

**Charities Improve Their  
Thank You Correspondence,  
At Least**

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## Charities Improve Their Thank You Correspondence, At Least

by PENELOPE BURK

It's been nine months since my research on donor communication and recognition was published in *Thanks...A Guide to Donor-Centred Fundraising*. I thought you might be interested in knowing how the fundraising marketplace has reacted to this information.

“Donor-centred fundraising” is the term for the three things that donors say they need in order to continue giving to a charity indefinitely and to increase the value of their gifts over time: prompt gift acknowledgement, confirmation that gifts have been set to work as intended, and measurable results on those gifts at work, before they are asked for more money.

The study's key finding can be summed up in this simple statement: donors are seeking information, while charities are focussing on recognition. The research and parallel testing showed that this seeming disconnect between charities and their donors causes unacceptably high attrition and impedes major gift fundraising.

Charities have moved quickly to deal with the first of the three things that donors say they need and the result is a notable improvement in the quality (and timeliness) of thank you correspondence.

### Warmth flows through

I know this because sometimes charities send me copies of their donor-centred thank you letters and they are nothing short of fabulous. The warmth and genuine gratitude of the writer flows from the best of this correspondence without being contrived or overdone. The language is in sharp contrast to the stilted and heartless thank you letters that used to be the norm. It seems that fundraisers were just waiting for the OK to unleash their creative writing powers and the freedom to express a little emotion.

Fundraisers are also starting to interact more with donors as individuals, rather than seeing them as file numbers or gift amounts, and they are communicating more when not asking for money. For instance, a small-budget charity in Winnipeg recently told me its donor-centred story: It had acquired new fundraising software, but electronic data transfer was impossible, requiring each donor record to be input manually. The fundraiser turned a laborious job into a winning opportunity. Every time she entered a new record, she took a moment to write a brief note that went something like this:

*As I was entering your name in our new database, I wondered how you were. I thought I would just drop you a note to let you know how important you are to our organization and how much we appreciate having you as a donor ...*

That thoughtful gesture unleashed a flood of unsolicited donations from donors who were surprised and grateful that a charity would communicate with them without asking for money.

The defining characteristic of donor-centred fundraising is a personalized approach to donor relations. That is difficult enough to achieve for small nonprofits, but it's a huge challenge for organizations with hundreds or thousands of donors.

I recently spent the better part of an afternoon describing my research to a large charity and explaining how much more money they could raise in the next five years by adopting a donor-centred approach. After some consideration, the Development Director reluctantly said: "I don't think donor-centred fundraising is right for our organization because we just have too many donors." Oh, oh. That's exactly why donor-centred fundraising and communication is so important.

### **Stop because no one talks to them**

The 1997 *National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating* study found that 40%-49% of donors who stop giving, or give less than they could, do so for reasons that are tied to lack of meaningful information or to a feeling that their giving is not appreciated. As 90% of donors who are giving to a specific charity today will not be giving to that same charity five years from now, the fundraising business needs to make donor-centred communication a priority.

Becoming donor-centred when you are in an organization with a large number of donors means not trying to tackle the whole job at once. This, however, is a tough assignment for fundraisers who are used to using only recognition and communications strategies that can be systematically applied across the entire donor base.

Take a donor-centred approach with a group of donors that you can handle with minimal disruption, and that group will also become your test sample. When you see the measurable improvement in retention and increased gift levels in that representative sample, you will be motivated to develop a donor-centred relationship with all your donors.

You can also stop worrying about whether donors want to hear from you. They do. And they will be very gratified that you took the time to communicate with them even if they've been giving for years and you have never talked to them when you're not asking for money.

Finally, being donor-centred means overcoming a fear that a surprising number of professional fundraisers and leadership volunteers have about making personal contact

with donors. Even though fundraising is all about building relationships, many practitioners are more comfortable with a systematic approach to raising money that allows them to focus on the database, the form letter, the general newsletter. Many find it easier to look a donor in the eye and ask him for a million dollars than to say thank you. That won't be overcome all at once, but each time you pick up the phone or knock on a door or write a personal letter, communicating in a donor-centred way will become easier. And, when you realize how good it makes you feel, it will become habit-forming.

Do yourself a favour and call a donor today.

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