Online Fundraising Essentials

A mini-guide to making the ask and creating a great donor experience.

A fundraising eGuide from your friends at Network for Good
About Us

Network for Good was founded in 2001 by Cisco, Yahoo! and AOL in response to September 11th. When tech giants like that get together, you know they’re going to create something great. We’re a mission-minded organization, just like you, so we understand the challenges you face. We’re here to help.

Network for Good powers more digital giving than any other platform. In our ten-year history, we’ve processed nearly $800 million for over 80,000 nonprofits. We are Level 1 Audited PCI Complaint and accredited by the Better Business Bureau Wise Giving Alliance, meeting all 20 of its standards for charity accountability. Plus, we’re registered in every state for online fundraising.

We offer a suite of services that helps you raise money and engage supporters online – plus the training that will make you a fundraising superstar.

1. Easy, affordable fundraising solutions: Get donations on your website with DonateNow
2. Email campaign and newsletter tools: EmailNow powered by Emma for sending and tracking mass emails and telling you which messages work best
3. Fundraising Fundamentals Premium Training: Let us help you hit your fundraising goals. Our ultimate survival package offers you access to Network for Good’s expert advice.
4. Online event management: EventsNow powered by givezooks! for accepting donations, registrations and ticket purchases online
5. Free weekly fundraising and marketing tips: Sign up here for great advice delivered to your inbox each week
6. Fundraising123.org: Our free online learning center is filled with ideas and best practices on what it takes to be an online fundraising superhero
7. Nonprofit911.org: Participate in our free webinar training series on nonprofit marketing and online fundraising, supported by Network for Good and our guest speakers.

We’re biased, but we think there are many good reasons to work with us:

☑ Kinship. We understand you because we’re a nonprofit, too
☑ Value. We handle the tough parts of online fundraising for you
☑ ROI. Our customers raise $29 for every dollar they spend
☑ Support. We provide lots of training and support via phone, email or in our online community
Raise More Money for Your Mission

After hitting it off with your supporters and building a strong relationship with them through email outreach and social media, it’s time to make it official – and ask for a donation! Getting a commitment from your donors may require less candlelight and fewer rose petals than a momentous romance, but there are a lot of cues we should follow, including:

👩‍💻 Set the stage for a pleasant and memorable experience (no flash mobs required).
👩‍💻 Tell them how great they are – and what good you can achieve together.
👩‍💻 Make it easy to say yes!
👩‍💻 Once they commit, make them glad they did by being grateful for their support and providing updates on the impact of their gift.

In this guide, we’ll show you what you can do ensure your donors will say “yes” to giving!
Keep Your Donors in Mind

As you create your fundraising plan and craft your appeals, it’s important to put yourself in your donors’ shoes. This will help you to speak to their concerns and make it easy for them to say “yes”. Here are some key concepts to remember:

**Use Your Networks.** People are more likely to take action if they know the person asking for help. Ask your biggest supporters to invite their friends and family to support you. The passion they feel for your cause is incredibly compelling to their circles of influence.

**Show How Donations Will Be Used.**
If your audience has given before, tell them all the great things they've done - and all the wonderful additional things more support will bring.

**Be Specific.** Don’t assume your donor knows what you want them to do. Ask for one concrete action. Asking people to click on a button to donate now is better than asking them to support your campaign. Specific actions are easier to do - and harder to decline.

**Inspire Trust.** Be honest and transparent about your programs, your spending, your impact -- everything. Show exactly where the money goes and what the donor's investment will do. Demonstrate your trustworthiness by displaying your Charity Navigator or BBB rating!

**Keep it Simple.** Everyone is busy. Don't be longwinded or beat around the bush. Make an incredibly compelling yet concise case for why people should give.

**It’s Not All about You.** Instead of only talking about how great *you* are, share amazing stories about your donors, volunteers and beneficiaries. Inspire your supporters to want to be a part of the action.
Tell Your Amazing Story

Remind your constituents of the great work you do and how they make that possible. Personal connections and stories have a big effect on giving — so if you’ve got them, use them.

Everybody has a story to tell. So go find them. If you don't already have a great story in mind, turn to your volunteers, turn to your coworkers, or turn to the people you help. Their point of view can help your potential donors feel more connected to your mission.

Avoid the "kitchen sink." Don’t try to relay every single aspect of your organization in a story. This creates information overload. Instead, find one small anecdote or facet of your work and show how it relates to everything else.

Share a photo. One powerful photo can go a long way in stirring emotion. Pick a clear photo of one person or animal looking straight at the camera.

Make it personal. People give more when they feel we’re helping another person to whom we can relate. Don’t talk about the masses who need help -- focus on one person’s story.

It’s tricky for fundraisers to grapple with restricted versus unrestricted giving. How can we tell an individual’s story and connect our donors to that individual while still raising money for a larger cause?

This isn’t easy, but organizations must work hard to transform their fundraising model to meet donors’ emotional needs.

- Tell stories that exemplify the work of your organization, without using statistics.
- Incorporate these stories into your fundraising and marketing channels.
- Be clear these stories are emblematic of your work, but don’t create an impression the donor’s contribution is specifically earmarked for that individual — unless it is.
Answer Their Questions

As you craft your fundraising appeals, it’s critical that you take the guesswork out of giving for your donors. That begins with understanding the questions your donors are asking themselves before they give.

"Why me?" Your donors need to know why your cause is relevant to them and why should they care. They need to connect to you on a human level. Use pictures, tell stories and do anything that can help your audience relate.

"Why now?" Is there urgency in your appeal? Create a sense of immediacy. Explain why a donation is needed right now. (Toward the end of the year, donors will generally answer this themselves knowing the tax deadlines are approaching.)

"What for?" Describe what their gift can accomplish and the impact it will have. Share how other donors have impacted individuals in need. Important: avoid talking about massive numbers, mind-numbing statistics, or intangible outcomes. This makes it harder for donors to relate to your cause!

"Who says?" People are increasingly skeptical and will trust what their friends, family and even acquaintances say over all of your marketing efforts. Ask existing supporters to share why they give to you and what it means to them -- use these testimonials in your outreach.
Clear a Path for Donation Success

Once you’ve made the ask, don’t put roadblocks in a donor’s way by creating a confusing or complex donation experience. From your first appeal to your thank you page, clear a path that will make it easy for your supporters to give to your cause.

**Common Mistakes that Derail Donations**

- No easy way to give online.
- Microscopic or missing donate links on the organization’s website.
- Conflicting calls to action.
- Too many distractions on the nonprofit website or giving page.
- Lack of urgency (donors might think “I’ll do this later...” — and then never come back!)
- Overwhelming the donor with statistics instead of appealing to their emotions.

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**8 Ways to Make It Easier to Give**

1. Simplify your nonprofit homepage to offer one call to action: Donate.
2. Make your donate buttons large, colorful and easy to find.
3. Send donors straight to your donation form from email appeals.
4. Include your donation link in your Facebook, Twitter and other social profiles.
5. Encourage recurring gifts.
6. Test your online donation process and fix problems before sending your appeal.
7. Include third-party ratings or testimonials on your donation page.
8. Create a "Why Donate" page that makes a case for why someone should care.
Optimize Your Donation Form

When a prospective donor lands on your donation page, each component should reinforce their decision to give while making it quick and easy to complete their donation. For best results, a nonprofit donation page should look like the organization’s website and ask only for necessary information to make the form as short as possible. Review your donation page to ensure that it’s in shape for eager donors this holiday season.

The Ingredients of a Great Donation page

- Branded page that looks like the nonprofit website, including the nonprofit logo and name
- A compelling photo that illustrates the impact of a donation to your cause
- Brief, emotional call to action
- Suggested giving amounts
- Recurring giving option
- Third-party endorsements or ratings
- Another way to contact the nonprofit with questions or additional gifts

WaterAid America optimized their DonateNow page to collect the necessary information while reinforcing a donor’s decision to give.
Mind Your Manners

The relationship isn’t over once you’ve asked for a donation and a donor makes a gift! Keep love alive by planning a great donor stewardship program and continue to cultivate your connection with your donors:

**Thank Quickly and Graciously.** Send out the receipt instantly and thank profusely. Remember: the number one irritation of donors is lack of gratitude or information on the impact of their gift. It’s the season to ask for money, but it’s also the season to give thanks.

**Make them Feel Special.** Don’t send a generic thank you that feels like it came from a robot. Personalize your acknowledgements to include relevant details to each donor, like additional information on the specific programs they support.

**Celebrate Your Donors.** Find ways to recognize and celebrate your donors on your website, in your newsletters and in your future outreach.

**Keep in Touch.** Reach out regularly to update your donors on your progress and how their donations are making a difference.

**Extend an Invitation.** Keep the door open for your donors to do more – such as volunteer, attend an event or help you spread the word about your cause. They want to feel like they’re part of the team.

**Listen for Feedback.** Your donors are a valuable source of insight and inspiration. Be open to their comments and suggestions, and take note of indirect feedback, such as unsubscribe requests.
Test and Track

To understand what works for your organization – and your audience – you must monitor your email open rates, click through rates and conversion rates (how many people end up giving as a result of an appeal). Be ready to adjust your approach based on the results you see. Test different versions of your calls to action, subject line and stories to zero in on what works best for your unique audience. Base your final emails of the year on what’s performed well. For example, if an appeal that focuses on volunteer stories results in more donations, make your last appeal of the season similar!

Beware: Common Testing Pitfalls

We strongly advocate testing well. A poorly run test isn’t worth the effort you and your staff will invest in it. Here are some testing pitfalls to avoid:

1. When looking for breakthrough results, skip the small things. Testing small items such as subject lines and the color of your call-to-action button may uncover low-hanging fruit. When looking for a big breakthrough, however, think big with your tests.

   - Test content.
   - Test treatments across segments.
   - Test a long-term cultivation program on a test cell.
   - Test messengers.
   - Test channels.

Get creative and bold — but make sure your creativity and boldness can be tested.

2. Avoid samples sizes that are too small to produce statistically significant results. It’s not how many people you solicit; it’s how many responses you receive. A statistically valid test requires 100 responses for each test cell. You’ll need 200 responses for a simple A/B test. For a donor renewal effort with a projected 5% response rate, this means soliciting 4,000 names (2,000 per cell) for a valid test. In a new donor acquisition effort with a 1% response rate, you’d need to solicit 20,000 names (10,000 per cell).
If you don’t have a large list size, here are some suggestions:

- Test fewer elements. Ditch the four-way test and try a 50/50 split test.
- Carry the test across multiple efforts until a statistically significant number is reached.
- Don’t extrapolate. When you don’t test a statistically valid quantity, you can’t assume a larger group will behave the same way.
- Retest. Always retest to see if you replicate your results.

3. Don’t ignore past test results.
Your test results are the voice of your donors and activists. Listen to what they are saying even if it’s not what you expected to hear. Keep a “testing bible” that brings together your organization’s learnings over time.

4. Don’t think that what worked for a competitor or another campaign will work for you.
You must test it with your audience. Enough said.

5. The data you generate is only as good as your analysis of it.
Set up systems to accurately measure your test and incorporate that learning into future campaigns.

Finally, don’t be afraid to fumble. We’ve learned a lot about testing through failed tests. Being data-driven is a daily practice that you must exercise to excel.
Remember

- Make it easy for your donors to give with an easy to find donate button that goes straight to your donation page -- and optimize your form.

- Create an emotional appeal that inspires action by using a compelling story and powerful image.

- Start cultivating a great relationship with your supporters now, before you start your next fundraising campaign.

- Keep the good feeling going by following up quickly with a well-written thank you letter and continue to cultivate your donors for years to come.