

How to write a strong fundraising appeal

Introduction

The aim of these notes is to give you some clear and practical ideas of how to put together a strong fundraising pack - with particular reference to copywriting.

Initially we'll cover a couple of broad points about authenticity and need, and then we'll give some tips relating to specific elements of a fundraising pack - from the main covering letter to the reply envelope.

The starting point - authenticity

The ChangeStar approach to direct fundraising from individuals is based on highly personalised mailings that are 'authentic' and therefore unlike other advertising that is sent through the post.

By 'highly personalised' we mean:

- Each person is asked to give according to their previous giving history. This means that each person gets an individual ask rather than a generic ask. Generic asks can often be wildly inaccurate and depress response.
- Details such as the last appeal that an individual responded to may be referred to. There may also be reference to a topic that an individual has expressed an interest in. There are also a series of other ways in which we personalise mailings.

'Authentic' means that we try to produce mailings that are not like typical direct mail, which is a turn off to so many people. From our perspective, direct mail is not about advertising through the post but a communication between one person and another person. So much direct mail is based around gimmicks and advertising concepts – for instance, coins attached to letters or a teasing slogan on the outer envelope. But direct mail is not like billboard or TV advertising - it about a communication between two people.

We have found that an information-led approach gets the best response – people want to make informed decisions when they give to organisations. Many charity mailings actually lack real information and are based around superficial advertising concepts.

We have found that our personalised approach, which was pioneered by us some 15 years ago here in the UK through another agency, TW CAT, gives a dramatic uplift to income. Typically we have seen our approach give an uplift in income of between 25% and 250% over a year.

Need and urgency

Need

Showing a clear need for money is essential to any fundraising appeal. We need to highlight something (a project, piece of work, situation (e.g. a budget shortfall)) that is clearly important to the donor - whether it's in helping the organisation they care about to survive, enabling a project that matters to them to go ahead or campaigning on an issue that matters to them.

We need to get the reader to feel something strong inside - a sense of injustice, fear, excitement - or any other strong feeling that will motivate them to take action. For many charities this is achieved by focussing the appeal on the ultimate beneficiaries of their work - e.g. cancer sufferers, abused animals. Stories from beneficiaries or people affected by the relevant issues really help people to empathise and to see the need in a simple, clear way.

Tangibility

The need not only needs to be urgent and obvious, but it needs to be made tangible for the potential donor - they need to see that the amount they contribute can make a difference to the bigger picture. So, tangible and significant examples of how their gift can help are crucial.

Urgency

Finding a sense of urgency is one of the biggest challenges in writing copy - giving the donor a sense that it not only matters that they give but that they do so now.

Be honest

It's an obvious point but it needs stating. Not only do you have an obligation to be honest in your copy (to regulators, potential donors and as someone in an overtly value-led profession) but honesty also strengthens your copy, as it enables you to state things with greater strength and clarity. For example, when the 'important meeting' to decide budgets and work plans really is on the deadline that you mention in the letter, you can write with genuine conviction about the importance of this deadline.

Materials and stories

As you can see from the above points, the supply of materials, stories and tangible examples of the need plays a crucial role in being able to put together a strong pack.

So, the client plays a vital role in the success of the pack, which another reason why the creative process between client and agency has to be a team effort. Both parties have to be on the top of their game in order to produce a good pack. It is extremely difficult to produce a good pack with very little material or need provided by the client, but the converse is equally true - good background materials and sense of need from the client is not enough - a skilled, experienced creative team and fundraising strategists are needed to develop them into an effective pack (hence why so many charities use agencies for this work).

Detailed comments - main letter

Early ask and statement of need

Setting up the ask early (often in the main headline) gets to the point immediately, so that the donor is aware from the start what is going to be asked of them.

Repetition of ask and need

The ask is then repeated throughout the letter to keep the donor focussed on the point of the letter, so that they cannot avoid the 'call to action' (i.e. to fill out the donation form) at the end.

The ask is not repeated in isolation however - each time it is repeated, the need is repeated, so that this is also becomes imprinted on the donor's mind by the end of the letter. The need can be articulated in different ways throughout the letter so that it builds a case for this overall need - so, at one point one might put '£x will help us buy leaflets to seek new members' as an example of the need and later one might note '£x will help us lobby the government on climate change' - both of which build the overall need for funds for a project to build the organisation's infrastructure.

The very minimum you want a reader to take from a letter is that there is an urgent need for funding for something, what that thing is, and that you are asking them personally for money. Repetition aims to ensure that these points are the key things the donor remembers - even if they remember nothing else.

Personalisation

An obvious point, but personalising a letter for the individual recipient increases response. Where appropriate, further personalisation can also increase the sense that this is a personal letter to them, and thus improve response levels.

Underlining and bolding

Can break up text and guide people's eyes to key messages, such as the ask itself.

Deadline

A deadline reinforces the urgency of the ask and turns this into a real issue for the recipient - it is not an abstract ask - we need money by x point. It also makes them more likely to respond straight away rather than put the letter aside to reply to later (which often gets forgotten, despite the best intentions). A deadline works especially well if there is a good, relevant reason for the deadline - e.g. a meeting where you'll be deciding on plans for the next year.

Letter length

In tests, we have found that longer letters (say of 4 pages) tend to do better than shorter ones (say of 2 pages) but this is not necessarily a rule to apply every time. Sometimes it may be more appropriate to use a short letter - such as in an urgent shortfall appeal. So, the rule here (and in everything else relating to creative development) is to do what's most appropriate for the topic, need and target audience in each case.

PS

Reinforces the need, ask and urgency outlined in the letter.

Personalised asks

Asks based on previous giving history bring higher average gifts than those without.

Detailed comments - supporting materials/letters

Supporting materials (including lift letters and booklets) can play an important role in reinforcing the need and ask made by the main letter. Again, the type of supporting materials to use would depend on the circumstances of the appeal. It is often useful however to have reinforcement of the ask/need from different spokespeople - e.g. an expert on the topic under discussion, someone representing the audience (e.g. a businessman if we were writing to a HV cold list etc), and other people - whatever is relevant and appropriate to the appeal topic, need and audience.

Detailed comments - response form

Your potential donor has made it to the donation form, so they want to respond. Don't lose them at this stage by making it hard to respond - make it as clear and as easy as possible for them to do so. Make the donation options obvious. Don't give too many options. Make the form clear and simple.

Also, reinforce the ask and need and use personalisation to remind the reader you are asking them directly.

Detailed comments - BRE

Another element that helps to make it as easy as possible for people to respond.

Detailed comments - outer envelope

You need to get the recipient to open the letter in the first place, so it needs to look like something worth opening.

People receive a lot of mail from organisations and charities, and we all vet our post into 'junk' and 'need to open' piles. Just because your logo is on the front or you've printed the word 'urgent' on it, it doesn't automatically mean they will want to open it - if it looks like a circular, they are more likely to bin it.

As a general rule we've therefore found blank envelopes with live stamps to be more successful than other approaches, because they look less like junk mail and more like personal mail and as a result are more likely to be opened. There are other ways you can enhance this personal feel - for example, by using a lasered handwriting font for the name and address on the outer.

The evidence

The ideas above are a mix of generally available direct marketing knowledge and evidence we have collected over 20 years of testing and success in fundraising. One of the advantages of this form of fundraising is that one can test the minutiae of packs to ensure that one gets the best results - for example, testing a pack with a blank, hand stamped outer envelope against one with a printed PPI on it.

Here's a quick example of the success of our approach. For one charity we did a year long split test. They split their donor base into two randomly distributed halves, and one half of their donors received our mailings, whilst the other half received mailings from another agency.

After a year the donors we had mailed had given more than twice the amount of money than those who had received mailings from the other agency.

We hope you'll find these notes useful. If you'd like to discuss them in any more detail or ask any questions do get in touch at info@changestar.co.uk or on **07968 227 029**.

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