

How Long Should Your Fundraising Letters Be?

Here's a proven way to improve your results.

By Jeff Brooks

It's an odd truth in direct marketing: Long messages work better than short ones.

Whenever I say this in public, a forest of hands goes up. How could that possibly be true? It must be an isolated incident!

But don't believe just me. Ask anyone with experience – especially testing experience – and they'll confirm it. Longer letters do best in about 80% of tests.

There are exceptions, where a short message does better:

A short but well-executed message will usually do better than a long but sloppily prepared message with no clear call to action.

If the message is about a major disaster or other news event that everyone is experiencing, a short message can do very well. I've seen the short version do better than a long version in this situation.

An organization with a very strong brand can sometimes do well with a short letter. The Salvation Army, for example, sends nothing but a very short message on its reply coupon. But the Salvation Army is a super-brand and can break a lot of fundraising principles that would sink most nonprofits.

A short message is risky. A long message (two or more pages) is a better bet almost every time. There's zero controversy about this among knowledgeable fundraisers.

We don't know why a longer message works better. You can't just ask donors; they don't know the answer. (Most people, when asked, will tell you they're confident they'd be more likely to respond to a shorter message!)

But here are some theories that might explain the longer-is-better phenomenon:


It's nearly impossible to cram everything that needs to be said into a very short message. Most short messages are omitting critical content.

Most readers will read about 10% of whatever you put in front of them. When the message is long, they get what they need.

Whether they read the whole message or not, the very fact that it's long persuades some readers that it's important.

Most donors are older people; older people are readers; they reward you for giving them something to read.

Most people read so inattentively that they simply miss the point of a short message because it appears only once.

These are just theories. But this we know: You will almost certainly raise more money with a longer message than with a shorter one. 

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Continue Your Journey

A huge amount of research exists in the field of direct marketing. The results offer great clues to success in fundraising. For instance, take a look at articles such as these at NonprofitWorld.org:

Beyond Common Sense: Proven Tactics for Direct-Mail Fundraising (Vol. 25, No. 5)

The Mysteries of Postage-Paid Envelopes (Vol. 14, No. 1)

How to Add an Emotional Hook to Your Fundraising Letters (Vol. 37, No. 1)

The Dirty Dozen: 12 Questions Nonprofit Leaders Ask about Direct-Mail Fundraising (Vol. 19, No. 3)

The Power of Story: Bring Your Brand to Life (Vol. 34, No. 4)

Choosing the Right Typeface Means Cash for Your Cause (Vol. 15, No. 6)

What Are the Three Most Boring Words in Fundraising Appeals? (Vol. 36, No. 2)

Improve Your Direct-Mail Outcomes With Advanced Analytics (Vol. 38, No. 2)

