

Not-for-Profit Industry

You Can Stop Guessing About What Works in Fundraising and What Doesn't

When you add up fundraisers, their bosses, their boards, and assorted second-guessers, there are millions of opinions about how to raise money “the right way.”

For example, executive directors and board chairs who have never had to raise a penny through direct mail blithely pass judgment on direct mail. “I’d never read a four-page letter!” they declare. Confident. Unchallenged. And flagrantly uninformed.

To separate opinion from practices now proven, author Tom Ahren, sought out a range of fundraisers from all walks for his new book, [If Only You’d Known, You Would Have Raised So Much More](#). His goal was to provide conclusive answers to questions that continue to linger, though by now they should have been laid to rest.

He addresses 40 questions in his book. Here is a sampling of the insights veteran fundraisers shared with him.

DO NOT BE TIMID IN ASKING

Each year, scores of fundraising appeals written by newbies share a deadly habit: waiting to the end of the letter to make “the ask.” Big mistake; do not wait to ask. In fact, ask early ... within the first few sentences. Ask often ... in the middle, repeatedly ... and at the end, just before the signature. Then in the P.S. ask again. And on the reply device. And on the giving page of your charity’s website. Ask. Ask. Ask. Why? Because people do not read your appeal in a linear fashion. Their eyes flit like butterflies, seeking things of interest. And when you ask multiple times the chances your donors see what you want are significantly increased.

WHAT
YOU
NEED
TO
KNOW?



AROUSE EMOTIONS

In a contest between two appeals for the same charity, one logical and well-reasoned vs. one that’s packed with emotional hooks ... well, it is not really a contest. The emotional appeal will bring in far more money than will the rational appeal. Every time. Guaranteed. Because of the brain’s hard wiring. With the advent of Functional MRIs and other investigative tools in the late 20th century, neuroscientists were able to directly observe a phenomenon they suspected for more than a century: the dominance of emotion in human decision making. While your charity’s well-reasoned argument might get me thinking, it is your ability to touch my emotions that gets me giving. That is why professional copywriters always lead with emotion in their appeals to individual donors ... and then drag in some reason; not the reverse.

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DO NOT WASTE TIME “RAISING AWARENESS”

When you fundraise you tell people about your cause, you make them care about it, and they give you money as a result. And you know what, you raise money and awareness too. It is amazing, isn't it? Tobin Aldrich, who, among other achievements, led World Wildlife Fund UK to new fundraising heights, wrote in his blog: “One of those counter-intuitive things about fundraising is that people do not actually have to have heard about your charity before they respond to a fundraising ask. I've lost count of the times I've been told by smart, senior people with a marketing background in some famous company that the first thing <insert name of non-profit here> must do is get our name out or raise awareness of the cause. Only then should we start asking for money. So let's start with a big awareness raising campaign (hey, maybe we could get an ad agency to do it for free).” Misguided thinking says Tobin.

NEVER JUDGE A DONOR BY THE SIZE OF THEIR FIRST GIFT

A first gift shows that the person may have some interest in your mission. But it shows nothing about the person's true “giving capacity” or their ultimate lifetime value to your cause. “When Harvard did a study after their last campaign,” Jerry Panas pointed out in 2017, “of their 254 million-dollar donors, 2 out of 3 started with first-time gifts of \$100 or less.” The lesson? They are called “first-date” gifts for a reason. The real question is: will your charity be beguiling enough to win a second date, so that maybe a romance will blossom?

SEND THE SWIFTEST POSSIBLE THANK-YOU

Research shows that first-time donors who receive a personal thank you within 48 hours are four times more likely to give again. Thanking in 48 hours equals a 400 percent improvement in renewal rates. It makes sense. First-time donors are often ardent. But that ardor cools fast if you don't sustain it. It is like a campfire ignited from tinder. You nurse it. You feed it oxygen, blowing across it.

IGNORE THE FUTURISTS

For a couple of decades, fundraising futurists have droned on about the impending demise of direct mail, deeming it doomed and irrelevant in an increasingly digital age. As Mark Twain wrote a worried friend, “The report of my death was an exaggeration.” Fact (not opinion) #1: Direct mail is still by far the way most US charities, big and small, attract new, first-time, “first date” donors. Fact (not opinion) #2: Direct mail is how most US charities successfully ask their current donors to give yet again ... NOT via email (which recipients ignore, by and large) ... but via direct, physical, well-personalized, non-boring direct mail.

The preceding is an article by Tom Abren, author of [If Only You'd Known ... You Would Have Raised So Much More, What Your Donors Want ... and Why, Making Money with Donor Newsletters, Seeing Through a Donor's Eyes, and How to Write Fundraising Materials that Raise More Money.](#)

Contact Us

If you would like to discuss how Cole, Newton & Duran's not-for-profit team can help your organization with its tax, accounting, or consulting needs, please feel free to give me a call.

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