



Top Five Tips to Improve Direct-Mail Fundraising & Cement Your Future

Unlock new donor dollars with these proven tactics.

By Brian J. Renda

Even in today's world of ever-changing technologies, direct mail is still the key medium for fundraising. Yet many nonprofits fail to make sure they're experiencing the greatest possible return on their direct-mail investment.

While there are many schools of thought on what makes direct mail effective, the bottom line is simply...*the bottom line*. A successful direct-mail campaign is one that adds dollars from existing donors and captures funds from new donors. Here are five tips to help you do just that.

1. Integrate existing channels. By using this simple but often overlooked method, you'll see an imme-

diately lift in your fundraising results. Why? Because you've probably already made the investment. Take a look at your Web site, talk to your PR department, gather all communications your organization sends, and *leverage* all you can from what's already taking place.

Direct mail is still the key medium for fundraising.

For example, what new publication or article in your newsletter is coming up? Develop a direct-mail offer around it. Pull quotes or photos from an upcoming publication to offset copywriting costs. In your direct mail, include great PR excerpts or newspaper clippings that

show how your organization helped someone in the donor's local community. Start a human-interest story or teaser in one medium, and compel donors to finish reading it by "watching for it in the mail" or going to your Web site.

Nonprofits often dismiss an integrated approach because they fear it's too costly. But integrating channels isn't what's expensive. That just takes creativity, teamwork, and marketing knowledge. The cost comes in building a multi-channel approach, which most nonprofits already have in one form or another. They all have Web sites, send out press releases, send direct mail, and so forth. All it takes to see higher returns is to coordinate these efforts.

Integration cuts fundraising costs by changing offline donors to online



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donors. In fact, integration is key to moving offline solicitations to less expensive electronic methods.

2. Empower your donors by giving them premium options. Premiums and even personalized premiums aren't new ideas. For years, organizations have sent address labels and other gifts to motivate people to give in return. Though premiums still work with older donors, you may need another approach for younger audiences. These younger donors scrutinize how you spend their contributions and could view sending dozens of labels as frivolous.

Instead, send teasers with the option of fulfilling additional premiums. For example, send one sheet of labels instead of three with a note that you want to maximize the donor's contribution by limiting expenses. Then offer more labels if the donor makes a contribution online or by mail.

Or give people the option of several back-end premiums instead of just one. New print-on-demand technology makes it cost-effective to print premiums when ordered rather than carrying large inventories.

Also, rather than asking donors to pay the cost of return postage, which has already proven effective, why not ask them to cover the cost of the entire package with their additional gift? The cost is low, and the new generation of donors will be happy you're up-front with them about how you're using their dollars.

3. Draw on the power of referral marketing. Your donors give because your cause is something they believe in, feel passionate about, have experience with, or connect to in their own unique way. But unless you give them a way to convey their feelings to others, they're unlikely to spread the message.

It's far less costly to let current donors distribute your material in a "viral" method than to uncover new donors on your own. Just like good salespeople, donors can recruit "leads" for you if you arm them with the tools to do so. For example:

- Send your donors greeting cards (bounce-back cards that connect recipients to those being served by your organization), which donors can send on to their family and friends.

- Provide online advocacy petitions that donors can sign and e-mail to others.

- Send two identical fundraising packages—one for the donor and one to be passed along to a friend. Imagine someone receiving a pile of solicitations from various organizations but then seeing a friend's handwritten note attached to one of those packages. Which one is most likely to be opened?

Your donors want a voice. They want to do more than sign a check. Give them the chance to help you, and you'll both benefit.

4. Know how much to mail. It's tempting to mail

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more pieces with the hope of getting more responses. Chances are, mailing more with the right strategy can indeed produce higher returns. Mailing blind, on the other hand, probably won't yield enough to offset the increased cost of mailing more.

Yes, you need to grow your donor base, but not without planning. To mail smarter, you must leverage demographic data. You need a database that tracks performance, predicts outcomes, manages constituent attributes, and provides marketing opportunities that support your long-range plans. Arming yourself with this information will let you grow your constituency and, ultimately, your base of long-term financial support.

5. Spend extra effort on package design and branding. With increasing competition and donor mistrust, it's impossible to raise funds without raising awareness and credibility. You have seconds to stand

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out among the clutter of mail your donors receive each day. Potential donors are easily distracted, so it's crucial to give them a reason to "pause."

The only way to guarantee a response is to connect with donors emotionally, visually, or conceptually. Visual impact is more compelling than any other element of the appeal. When it comes to direct mail, never forget that a picture's worth a thousand words.

By making your packages look consistent and branding yourself across all communications, you're telling donors that you're a legitimate, well-run organization. By strategically placing your direct-mail piece and leading with a strong message, you're telling people that you have something in common with them and that you want to start a relationship. Remember, it's all about relationships, and these simple tactics can create powerful bonds with your organization's supporters. ■

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Brian Renda is president and CEO of Brickmill Marketing Services (800-535-3863, www.brickmill.com), one of the largest full-service marketing and creative agencies in New England. Organizations collaborate with Brickmill to create an integrated marketing vision with services such as brand design and development, interactive programs, direct marketing, fundraising, advertising, event branding, public relations, and more.

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.

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 and O for Opportunity: Exploring New Revenue Opportunities for Nonprofits (<http://www.snpo.org/lino>).

Creative Fundraising Ideas

Auction Off Spots in a Customized Calendar

Pet Paw-see, a small nonprofit that finds loving homes for animals (www.petpaw-see.com) raised funds with a themed calendar, created from a free online template at www.printingcenterusa.com. (The Web site provides a Market Smarts section for nonprofits.) To generate interest, Pet Paw-see told pet lovers they could bid for a chance to have their pets featured in the calendar, with a minimum opening bid of \$50. A local photographer volunteered her services, and the calendar layout was created from one of Printing Center USA's free online templates.

Create a Planned-Giving Page

Planned giving has the potential to be your greatest source of major gifts. One way to capitalize on this treasure trove is to add a planned-giving page to your Web site. Then publicize this page in as many places as possible. Make it easy for people to remember your organization in their wills by enrolling donors in a legacy club. They can provide details about their bequests on your planned-giving Web page. Organizations following this advice have seen great increases in the number of planned gifts they've received.

Beyond the Basic Picnic

A festive outdoor event is a great way to attract people and build relationships. Here are some ideas:

- Poolside picnic at a country club or someone's yard.
- Ant-free picnic fundraiser where you deliver baskets of food to donors' homes or offices.
- Nothing but desserts that are cool, refreshing, and lavish.
- Ballot-type invitation where guests vote for their favorite picnic fare in advance, then eat the top choices when they arrive.