

eBook



How to Make the Case for Giving

8 Steps to a Compelling Fundraising Appeal

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8 Steps to a Successful Fundraising Appeal

A fundraising appeal without a compelling case for giving is just words on a page.

For fundraising appeals to indeed appeal, fundraisers must master the art and science of creating a rock-solid case for giving—persuasive content that inspires donors to give and give now.

Fundraisers can no longer rely on “we need your donation” as a persuasive argument. Just saying your organization needs support is not enough, particularly in an economic climate when donors are making hard decisions about where to invest their philanthropic dollars.

So what’s the secret? Follow these eight steps to a winning case for giving:

Step 1: Think Like Your Donor

Step 2: Tell a Story

Step 3: Avoid the Magic Black Box

Step 4: Answer the Question “Why Now?”

Step 5: Answer the Question “What For?”

Step 6: Answer the Question “Who Says?”
10 Ideas for Compelling Messages

Step 7: Be Credible

Step 8: Make it Channel Appropriate

Step 1: Think Like Your Donor

Fundraiser's amnesia—that's what happens when fundraisers forget what it's like to be a donor and think about marketing the organization from the inside out rather than from the outside in.

The causes of this form of amnesia include:

- Long-winded internal meetings
- Little direct communication with donors
- Fundraising plans based on strategic plans
- A wish to tell the world everything about everything your organization does

If you're in the fog of amnesia, snap out of it. Think like your donors and you'll raise more money by creating a message that appeals to their interests, not just those of your organization. Here are three simple tips for thinking more like your donors:

1. Talk to them.

You should be frequently talking to your donors. Survey them once a year to find out what interests them most. Engage with them on Facebook. Call your donors to thank them for their support and ask them more about why they support your organization. What they tell you will give you a good idea of which messages resonate the most with them.

2. Watch their online behavior.

In addition to talking to donors, you can find out which messages resonate best with them by monitoring which emails and Web content your donors interact with. If your donors are clicking on content and responding by taking action or donating, that message is engaging them.

3. Remember the iceberg metaphor.

Organizations are like icebergs. There's a lot beneath the surface but only a little visible at the top.

This should mirror your messaging strategy. Donors are usually inspired and interested in a small portion of the work your organization actually does. Make that the focal point of your appeals.

- World Wildlife Fund does a whole lot more than save pandas, but saving pandas is at the top of its iceberg.
- Greenpeace does a whole lot more than protect whales, but protecting whales is at the top of its iceberg.

What topic is at the top of the iceberg for your donors? Make sure that's front and center in your messaging.

Step 2: Tell a Story

Now that you know which messages are resonating most with your donors, tell them a story that helps make those messages come alive.

One screenwriting guru, Michael Hauge, boils all stories down to three elements:

- Character
- Desire
- Conflict

That's it. If you have those three components, you have a story.

Character

Character means our protagonist (or hero, loosely defined). Roughly 99% of the time the protagonist of a good story is a single individual or animal.

Who is your protagonist? A beneficiary? A field staffer? A volunteer?

Desire

Desire doesn't mean lust or greed, but a burning need to change the protagonist's world somehow—to obtain something, to get rid of something bad, to restore order to the protagonist's universe, or to escape a threat.

What does your protagonist want in the world? What do they want to change?

Conflict

Conflict simply refers to the obstacles that prevent the character from getting whatever he or she wants. The essence of every story is what the protagonist does and must endure to get what he or she wants.

What conflicts arise for your protagonist?

The Fourth Element: Emotion

If character, desire, and conflict make up the frame and engine of the car, then emotion is the fuel. If your reader or listener is not emotionally engaged in your story, you don't have a story. Your story must make your reader feel something. Emotion, not logic, is the stuff of drama.

What emotional elements can you incorporate into your story? Love? Fear? Grief? Empathy?

How It Works Together

First, introduce a character.

Then detail the obstacles and conflicts your character faces when working toward a goal. This is the real meat of the story, when your character is struggling to get a law passed, a visa for a refugee, emergency surgery for an animal. It's not clear if the character will prevail.

Next, the character either prevails or fails. At the end is a moral and call to donate.

To get you inspired, here is a fantastic example of an emotional story starring one protagonist: [Billy](#).



**Watch Billy's inspiring story.
Then donate monthly to become a Humane Hero for animals like him.**

Billy was used as a breeding dog in a puppy mill, tossed aside when he was past his prime and left to rot in a cage. He had been locked in that cage for so long, *the bars had rusted shut*—but his life changed when his rescuer, Adam, pried the bars open and gave him a second chance.

Watch Billy's story and become a **Humane Hero for animals like him by making a monthly donation today**. Your monthly gifts will be used to shut down puppy mills, end dogfighting, stop the Canadian seal hunt, reduce the suffering of animals on factory farms, and so much more. Plus, you'll receive updates and action alerts so you can take quick, simple actions for animals each week.



Help us continue our lifesaving work for animals. Make your monthly donation today using the secure form below. If you'd prefer to make a one-time gift instead [click here](#).

Step 3: Avoid the Magic Black Box

Storytelling master Andy Goodman warns nonprofits to avoid the magic black box when crafting a story.

The magic black box is a plot device similar to deus ex machina, when a seemingly challenging problem is suddenly and abruptly solved with the intervention of a new character (for example, your organization).

Example

Protagonists: Sandy and her daughter Chloe are homeless.

Desire: For Christmas, Sandy wants a safe place for her and Chloe to live.

Conflict: Sandy is struggling with mental illness and has trouble keeping a job.

Black box: Organization X enters the picture and Sandy and Chloe live happily ever after.

- To avoid black box syndrome, share specific details about how you are helping your beneficiaries—in this case, Sandy and Chloe.
- What support systems do you put in place?
- How do your services make an impact? What are some setbacks you might face in your efforts?

This will add credibility and sustained engagement to your story.

Step 4: Answer the “Why Now?”

Most people donate on two occasions. The first is toward the end of the year when people have more charitable mindsets and are looking to make year-end tax contributions. The other is when there’s a crisis, such as the Oklahoma tornadoes.

At other times, 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?

Here are five ways to build a sense of urgency in your next fundraising appeal:

1. Set a deadline.

As any procrastinator knows, nothing concentrates the mind like an imminent deadline. People are far more likely to give or take action as the deadline approaches. Make sure to publish this deadline on landing pages, donation forms, and fundraising appeals.

2. Make it close.

When people sense you’re close to the finish line of a goal, they are more inclined to help you cross it. If you’re close to your goal, show people how they can put you over the top. Illustrate this by using fundraising thermometers or tickers in your emails and on your donation forms.

3. Create scarcity.

When people feel an opportunity is running out, they are more inclined to take action. “Get your tickets now—only 10 seats left at our gala!” is better than “attend our gala!” You also can create exclusive giving levels or thank you gifts with limited availability.

4. Be specific.

It’s easy to say no to something hard, and it’s hard to say no to something easy. Make your call to action clear, quick, and easy and people will be more likely to act now.

5. Build a campaign or join one.

A coordinated campaign can help supporters feel like they’re participating in something bigger. If you don’t have a campaign planned, think of how you can leverage seasonal or current events to help create a sense of urgency. Consider joining a giving day or larger organized fundraising event for your region or issue to help rally your community for support and create buzz around your desired action.

Step 5: Answer the “What For?”

People know you’re a nonprofit organization and that you need donations to help your cause. But where exactly is the donor’s money going? What will they get in return for their donation—personally and in terms of your programs?

- Don’t just focus on need; focus on specifically explaining the impact a donation will make. Explain in tangible, vivid terms how donations will be put to use.
- Show people that your organization is a good steward of funds and will use their money efficiently.
- Clearly show which programs are being helped by a donation or what good is going to result.
- Avoid talking about big numbers, mind-numbing statistics, or intangible outcomes.

Just how much do personal connections influence giving?

Research has shown that when people have a personal connection to a cause (or know someone who does), it can lead them—and others—to be more supportive.

In one study, research subjects were told different stories about a college student. In one case, the student’s parent suffered a heart attack. In another case, the student’s parent had been diagnosed with cancer. When the student graduated, he went to work for either the American Heart Association or the American Cancer Society. Some research subjects got a scenario that matched the parent’s condition and some did not.

Research subjects were then asked how they would react if the student invited them to a volunteer event. When the event was directly related to the student’s personal experience, people were sympathetic and said they would have a hard time saying no. When the event was not—for example, the student whose parent suffered a heart attack was advocating for the Cancer Society—the effect was not the same.

Personal connections and stories have a big effect on giving. If you’ve got them, share them.

Step 6: Answer the “Who Says?”

The messenger is often as important as the message.

People tend to do what other people are doing. Tap into that by using trustworthy messengers—those you’ve actually helped or other donors instead of just you. People say friends and family are the most influential in determining where they give money, so also think about how you can get your supporters to speak for you among their own circles of influence.

Throughout your communication channels, strive to have these three kinds of messengers:

- People on the front lines of your work who can speak authentically about the change they see.
- Influential supporters who will champion your work within their circles.
- People with credibility and authority who can attest to the quality of your organization and your work.

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? Whom should you tap to talk about you?

10 Ideas for Finding Nonprofit Messengers

Make sure you’re not the only one saying your work is great!

1. People who have been helped by your organization
2. Donors
3. Volunteers
4. Fans
5. Caseworkers or support staff
6. People with firsthand experience living with your issue
7. Third-party rating agencies or charity watchdogs
8. Partners
9. Kids who care about your issue
10. Local leaders

Step 7: Be Credible

A case for giving must be credible. Add credibility to your cause by putting the following front and center throughout your case for giving communications:

- **Testimonials from other donors, celebrities, or authority figures.**
Messengers who are not you assure donors that you have external stamps of approval. Influential supporters who will champion your work within their circles.
- **Seals of approval.**
Has GuideStar or Charity Navigator awarded you four stars? Has the Better Business Bureau endorsed you? Put their graphics on your communications.
- **Transparency graphics.**
Include simple pie charts of where your money comes from and where it goes.

Social proof is the powerful idea that if we think everyone else is acting in a certain way, then we're likely to act that way, too. People are conformists by nature, and we take cues about how to think and what to do from those around us. Social norms fuel entire industries. Would the fashion world be able to motivate us to buy a narrower tie or a longer skirt this year if we didn't care what people think?

Here are some ways you can generate social proof for your cause:

- **Use fundraising tickers.**
Once you get some critical mass going, show how many people are giving in real time.
- **Count your community.**
Show how many people have taken action to create a sense of a growing community of like-minded people.
- **Use testimonials.**
Quotes from people talking about why they support you are powerful. Other people are often your best messengers.
- **Use social norms.**
In your call to action, choose wording that demonstrates that others are already participating: "Join millions of other generous Americans," or "hundreds of other concerned members in your community."

Step 8: Make It Channel Appropriate

Now that you have your amazing case for giving, be sure to compile these elements in the appropriate format for different marketing channels. We recommend that you package your case for giving as follows:

- **1,000+ Words: Direct Mail Piece**
Include all of the elements we've covered so far.
- **250 to 300 Words: Email Appeal**
Include all of the elements above, but make them shorter and punchier. Remember: People don't read emails, they skim them.
- **50 Words: Home Page Feature**
Include a great photo, why now, what for, and credibility graphics.
- **50 Words: Donation Form**
Include a great photo, why now, what for, and credibility graphics. Make sure you're including the most compelling information on your donation form.
- **15 Words: Facebook Post**
Include a great photo, why now, and what for. Focus on getting your Facebook audience to take the next step.
- **10 Words: Twitter Post**
Include why now and what for. Your job is to inspire your Twitter followers to share and click through.

Remember

- Avoid “fundraiser’s amnesia” by stepping into your supporters’ shoes. Talk with them directly—by phone or via social media, for example—to learn which of your organization’s messages is central in their minds.
- Make your message come alive through compelling stories that include three key elements: character, desire, and conflict. Add a strong emotional angle—love, fear, grief—to further connect people to your story.
- Spark giving by creating a sense of urgency, such as setting a short deadline to donate or offering a limited number of tickets to an event. Make the call to action clear, quick, and simple to complete.
- Offer tangible, specific information about where people’s money is going and what they’ll get in return.
- Once they feel connected to your organization, encourage them to promote your mission to their friends.
- Add credibility to your cause by including testimonials from donors, seals of approval, and transparency graphics that show the impact of a person’s gift.

Avoid These Common Pitfalls

- Not clearly articulating your purpose and your plans/vision
- Making claims that are not supported with clear evidence of previous impact
- Creating over-sentimental pleas that do not match the cause, need, or urgency of your mission
- Focusing on budget (shortfall or pipe-dreams) rather than on achievable actions and impact

Essential Elements of a Case for Support

State clearly:

1. The problem/opportunity you address

This section includes the issue at hand -- getting at the why you do what you do and why your reader should care.

2. The solution you offer

Your vision and mission statement are important, but also be specific about the programs and services you provide to address what would be missing if you did not exist.

3. Your capability to address the problem

If you have a long history of service and impact, be sure to present these here; if not, share the story of the founder/founding team, how he/she recognized the issue and what compelled him/her to respond.

4. How/why you are best suited to address the problem in the way you do

Perhaps others offer similar services in other locales, have limited capacity to address issues, or do not understand the issue in the same way

5. What resources and funds are required to offer this service

Present a well-thought out and clearly defined budget.

6. How you will obtain these resources

Present the various revenue streams and collaborations that will be needed to offer the comprehensive service so that the potential donor understands how their investment relates to the whole.

7. The methods and time-line for giving

Clearly outline all needs and wish list items, the channels for donors to contribute, and the time frame for giving to optimize success.

8. Who is leading this project

Present the professional accomplishments of your board leadership, Executive Director, and administrative staff in a personable narrative.

