platform with white-glove campaign-setup service allows you to quickly set up and monitor your campaigns donations.”

Make Giving Fun with Once-in-a-Lifetime Prizes

Anyone who has dreamed of playing one-on-one with Magic Johnson or singing on stage with Sir Paul McCartney can see the allure of Omaze (omaze.com). Omaze raises funds for nonprofit organizations through online auctions, where people donate to a good cause for the chance to win something extraordinary, like paying off student loans, exploring Europe on the Orient Express, or winning a new house or car. One person is picked at random to win the prize. The nonprofit receives as much as 90% of the funds raised and gets support from a whole new network of people. 

