

How to Thank Donors During a Crisis

By Lisa Schohl



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In the months ahead, most fundraisers plan to focus on keeping supporters rather than finding new ones, according to a survey released by the Association of Fundraising Professionals.

To keep donors giving, it's critical to make them feel appreciated and connected to your cause, experts say. Yet it can be tough for fundraisers to prioritize donor-relations efforts at a time when many groups are struggling to cover operating costs and meet a swelling need for their work due to the pandemic and the ensuing financial crisis.

Amid these challenges, some organizations are hurrying to solicit gifts from donors without making as much effort to protect the long-term relationship, says Lynne Wester, founder of Donor Relations Guru, a fundraising consultancy. "One of the things nonprofits have to consider is that we're in it for the long haul and that relationships happen and unfold over many years and decades," she says. "So thanking donors — and even more than thanking, telling them what their money is doing — is really important."

It's vital to do this as urgently as you ask for support, Wester says. "If you're saying this is an urgent need, then you need to spend and report back on the money probably within weeks and not months," she says. "But especially you should report back before you ever ask for any more money."

It's typically best to share updates using the same method of communication that a donor uses to give, Wester says. Many groups are relying mostly on digital communications these days because of the pandemic. If your nonprofit is one of them, try to incorporate videos and photos into your messages when you share results, she suggests, rather than just sending an email with text.

Here are more tips from a variety of fundraising experts that can help you thank and stay in touch with your supporters during these trying times so they'll keep giving even after the crisis ends.

Be vulnerable. Whether you are writing a fundraising appeal or a thank-you letter, you should adapt the tone of your message to reflect what people are experiencing and how they are feeling, says

Lisa Sargent, a fundraising copywriter and donor communications consultant. “What I tell people is, you say the bravest, truest thing that you can,” she says.

A [thank-you letter](#) that Sargent recently wrote for ChildVision, an educational charity in Ireland, offers an example. “It was simply a thank-you, from the heart of the CEO to supporters,” she says. In the letter, chief executive Brian Allen explains how the organization is continuing to help blind children and their families during the pandemic. He recognizes that he can't predict how the crisis will affect ChildVision's work moving forward but promises to share an update as soon as he knows more. “But for today, I just want to say thank you,” he says, and lists several specific things for which the group is thankful. The letter ends with a postscript that provides information about how to give but adds, “please know that you should never feel pressured to donate, by any charity.”

Put donors at the center of your message. “Some of the old [recommendations] tend to rise up during struggle,” Wester says. “And that is, you know, stop talking about yourself. Keep talking about the donors and their experience.” Don't assume you know what they are going through, she says, but show empathy and acknowledge that this is a “scary” time for donors and the nonprofit.

This includes recognizing that millions of Americans are unemployed, underemployed, or furloughed, she says. Don't communicate as though people owe your organization a gift.

Thank supporters quickly or explain why you couldn't. Sargent suggests saying thanks within about 48 hours of receiving a gift because this may increase your chances of getting another one. If your process has been delayed or altered because of the crisis, she says, acknowledge that in a warm way and explain the reason for the change.

For example, in the early weeks of the pandemic, some nonprofits were taking longer than usual to thank their direct-mail donors because the staffs couldn't go to the office and open mail as regularly, Sargent says. To address this, her clients added a postscript to late letters that apologized for the delay and explained that many of their employees were still working from home.

Improve your online acknowledgment process. “I would recommend every single nonprofit try to go to their website and make a test donation and watch what happens,” Sargent says, “because a lot of times you can identify cracks in the armor there.” Make sure that a page appears after a gift is made — what Sargent calls a “redirect page” — with a warm message of appreciation, not a dry confirmation notice.

In addition, send a thank-you email to people who give online, and if you have their permission, a direct-mail letter, too. (Getting supporters to communicate with you on more than one channel can lead to greater giving and loyalty, Sargent says.)

Call your donors just to say thanks. This gesture can help foster long-term relationships with donors and can even boost giving, says Michelle Powers Keegan, chief development officer at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation and Institute. The organization supports entities including a library and a museum, which have been closed during the pandemic. To help preserve jobs, the foundation enlisted employees in departments that were affected by the closing, such as visitors' services, to help fundraisers make thank-you calls to donors. The team has since made nearly 15,000 calls, which have been received very well, Keegan says.

Once donors realize the representatives are calling just to say thanks rather than to ask for money, Keegan says, they often open up and share things they have been going through, including having the virus.

These efforts are paying off, she notes. “We have had everything from someone in the middle of a thank-you call saying, ‘I’d like to make a gift to you right now’ to people sending in gifts.”

Nurture new donors. Sargent says some of the people who give for the first time during the pandemic may be “crisis donors” — those who are moved to give in response to great need. It can be hard to get these supporters to contribute again, she says, but you should still have a plan for thanking and cultivating all new donors so you can hold onto as many as possible.

Don’t ask new supporters for another gift in your thank-you message, she says. “But you have to have some way to try to foster a connection with them, report back to them, welcome them, and then give them the opportunity to give again once you’ve done those things right.”

For example, after you thank these donors, you could send them a letter with a copy of a recent newsletter. “That’s pretty quick and easy to do right now for a small staff,” Sargent says.

Recognize key donors generously. You may want to reconsider how you define major gifts this year, says Rachel Cyrulnik, principal at Raise Nonprofit Advisors, a fundraising consulting firm. “Someone who gives \$25k is like the new \$100k [donor], at least for this year,” she says. “So, treat them like a \$100k donor.”

One of Cyrulnik’s clients plans to organize “mini recognition events” to thank certain key donors for maintaining their giving level this year. Depending on the geographic location, the event could be a 20-minute Zoom call or a socially distanced visit to thank the supporter with her family, or whomever she wants to invite, and talk about her vision for the nonprofit.

Another organization had planned to hold an appreciation event for its capital-campaign donors this summer, Cyrulnik says, but now plans to send a few top leaders to donors’ homes to personally thank them and share an update on the project. “I think when it comes to solicitation, we’re always happy to go out and bring whoever is needed, but [it’s important] to kind of deploy a thank-you team for recognition as well,” she says.

Show appreciation for loyalty. Don’t just thank donors who make a new gift or give more, Cyrulnik says. Those who keep giving at the same level are critical for budget planning and should be thanked, too. “Call out that ‘you’ve maintained your gift even in a difficult environment, and we really appreciate that,’” she says.

If your organization lists supporters who give over a certain amount, she says, consider doing the same for people who have continued to give at the same level as before, no matter the amount. This can help motivate them to keep contributing, she says.

Provide hope. Share good news, Wester says, rather than focusing heavily on things your nonprofit and community have lost during this crisis. “People want hope,” she says. “So, what are the actions we’re taking to deliver that hope? And what are the things we’re doing to kind of be the stable force during the storm?”