

## Communications overload: How much is **TOO** much for donors?

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I have recently had various conversations with communications directors who were concerned about overloading people with information from their charities.

What's interesting is that the folks I've talked with, when asked about their actual communications frequency, invariably responded along these lines:

- We send a quarterly newsletter - when we can.
- Our donors get a gift acknowledgment letter every time they give and our magazine twice a year.
- We're thinking about adding two appeals per year to our quarterly updates.

If you make similar statements, or have questions (or qualms!) about optimising your charity's communication frequencies, I hope you'll consider this fundamental principle: **People make time for the things they enjoy. Period.**

Worries about communications frequency are not the primary issue – as long as your charity's communications are doing the job they **SHOULD** be doing in engaging the hearts and minds of donors. In these few paragraphs I'll show you why most communications from charities to supporters are simply misguided and, therefore, failing to engage their intended audience.

First, let me dissuade you of the notion that you are overloading people with communications. I've been in this arena for thirty years and I can tell you with the utmost confidence that the most serious problem for charities is **UNDERWHELMING** their donors with their communications.

And I mean that both in terms of frequency and quality. While I won't say dogmatically that every donor should have a frequency of X number of contacts per year, I can say that Christian charities tend to be too timid in the number of times they contact their donors.

If people are interested enough to invest in your charity's projects, programmes or personnel, then they are naturally interested in what's happening as a result of their investments. Are they producing fruit? Are they making a difference? Does the charity value their partnership? IS THIS PARTNERSHIP WORTH MY TIME AND MONEY??

A significant number of donors, especially major donors, have an "investor's mentality" when it comes to their giving. And we actually do them a disservice when we assume they do not want to hear on a regular basis. This can be taken to indicate that their partnership doesn't really matter!

The issue of communications "overload" comes into play when a charity's communications fall into one or more of the following categories (my top 10 list of supporter communications "sins"):

1. EVERY communication donors receive is a solicitation – is asking for money.
2. There is little, if any, emphasis on, or appreciation for, the role the donor is having in the work of the charity.
3. The communications style is impersonal, lifeless, and boring.
4. The communications appear to have no specific objective other than to "connect" with the donor.
5. The content of the communications has no sense of vision, passion, challenge or PERSONALITY.
6. There is nothing of perceived value or relevance to the donor.
7. There is a continuing sense of predictability in every communication.
8. The communications are not written to help the donor recognise the part he or she plays in achieving results.
9. The communications dwell on the charity and its problems, rather than on opportunities and solutions.
10. The communications ignore the BENEFITS of continuing partnership that affect the DONOR, the charity, and the people who are served as a result of that partnership.

If you evaluate the various opportunities you have to really make a difference in this world, and those that give you the greatest pleasure, I am certain you will agree that you actually enjoy hearing about those opportunities on a regular basis.

We MUST NOT ASSUME that people don't want to hear from us. On the other hand, we MUST do everything possible to make communications not only

meaningful, but PURPOSEFUL, POWERFUL, PASSIONATE, and RELEVANT to the interests, needs and desires of the donors.

That's the formula for successful communications. Frequency can be tested to optimise according to donor preferences. But, I would suggest that a monthly frequency of contact is by no means too frequent- IF you can avoid the problems listed above.

**I'm not encouraging you to write "love letters" - but I want you to come close!**

Does a newsletter or magazine fit the bill as a donor communications vehicle? That depends upon how well the publication is constructed, whether it has clear objectives, is well written and designed, etc. But please understand that such publications are typically very broad and impersonal even with a personal cover letter.

You need to think in terms of reaching individuals with focused, personal communications - heartfelt person-to-person letters that fall into the classification "personal correspondence," like perhaps the letters you received from your wife or husband before you married. While we're not writing "love letters" to our donors we're wanting to come close!

Journalism does not communicate either from or to the heart as personal correspondence does. Business letters don't connect that way, either. In order to delight your donors you're going to have to think of them differently - and behave toward them differently. And you're certainly going to have to communicate with them differently.

A quarterly magazine or newsletter is an important element of any charity's communications strategy. But there is immense value in adding to your publications a monthly letter or e-mail, a note, etc. that zeroes in on timely, meaningful, relevant, exciting issues, projects, programmes, people, results, impact, opportunities that are designed to really connect with your "investors."

And I would be sure that every communication would underscore your appreciation for the role that donor is playing in accomplishing wonderful things by showing them very clearly, through stories, photos, testimonials, etc., just HOW they are making a difference.

Even in bad times, people tend to do (or read, or watch) the things they truly enjoy. Hollywood still packs in the cinemas. DisneyWorld has not closed its doors. Charities that are doing a GREAT job of communicating, engaging, motivating and delighting donors are prospering. **You can, too.**

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