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Donor Communications for Every Donor

By Emily Weisgrau

If you've written a grant proposal, you know that every funder requires a report at the end of the grant term. Some even want an interim report. They do this, of course, to make sure their grant dollars are being used as promised and in a way that aligns with their mission. And without that reporting, there's no chance of another grant in the future.

Individual donors typically aren't as demanding. But aren't they just as deserving? Donors at every giving level make careful choices about where to invest their limited charitable dollars. They want their gifts to make an impact in a way that aligns with their values. But, too often, we ask, then thank, then ask again, then thank again. Simply put, nonprofits don't report enough-if at all-to individual donors.

And it's hurting our organizations.

At the 2017 AFP International Fundraising Conference, Penelope Burk, author of *Donor-Centered Fundraising*, reminded attendees (I was one) that, "donors will stay loyal and give more over time if organizations *report back on accomplishments before asking again.*" [Italics are mine.]

If organizations invest in donor relations, it's typically for major donors. They give more, so we give more back. That's OK. But our donors at lower levels are the foundation of our gift pyramids and must be recognized more than once a year with a thank you letter. Fortunately, you can do this without high cost. Here are three ideas that cover print, web, and email:

- Rethink your thank yous. A handwritten thank you card from someone your organization

serves-a patient, a student, an artist in training-goes much farther than a template thank you from an executive director or board president. Gather your writers at least once a year for a thank-a-donor day and send your donors a *second* thank you note. You can't say it too much, and personal testimonials bring your organization's work to life.

- There's a good chance you're already reporting on the work of your organization online. Maybe you have a regularly updated news section on the website or post updates on social media. But you may have considered adding a visual timeline to your site. Free, open-source timeline widgets (like the one I've used from [KnightLab](#) at Northwestern University) provide an easy and dynamic way to aggregate your accomplishments and show them off not just to donors but to prospective donors too. Timelines work especially well for discrete campaigns, like a comprehensive or capital campaign, or other limited-term initiative. While the timeline should primarily include progress toward goals, be sure to feature major gift announcements too. Just be sure to balance them out with annual giving achievements, such as a point on the timeline at the end of each fiscal year that touts the number of donors and total dollars raised. You can lift up smaller gifts by noting the collective impact, such as "500 donors gave \$100 or less, totalling \$20,000 for our organization. That paid for [fill in the blank]." Reporting on specific accomplishments helps connect unrestricted gifts to tangible outcomes in donors' minds, and that builds trust. My team is currently in the process of building [a timeline for Swarthmore's comprehensive campaign](#) that will go live at the end of March, coinciding with the one year anniversary or our campaign's public launch.

- Email is great, and email is terrible. It's fast, it's cheap, and there is a ton of it. Fortunately, donors open emails from organizations they support at a higher rate than non-donors. They've invested in you, and they want to know what you're up to. You probably tell them by announcing upcoming programs, performances, events, or volunteer opportunities. Maybe you also have an email newsletter. But how often do you specifically connect your news to your donors' gifts? One simple way to do so is with an email impact report. At the end of each fiscal year, gather the best stories-anywhere from a half-dozen to 10 or so-from the past year that were made possible in whole or in part by annual gifts. Using headlines and images, create an easily-scrollable summary. Preface it with a statement of thanks that includes how many donors gave in the past year and how much. If you have enough news during the year, do a mid-year report as well. Here's [an example from Swarthmore College](#).

You can't visit every donor, but you can thank them more than once, you can report on how their gifts are making a difference, and you can build trust by demonstrating how your organization is accomplishing its goals and using charitable dollars as intended. Strengthening donor relationships through simple but effective communications creates the groundwork for a long-term relationship that breeds loyalty. Ultimately, that loyalty will yield increased annual gifts, conversion to monthly gifts, and more planned gifts.

Send me *your* best ideas for donor communications for possible inclusion in a future issue of *Philanthropically Speaking* at emilyweisgrau [at] gmail.com.

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