

Can You Thank Your Donors Too Much?

The answer may surprise you.



By Tom Ahern

As a matter of fact, you *can* thank too much!

A committed donor recently e-mailed this message to the nonprofit she has been supporting:

“I wanted to tell you that it’s not necessary, or even desirable, to keep sending me thank-you letters every month for my little monthly donations. I don’t need to get them, and I think it’s a waste of time and money on your part to send them every month. One thank you at the end of the year, with an official list of my donations for tax purposes, is sufficient for me – and, I’m sure, for most, if not all, your donors.”

That’s just one person’s opinion, of course. But in my view it’s clearly “actionable.” (That’s researcher-talk: It just means, “Yeah, this is valid feedback. We should pay attention.”)

Maybe it’s time to ask your donors – perhaps annually or every two years – about their communication preferences. I’d wait until *after* a donor has made a second gift. That way, the donor has had some experience of the kinds of stuff you’ll be sending.


Asking donors for their “personal communication preferences” is *never* a bad thing. It builds relationships. If you’re boring them, they’ll tell you to ratchet it down. If you’re pleasing them, they’ll tell you, “Keep ‘em flying!”

Forward-looking CRMs (customer-relationship-management systems) let you specify exactly which kinds of communication any specific donor wants to get. This is a fundamental customer-service issue.

Monthly thanks are a bit of a conundrum, I admit. Many people prefer giving to charities monthly. But sending someone the same thanks 12 times a year (even if it’s kinda wonderful) gets old fast.

The chemical principle beneath all this is simple: When people make gifts, their brains release three pleasant drugs (dopamine, for example). So, reasonably speaking: Would donors rather get that “philanthropic high” 12 times a year – or just once (because they gave annually instead of monthly)?

The answer seems clear: 12 times is better than once. But – big caveat – if a charity’s boring, repetitive, predictable, robotic method of thanking people is maybe (who knows?) even *suppressing* that monthly release of chemicals (as it seems to be with the donor who asked her organization to lay off the thanking) . . . then, yup, you have to come up with an alternative.

The best way to find out if you’re pleasing or boring donors is, simply this: Find out what they prefer. And, the best way to do that? Ask them. 

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To Thank Or Not to Thank

Saying “thank you” in the right way, at the right time, is a crucial skill. Find details in articles such as these at NonprofitWorld.org:

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

The Perfect Gift for a Major Donor (Vol. 36, No. 1)

The Power of the Reverse “Thank You”: Influencing Others Made Easier (Vol. 40, No. 4)

This Is How It Feels when You Don’t Acknowledge a Donor (Vol. 37, No. 3)

What’s Wrong with Thank You? Plenty (Vol. 22, No. 2)

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

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

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

Revitalize Your Thank-You Letter with a Good Story (Vol. 37, No. 2)