# Year-End Appeals for Procrastinators

How to write a successful year-end appeal with limited time

# About this Guide

To raise more money online at year-end, you need a great appeal that grabs donors' attention, drives urgency, and inspires them to give. How do you create fundraising letters that stand out and get results?

We've got you covered.

This short guide will give you practical tips for:

- Focusing on the key things donors want to know
- How to tell a compelling—and effective—story
- Crafting an irresistible call to action
- Simple tactics for improving donor conversion and increasing your average gift size

Ready to create your best fundraising appeals ever? Let's get started!

# First Things First

Before digging into your fundraising appeal, let's take a step back to understand your audience, the timing of your emails, and last year's appeal results.

## Audience

Who is the audience you're trying to reach? Are you attempting to activate lapsed donors? Younger donors? Turning annual donors into monthly donors? Have a target in mind and do your research on what makes your particular audience unique. You can then tailor your appeal to make it more effective.

Tip: Use the information you have in your donor management system to segment your donorbase so you can better tailor messages to these groups of donors.

## Timing

When will you send your appeals and how often? Consider holidays and other events that may affect how likely your messages will be opened and read. Remember that it will likely take more than one appeal during a campaign to get a substantial number of donors to act. Decide how many appeals you will send in the month of December and how often.

## Past Performance

As you craft your appeals, don't forget to look at previous campaign performance in your donor management system and how they performed. Look at open rate, click-through rate, as well as completed donations and total donation amounts over time. Note any trends and apply your learnings to your next appeal. You're likely sitting on a goldmine of data that will help you reach more donors!

# The Most Important Ingredient

While it's important to remember all of the components of an effective fundraising appeal (a clear call to action, a sense of urgency, statements about what a donation will do), what will ultimately make your appeal stand out is an attention-grabbing, emotionally compelling, authentic story.

Why are stories so important?

- Stories have been a natural form of communication for thousands of years.
- Stories allow us to feel by creating an emotional (and oftentimes physical) reaction—think about a tearjerker movie or suspenseful novel.
- Stories are proven to be easier to remember (in fact, 22x more memorable than straight facts).
- Stories also are more likely to be shared, which is important for spreading your message beyond your core supporters.

Your cause's story is the heart and soul of your fundraising letter. It's how your appeal will have a personality that allows you to connect with your donors and inspire them to give. Without it, your appeal will read like many other cookie cutter letters your supporters will receive.

As you plan your appeal, think of your organization's most interesting and moving stories, and then distill them down into key talking points that you can insert in your fundraising letters to make your work come alive in the mind of your donor.

# The Key Characteristics of Your Online Ask

Once you have a good story on which to base your fundraising ask, it's time to think about how to frame that story in a way that helps donors take action once they're inspired to give. Beyond the mechanics of your appeal, it's important to include these characteristics in every ask:

## Clarity.

Keep your email appeals as simple as possible, both in format as well as in language. Offer clear statements about what a gift can do, as well as what action you want your reader to take: donate! Remove anything that causes confusion or weighs down your message.

## Specificity.

When your appeals are specific, they can be more relevant, interesting, and authentic. Tell your donors exactly what they will support, why it matters, how much they should give, and how they can complete their donation online.

## A Sense of Urgency.

It's crucial to create a sense of urgency and immediacy in your appeal. Why should donors give now? What will happen if they act immediately? What might happen if they do not? You can create a sense of urgency for donors with a deadline or by introducing a matching gift

## A Trustworthy Messenger.

Consider who will tell your story or sign your appeal. The messenger is often as important as the message. Who are the messengers that wield more influence than you when it comes to your organization? It may not be your executive director. Stuck for ideas? Here are 10 alternate messengers for your next appeal.

# How to Stand Out in Your Donor's Inbox

### Make it visually appealing.

If your emails look like every other message in your supporter's inbox, you're making it easy for readers to ignore you. Spend as much time designing your emails for your readers' inboxes as you spend writing the contents of your email.

**What you can do:**  Create subject lines that make them want to open and read your message, and think about what shows up in the preview pane and from whom your email is sent. No one wants to get an email from "donotreply@thisnonprofit.org".

### Remember that giving is personal.

Charitable giving among donors who regularly or sometimes give to new causes/charities is heavily motivated by affiliation and existing donor knowledge of an organization and is somewhat unresponsive to solicitation.

**What you can do:** Don't try to blast your message to the "general public" and expect successful results. Use your donor management system to tailor your outreach for different segments—different audiences will need different messages to be convinced to give to your cause. Use your nonprofit's market-ing efforts and fundraising materials to make the connection between your work and the affiliations and identities your community cares most about.

### Show the real impact of a potential gift.

When making a charitable donation to a nonprofit, donors are interested in information beyond metrics of financial stability (such as fundraising and overhead costs). As many as 75 percent of donors use information about the nonprofit's impact, and 63 percent use information about the social issue the nonprofit addresses.

**What you can do:** In your fundraising appeals, make a clear tie between a donor's gift and what that donation will accomplish. Make it easy for donors to find information about the results of your work on your website with benchmark reports about your issue area, annual reports, and updates on your programs. Once they've found this information, make sure it's simple to use by presenting your results in easy-to-understand formats like one-page summaries, fact sheets, and graphs.

## Offer evidence of trust and transparency.

Most donor research relies on disclosures from the nonprofit, peer recommendations, 3rd-party endorsements. Donors use multiple sources to gather information instead of relying heavily on one particular source. Donors who frequently or occasionally look for information about nonprofits use the nonprofit itself as the most common source, followed by friends or family, and then independent third-party organizations.

**What you can do:** Provide information about your impact in multiple locations and formats. Include third-party ratings, such as a Charity Navigator or GreatNonprofits badges, in your fundraising appeals, on donation pages, and throughout your website. Encourage your supporters to spread your message by providing them with easy ways to share, recommend, and review your organization.

## Provide a feeling of connection to your charity.

For your appeals to be effective, you must answer the question of "Why me?" Your need alone is not enough. You are competing with many messages and many appeals. Think about why your cause is personally meaningful to your audience.

**What you can do:** Understand why your donors give. Invite them to tell you their stories to gain insight on what motivates people to support your programs. In-person events, thank you phone calls, and online surveys are all easy ways to collect this information.

Also, be sure to segment and target appropriately. Don't use the "spray and pray" method of marketing to win support for your cause. Tailor your

messages to speak to each type of supporter. In addition to personalizing emails with your reader's name in the subject line or greeting, segment and tailor your emails to align with their experience with your organization. Treat recurring donors different from those who haven't given. Send program-specific information to those supporters who have indicated a passion for a particular part of your mission.

## Make it mobile friendly.

Over half of all email opens now happen on mobile devices, so it's critical for your emails to be easily opened, read, and actionable from smartphones and tablets.

**What you can do:**  Be sure to simplify your outreach, increase font sizes, and make your buttons and calls to action easy to click with a fingertip or thumb. Applying mobile friendly design principles to your emails will make your organization's messages easier to read and act on, no matter how they're being read. Furthermore, be sure your online donation page is mobile friendly so when donors read the email on their mobile device they can instantly and easily make a gift.

# A Simple Template for Your Year-End Fundraising Appeal

Ready to put it all together? Now that you have your sights set on a fabulous appeal that shares your story, focuses on the donor, and is ready for inbox stardom, use this template to jot down the key parts of your appeal letter.

## From

Your appeal should come from a real person, or at least use the full name of your organization.  Acronyms, technical jargon or a "do not reply" style email address will make your message more likely to be deleted.

## Subject Line

The subject line is the most important part of your email appeal. Its purpose is to make your message stand out in a reader's inbox and entice them to open your message. Keep your subject line short, relevant and compelling. Front load your subject line with key terms in the first 50 characters, to account for the way different email programs might display your message.

## Salutation

If possible, use the recipient's name, spelled correctly.

# The emotional, interesting opening

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Don't start with the typical "we need your help".  Open your appeal with a vivid, emotional image that illustrates the need or the impact a gift could have.  Or show supporters the difference they are making. Try to focus on an individual story rather than overwhelming the reader with mind-numbing statistics or massive scale.

# 1st call to action

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Include a short call to action that allows readers to quickly click make a donation. Vague calls to action like "support us" are more likely to confuse than to motivate.

_Example:  "Please make a year-end gift so more children like John can graduate this year" with a big donate button next to that call to action._

# How to help

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Provide detail about what the donor's gift could make possible. Clarity and specificity are vital. This is where you can suggest a gift amount and designation.

_Example:  "Your gift of $100 will mean one student like John will be tutored every day till graduation this school year," or "Your donation will help us buy_

*sonogram machines and vitamins to ensure every mom and baby is healthy."
Include information on the specific impact a donation will have, but be sure
not to mislead your reader if donations will go into a general fund instead of
being earmarked for a specific individual.*

## 2nd call to action

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Provide a clear call to action that tells the donor exactly what you want them
to do and how they can do it.

*Example "Click here to make your tax-deductible donation now."*

## Closing

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Thank the reader for their attention and sign a real person's name, along with
several ways for your donors to contact you:  i.e., by replying to your email,
your phone number as well as listing your physical address.

## P.S.

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In the P.S. reinforce the sense of urgency.

*Example, "Remember, you are our best partner in advocating for abducted
children. Please give now so we can train 600 police this year" or "We are
nearly to our goal. Your gift will help put us over the top. Thanks for your
support."*

# Beyond Your Appeal

After you get your appeal just right, your work doesn't stop there. Don't let your efforts go to waste by ignoring what comes after the appeal.

Your online donation experience should:

**1. Make giving easy.**  This can't be stressed enough, so we'll say it again and again. Don't make your donors think too hard about giving to your organization. This includes enabling your supporters to quickly interact via mobile and social: does your donation page offer donors easy ways to give and share on the go?

**2. Keep donors in the moment of giving.**  When a prospective donor lands on your donation page, each component should reinforce their decision to give while making it quick and easy to complete their donation. This means it should closely match your nonprofit's branding, campaign materials, and message. Make your donation page an extension of the conversation you're having with your potential donors so there's no disconnect.

**3. Start your donor relationships off right.**  Donor retention really begins before a donation is made. If it's confusing, difficult, or frustrating to give to your cause, you're not starting your donor's experience with your organization on a positive note. Your donation page should also help you quickly thank donors with a powerful post-donation experience and email acknowledgement, plus give you the information you need to cultivate these supporters over time.