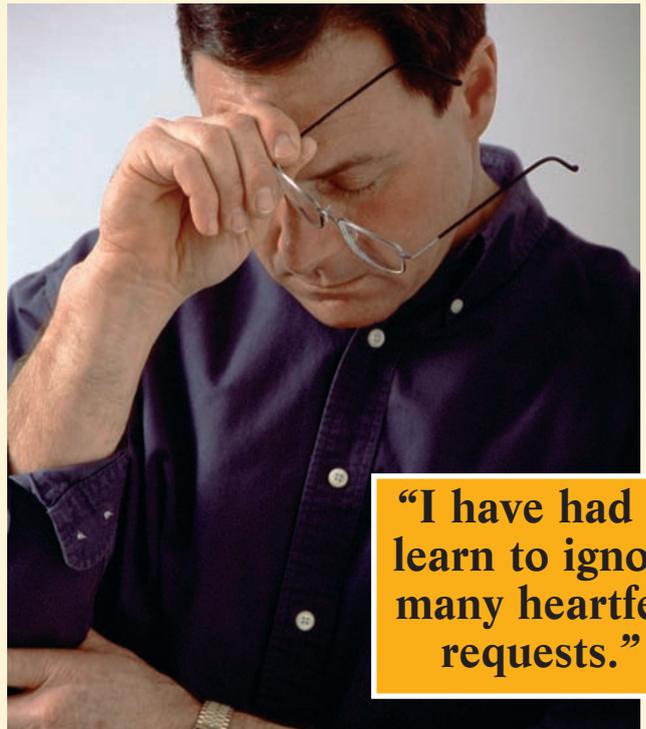




Reducing Donor Fatigue Syndrome

A new survey offers valuable insights into donors' feelings.

By Martha L. Barnes



“I have had to learn to ignore many heartfelt requests.”

In a recent study, one donor mentioned receiving hundreds of mail requests in one year: *“I understand the need to solicit funds, but last year I received nearly 350 mail requests, not to mention telephone solicitations — with multiple requests from most charities. Far too many. A donation often elicits a request for more money. This is the aggravating part of fundraising.”*¹

That comment conveys the danger of donor fatigue syndrome (defined as an on-going situation in which individuals are solicited by a plethora of organizations again and again). Here are some ramifications of the problem:

Smaller and less well-known charitable organizations in dire need of support may suffer. A participant in the same study explained: *“I now limit my donations to the well-known, tried-and-true organizations. I don’t know whether to trust everyone who comes to my door or who sends me glossy brochures.”* As donor fatigue becomes more severe, potential donors are less likely to make commitments to unknown organizations.

Donors often decide to make just one donation per organization a year. In other words, repeated

asks won’t necessarily yield additional donations. In fact, repeated asks may have a negative impact. For example, one donor said, *“I tend to make one donation per organization in mid year. However, they send numerous requests before and after. It is a waste of their (my!) money. I have had to learn to ignore many heartfelt requests — I just can’t give to everyone! It has made me more ‘hard-hearted.’ I don’t like that, but there seems to be no alternative.”* This sentiment was echoed in many other responses, such as the following: *“I have decided to make only one donation per year and not to respond to telephone requests.”*

The entire nonprofit sector receives a black eye. When donors are frustrated by the way nonprofits operate, there’s a tendency to retrench support across the board. One donor reported: *“Requests for money fill more of my mailbox than legitimate mail does. It is increasingly annoying and tends to reflect unfavorably on all charitable organizations.”*

How Can We Cure Donor Fatigue?

Based on the views expressed by donors in the study, it’s imperative to address the issue of donor

fatigue syndrome immediately. To ignore the situation and continue with present practices will destroy the nonprofit sector’s most valuable resources, its donors. By inundating prospects and donors with solicitation requests, the field is creating a situation of frustration, irritation, and aggravation. This has detrimental effects for all nonprofits, because a frustrated individual isn’t one who will continue making donations.

Here are some strategies you can take to reduce the effects of donor fatigue syndrome, while still maintaining a high level of support:

- **Never thank a donor** for a donation and solicit another donation in the same mailing.
- **Solicit donations from individuals once a year.** A respondent in this research suggested that nonprofits ask for donations on the anniversary of the donor’s past donation. This strategy reduces the number of times a donor is asked while also personalizing the request a little more.
- **Reduce the amount of material you mail.** Donors are tired of the huge volume of charitable mail they receive. They also want their donations to be spent wisely. Efficient spending doesn’t include

CREATIVE FUNDRAISING IDEAS

Offer an Evening at the Spa

Arrange a discounted or donated evening at a spa, and ask your board members (and other supporters of your organization) to bring a few friends. When WomenVenture (St. Paul, Minnesota) tried this idea, they charged \$150 per ticket for the four-hour event in July and two tickets for \$250 when they tried it again in November. Both events, which together netted nearly \$10,000, included dinner, drinks, dessert, a fashion show, a professional makeup application, skin analysis, and the choice of one spa service (pedicure, manicure, facial, or massage). The November event encouraged teens to attend and gave them the option of coloring their hair and mixing their makeup. Contact sschwieber@womenventure.org or www.stevensoninc.com.

Expand Your Auction Online

To reach a greater audience with your auction, consider going online. Organizations that add an online auction to their live auction or gala event report a 25-100% gain in proceeds. Some tips: Link your Web site to your auction home page. Include a compelling description and a photograph or image suggestive of each item. Use your e-mail list to promote your online auction, and ask recipients to pass your e-mails to their friends. Keep your online auction open for at least three weeks. Encourage bidders to return to your online auction frequently. Send a "last chance" e-mail in the auction's final days. For more ideas, see www.cmarket.com.

Don't Overlook the Woman Next Door

Most nonprofits ignore the donor potential of wealthy businesswomen, who give a much higher proportion (just under 7%) of their income to charity than most other groups. African-American businesswomen are especially altruistic, donating an average of 10.1% of their income. The most generous donors tend to spend the most money on investments, pension or annuity contributions, and fees for professional financial advice and asset-management services, making it especially productive for fundraisers to get to know such advisors. For more information on this fruitful source of donors, see Thomas Stanley's *Millionaire Women Next Door* (Kansas City: Andrews McMeel Publishing, www.andrewsmcmeel.com).

multiple mailings.

- **Target fewer individuals.** Studies suggest that 10% of individuals make 90% of all charitable donations.² Such research makes a strong case for putting an end to mass solicitation mailings.

- **Use restraint with online appeals.** While soliciting via e-mail is a good way to alleviate mail and phone overload, take care not to add to an infestation of e-mail fatigue. Be sure your e-mail messages are relevant and wanted by recipients. Give them a chance to opt out of receiving e-mails, and respect their wishes.³

It's time for the culture of nonprofit work to change donors' perceptions of solicitation methods and lessen donor fatigue. Otherwise, the future of charitable organizations could be in jeopardy. ■

Footnotes

¹The intent of the research, conducted with a Canadian Symphony, was to understand donor motives

"I now limit my donations to the well-known, tried-and-true organizations."

— in particular, how incentives, involvement, empathy, social norms, and opportunity contribute to the philanthropic act of giving. Data were collected on 228 donors who returned questionnaires containing both open-ended and closed-ended questions. It was at the data analysis stage that the concept of donor fatigue syndrome emerged from the written comments as a vital issue for donors.

²See Crompton, J., *Financing and Acquiring Park and Recreation Resources*, Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics; Mixer, J., *Principles of Professional Fundraising*, San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass; and Prince, R. & File, K., *The Seven Faces of Philanthropy*, San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

³See "Spam Law a Mixed Blessing for Nonprofits" in *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 22, No. 2.

Resources

Katz, Wendy, "Tips for Testing & Analysis of Acquisition Mailings," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 3, No. 4.

Keller, Thomas K., "The Dirty Dozen: 12 Questions Nonprofit Leaders Ask about Direct-Mail Fundraising," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 19, No. 3.

Warwick, Mal, "How Big a Gift Should You Ask For?," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 17, No. 2.

Werner, Diane, "The Key to Direct-Mail Fundraising: Market Segmentation," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 10, No. 1.

These resources are available at www.snpo.org/members. Also see Learning Institute programs online: Resource Development (www.snpo.org/li).

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