

Top Five Fundraising Appeals Mistakes & How to Avoid Them

By Heather Buchheim

YOU'VE HEARD THE DOOMSAYERS. Every few years some shiny new technology comes along, and they prophesize that it's the death knell of email fundraising. And every year, emails are still alive and kicking, raising tons of money online for your cause.

At least they ought to be. Email is still king, but there is no guarantee your emails are living up to their potential. Even the best-laid campaign plans can fall flat if you settle for lousy appeals. I'm talking about boring, impersonal, organization-centric writing. You do inspiring work—your writing should be inspiring too.

Fundraising is an uphill battle, especially in a rapidly changing online landscape. Don't make bad writing another hurdle in connecting with your donors and prospects.

What follows are the top five mistakes in bad email appeals and how you can avoid them.

1) Ignoring the Basics

There are many simple ways you can improve response to your appeals without analyzing your writing too deeply:

- **Don't skim on your email subject line.** If your subject line is ho-hum, your email gets archived or ignored, and the rest of what I am about to tell you won't count. Don't come up with just one subject line. Brainstorm a few. Test one or two on a small portion of your email audience if you have time. Ensure whatever subject line you choose does not get cut off in your readers' inboxes (50 characters or less is a good rule of thumb) and is not so wordy that they will gloss over it.
- **Don't write a novel.** This isn't the place for dense, lengthy paragraphs and complex prose. Emails must be painless to scan. Use short paragraphs—one to three sentences long—though you may be able to get away with longer if your story is really strong. Make sure to bold key phrases (like your case for giving) and links, which should also be underlined.
- **Don't bury the link to your donation page.** Put it early in the email, in the first few paragraphs, and in a short sidebar near the top of the email beneath a header with your logo.

Link the header and any images in the callout box to your donation form as well.

- **Don't confuse your readers with more than one ask.** Multiple asks, while tempting sometimes, will just divide your readers' attention with emails that say, "Sign this petition! Donate! Join us at our event!" And don't point to your latest blog post or an article about the issue. It will just drive your readers away from your donation form, and you may miss your chance to get their gift. Your only ask should be for money, and you should make it a few times.

Once you check these basic best practices off your list, take a look at your writing. Do these classic mistakes look familiar?

2) Neglecting Urgency

In an email, you only get a moment to catch your readers' attention. Don't squander the chance to really connect with them on a personal level and motivate them to make a gift to your cause. Urgency and timeliness are key drivers of response. Maybe it is a deadline, like the last day to meet a fundraising match from a supporter or midnight on December 31st, the last day for tax-deductible gifts to nonprofits. It could be a significant holiday that is especially relevant to your audience. It could even just be an arbitrary campaign deadline you set (the end of the month is a logical choice), and believe it or not, it really works.

Whenever your deadline is, your hook—the first sentence—should grab your readers' attention and not let go. They should feel like they will miss their chance to do their part to further your cause if they don't act this instant. Because odds are, if they close that email, they are not coming back. If you don't define the moment, your reader will be left wondering why you have wasted their time.

3) Writing like a Robot

People give because it feels good, not because they are running a logical cost/benefit analysis of their decision to give. That is why

people tend to respond to the story of one individual whose life has been affected by budget cuts versus millions of people affected. They connect with a story that has pathos and makes them feel something. Then they act. The arguments and statistics that work

KEEP IT CONVERSATIONAL, AND REMEMBER: IT'S NOT ABOUT YOU.

in a press release or help secure a policy win don't necessarily work here. Giving is rooted in an unconscious impulse, so tell your readers why they should feel sad, angry, inspired, or outraged. This is personal. Use words like you and me—not us, we and them.

You also want to show—don't tell. Use vivid visual descriptions and unexpected, specific details that paint a picture for your readers. Every word has to mean something, so skip the empty phrases and generic, cookie-cutter rhetoric that will put your audience to sleep. This is it. We have to fight back, now more than ever! Stand up! Your gift will make a difference! We're so close to our goal. Deadline. DEADLINE! If I had a dollar for every time I saw these phrases, I bet I would raise almost as much as they do. Almost.

4) Not Putting Your Audience First

Try and see things from your readers' perspective in all your communications, and ask yourself these questions: Is this relevant to my constituents? Can my readers write themselves into the story and stake their claim in the movement? What does it say about who they want to be in the world?

Odds are, your audience doesn't care too much about the launch of your redesigned website, so don't get too wrapped up in what is happening within your organization internally. Put your donors directly in touch with your cause so they can feel like they are the real heroes of the story. For example: "Give \$100 by September 1st to help give teens access to college education; provide nutritious meals to seniors; or save our park from being developed."

Another mistake appeal writers often make—and I'll be first to fess up to this one—is falling in love with your own words and getting excessively lyrical in your appeals. This runs the risk of overcomplicating things and having your readers get lost in the details before they even get to a donation form. So cut to the chase. Break up your sentences with commas and em-dashes so it reads like you would say it aloud. This isn't a long-winded, erudite academic paper. Keep it conversational, and remember: it's not about you.

5) Losing Sight of the End Goal

Just as you shouldn't assume your readers know or care about your work like you do, you can't assume they are connecting the dots between their involvement in your work and the goals you have set out to accomplish. What is your theory of change? You have to make a clear, accessible case—outlining the problem, your work as the solution, and how their support is critical to that work.

This is where you tell your readers how this fight is winnable and show (not tell) how their support really does matter. Explain in detail what their money will go toward immediately. You can do that by telling them that their \$25 will pay for an exam at a free clinic. \$50 will sponsor a high schooler on a summer internship. Give a goal, and make it feel significant but achievable. Again, this is about the big picture and your readers' place in the world, so don't lose the forest for the trees.

Putting it into Practice

If you are not sure whether your appeals are making these mistakes or making the grade, here are a few easy ways you can help improve your next piece of fundraising copy:

- **Read it out loud.** Your ear will catch disconnected flow, poor rhythm, and sentences that just don't make sense.
- **Look at just the text you have bolded.** Does it stand on its own if you don't read the rest of the copy closely?
- **Find any unnecessary words and remove them.** You have precious space in an email—subject lines especially—or on a webpage, so make sure you make every word count.

Here's to fantastic writing that lives up to your truly great cause. ■

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WANT TO LEARN MORE ABOUT WRITING APPEALS?

Check out these and other articles on appeal writing at grassrootsfundraising.org/archive.

Can this Letter be Saved? Strengthening a Fundraising Appeal by Karen Topakian

Fundraising Appeal Makeover by Nicole Hsiang

Four Essential Tips to Motivate Individual Donors by Mara Perez