

Essential ideas for raising major gifts through direct mail

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Is your charity looking to generate increased income from major donors? Do you want to know what the key elements of a high value direct mail programme are?

If you answered 'Yes' to these questions then here are some insights that can help you start a high value direct mail programme.

First you must be prepared to ask yourself this question: **Will direct mail fundraising from major donors work for your charity?**

The answer is 'Yes' if your charity has a pool of current and prospective major donors who can be invited to make large donations by mail or converted to higher levels of giving.

Therefore, the first task of a fundraiser looking to develop a high value direct mail programme would be to identify donors who have given before and who appear to have the capacity to give larger gifts than the typical direct mail gifts.

For example, you might be looking for donors who have given say £100 - £1,000 in response to your previous fundraising appeals. Your objective will be to solicit larger gifts from them through targeted direct mail packages.

Furthermore, you will need **a compelling case for support** – an initiative or a ministry programme that really can capture the hearts and the minds of target audience. In addition to this you need to have **an inspiring vision, credible and well respected leaders** (*people who will sign the appeals and be the forerunners of your cause*), **brand recognition** and a **track record of success**.

And, last but not least, you need **the capacity**, in terms of staff members and financial resources as well as **commitment** to stay focused on acquiring and retaining major donors through direct mail. This special direct mail programme should become the first step towards cultivating stronger relationships with potential major donors and give you opportunities to solicit larger gifts from them through fundraising events or, face-to-face meetings.

Practical suggestions for launching a high value direct mail programme:

- **Identify the prospects for this programme.** Spend some time analysing the giving trends of your current donors to identify potential prospects for the high value direct mail programme. You might want to use criteria like:
 - amounts donated before (£100 - £1,000)
 - frequency of donations (give at least twice a year)
 - recency (have given in the last three years)
 - responded to a capital appeal (if your charity has run any recently)

Note here that the criteria you chose will be dependent on the size of donations to your charity, the frequency of fundraising communications and your specific objectives of the high value direct mail programme.

Once you have generated the prospects list make sure that it is as clean as possible. Look at all the records yourself to ensure that there is no duplication or, that names and address details are spelt correctly, etc.

- **Develop the right cause concept** for this donor group. A common mistake fundraisers make is that they try to re-work a regular fundraising appeal into a high value appeal. But, more often than not the regular appeal does not have strong enough arguments to convince donors that they should send gifts of £1,000 or more by post.

Remember, that potential major donors are often well educated and likely to practice critical thinking. They are probably well read and well travelled too. So, in order to persuade them to make significant contributions by you're your charity needs to put forth a well argued case for funding – using *stories* and *big picture issues* to challenge and inspire such donors to act.

However, in some cases, it might be enough to emphasise to the urgency of the special appeal. For example, '*Right now we don't have time to raise funds in the usual ways so we are asking 50 friends like you to make contributions of £2,000 each.*' Note here, that gaps in your annual budget that you have been aware of for the last 8 months but haven't got around to filling don't constitute an urgent situation.

- **Make sure you ask for a significant amount** – start say with £100 as the lowest option and give two or three other higher options. Make sure that you highlight several donor benefits from responding to this appeal.

Such benefits might include: the satisfaction of knowing that they are a strategic player in a key project, their leadership in enabling the charity to seize unexpected opportunities, the joy of seeing not one but hundreds of beneficiaries helped by the project and so on.

- **Produce a high quality and highly personalised direct mail package** that will be dramatically different from the previous appeals that your target audience might have received from you in the past. This package really

needs to stand out from the crowd! When the prospective donor sees it – they can set it apart from the junk mail and hopefully open and read it.

In order for this to happen the high value fundraising package needs to be of higher quality than your previous appeals. This means high quality stock of paper, simple but excellent creative treatment, a well produced insert (maybe), high personalisation and a proper hand written signature.

Furthermore, this package should have a real stamp and the response envelope should have a real stamp also. This should not look and feel like your average direct mail.

I am not saying there that this package should be very extravagant or expensive – just not mass produced in the same way as traditional direct mail.

In other words, it is the difference between sending Christmas cards to everyone in your friends and acquaintances list (*mass produced direct mail*) and sending nicely chosen and personalised invitations to friends and family you want to have with you at a special occasion (*high value direct mail*).

- **The high value direct mail programme is the first step towards a long term relationship with these donors.** One or two well executed direct mail packages are just the first steps in the process of cultivating relationships with current and potential major donors.

Over time you can keep asking for additional major gifts, offer these major donors opportunities to join a strategic regular giving network, invite them to fundraising events or meet them in person. The list of possibilities is only limited by your creativity and your commitment to building lasting and meaningful relationships with major donors.

If you chose to use high value direct mail well - you can touch your donors hearts and minds – and what's more you can see them grow in their generosity towards your charity.