

Ten Simple Truths about Direct Mail Every Fundraiser Should Know

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Despite the rapid growth of online communications direct mail remains one of the essential tools in a fundraiser's tool box for acquiring new supporters, soliciting support from present donors and strengthening the relationship between a charity and its donors.

Here are some basic truths about direct mail that can help you make the most of this fundraising and donor cultivation tool:

1. **Charities that raise most money from direct mail are those that *have a focused direct mail programme rather than an eclectic collection of appeals.***

True measures of fundraising success are not the response rate or total income of any mailing but rather an increase in the total number of gifts compared to previous years and overall income generated through direct mail.

The question is: What would you do to ensure that donors increase their giving frequency and the amounts they donate to your charity?

Well, one thing would be to vary the copy and design of your fundraising appeals, to make them more interesting and appealing to your supporters. Another thing would be to allow for adequate amounts of time between different mailings so that donors have time to respond.

2. **Fundraising appeals work best when there is a letter, a response form and a reply envelope.** These three elements are essential and other additions to your appeal packages are likely to reduce rather than increase response rates.

However, it is important to note here that the letter enclosed in the appeal pack should contain a simple and straightforward 'ask' – a direct invitation to the donor or potential donor to make a contribution to the charity. I know this seems obvious but too many appeal letters hint at 'the ask' but fail to issue a straightforward invitation to give.

3. **Thanking donors promptly and warmly is a key factor in ensuring the success of a direct mail programme.** Showing appreciation for their contributions helps donors to bond with your charity and makes them feel they are partners in your work rather than 'walking cheque books'.
4. **A charity's donors are more likely to stop giving because they have not been asked enough not because they have been asked too often!** Many Christian charities are reluctant to ask their donors more than two or three times a year fearing that they will stop supporting the charity if they are asked more often.

In our opinion, such fears unfounded, unless they are backed up by statistical data of increased donor attrition over a period of time caused by increased frequency in appeals.

Knowing how many 'asks' are right for your charity is not something that can be decided by looking at other charities but by testing the frequency of appeals with your database over a period of time and carefully tracking your donor's attrition and retention rates.

5. **Integrating newsletter and annual reports in a charity's direct mail programme is likely to increase the overall income.** Well-written and designed newsletters, magazines or annual reviews enable donors to see the bigger picture of what your charity is doing and encourage them to continue their involvement with your work.

Showing appreciation, gratitude and offering examples of how donor's gifts have made a difference can sometimes be an excellent way of generating additional income without direct solicitation. However, in order to achieve this - your charity's communications should be donor-centric rather than programme or charity-centric.

6. **Brochures, DVDs or other materials included in fundraising appeal packages are likely to reduce rather than increase response rates.** Sometimes, senior leaders of the charity insist that a particular brochure should go out with the fundraising mailing to reinforce its message. On most cases however, producing that additional piece slows down the process of getting the appeal out on time, adds to the appeal costs and the increase in response rates barely justifies the money spent on them.
7. **Good fundraisers give donors opportunities to give whatever amount they chose be it £2,000 or £20.** A fundraising appeal is in essence an invitation to participate in making a difference in the world through a particular charity's programmes or activities. That is why fundraising appeals should contain opportunities for different types of donors to give at the level they chose.

Successful fundraising programmes contain different types of appeals for different segments of the database asking for varying amounts of support rather than one size fits all!

8. **Emergency relief appeals are likely to generate more income than appeals for ongoing programmes or for general funds.** This is understandable since the emergency appeals have an element of urgent response and are often responses to disasters, etc. However, regular giving appeals or annual membership renewal programmes have higher retention rates and contribute towards creating higher donor lifetime value.

Here is a challenge for charities involved in emergency relief work that they need to invest in increasing the number of people giving regularly to their work rather so that they can retain their donors for the long term.

9. **Few donors who join a regular giving programme are likely to upgrade their gifts after a period of time.** Data from your charity's database is likely to confirm this trend – and show that further mailings to these donors to increase their giving are not likely to produce high response rates.

However, the good news is that those donors who increase their giving help offset the loss from donors who stop giving or decrease their support.

If most donors are not likely to increase their giving then it is important to ensure that your regular giving programme invites them to donate adequate amounts rather than the smallest amounts possible.

10. **If you are mailing less than 10,000 contacts testing different variations of appeal packages using random segments is not likely to produce statistically valid differences in response rates.**

This does not mean that you should not segment your database and use different types of appeals with different donor segments. What we are saying is that if your database contains less than 10,000 contacts you should not spend time or money unnecessary to test for example the size or colour of the outer envelope of a package with a relatively small random sample.

However, if your charity mails more than 10,000 at any given time then testing variations of fundraising packages with random samples of the database is likely to produce statistically valid results, help you reduce costs and increase the effectiveness of your fundraising appeals.