# The Essential Guide to END-OF-YEAR FUNDRAISING for Nonprofits of All Sizes

MAKING THE MOST OF YOUR ONLINE RESOURCES TO ENCOURAGE YEAR-END GIVING

Kristin DeMint

## About Salsa Labs

Salsa Labs (Salsa) helps nonprofits and political campaigns to build, organize, and engage a base of support more efficiently and effectively. In one easy-to-use, integrated, and flexible web-based system, groups of all sizes can manage their supporters and chapters, communicate through e-mail and social media, fundraise, advocate, host events, and measure results.

With all that as well as its top-notch training, support, and strong online community, Salsa provides you the best value for your investment—letting you focus more resources on your mission. Salsa currently supports more than 2,000 organizations' relationships with more than 75 million donors, members, activists, and fans all around the world. In 2011, our clients raised $51 million, sent more than one billion e-mails, and undertook over 18 million advocacy actions.

Originally founded as a nonprofit, Salsa knows that your organization has unique needs, and we are ready to help. We can do more things together than we can apart.

Get your free trial of Salsa online at **www.salsalabs.com**.

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# 1 Giving Is Addictive

You know it's coming, and you know it's important. Yes, I'm talking about the holiday season, but more importantly: *end-of-year giving*. Think about this — at what other time of year are people (on the whole) in a sustained spirit of giving to their loved ones *and* to others who are also bound to the human condition? As an organization that relies on the generosity of others, you must reach out in their most charitable of moments and take advantage of the giving addiction.

Giving for the sake of giving isn't necessarily the only thing on people's minds at this time of year. Many people, especially the financially savvy (who are likely to be your donors), are also thinking about how to withhold another buck or two from Uncle Sam before January rolls around. In any fundraising campaign, you want to tell people why they should be giving *now* — and this is definitely one of those reasons as the tax deductibility deadline approaches. (Of course, this motivator applies only if you're a 501(c)3, where gifts to your organization are tax deductible.)

For most organizations — particularly those who solicit tax-deductible gifts — the year's online fundraising is a pie with six slices:

1. The 1st fiscal quarter: January to March
2. The 2nd fiscal quarter: April to June
3. The 3rd fiscal quarter: July to September
4. The first two months of the last fiscal quarter: October and November
5. December 1 through approximately Christmas (December 25)
6. A very few crucial days: the last week of the year

Of this fundraising pie, a whopping *one-third* of the year's fundraising is served in the month of December — and for good reasons (read on, dear friend!). Salsa Labs' research shows that the average online donation amount is higher, possibly as much as 50 percent higher. People are in the mood to give and to give more.

So, planning ahead for end-of-year fundraising is critically important both to maximize your nonprofit's income and to take advantage of people's giving mood to turn them into recurring donors for your organization.

# Establishing a Giving Addiction

Many groups don't realize just how important end-of-year fundraising is to establishing a giving addiction both now and for the following year. This giving addiction applies to both offline and online giving, but with online giving, you can encourage and enhance it in innovative ways. Try encouraging giving addictions through the following strategies:

- **Single-click donations:** Why ask for a credit card again and again? It's monotonous for your long-term supporters, drags down conversion rates, and incurs risk as that credit card is transmitted across the wire again and again. Make it possible for donors to complete their information only once.
- **Recurring gift upgrade:** The *most* important time to ask for a recurring gift is right away. With single-click giving, you can turn individual donations into long-term, predictable income. That doesn't just amp up year-end numbers, it sets you up for success next year as well.
- **Cross-Organization single-click giving:** Why stop at just your org? Because of the addictive nature of giving, reducing the barrier to giving across different organizations helps everyone.

- **Building coalitions of giving:** Working with a network of like-minded partners may increase donations for everyone. See Chapter 2 for the top ten list growth strategies.

# Creating an End-of-Year Plan

End-of-year fundraising doesn't just happen in December. It takes months of building lists, inspiring and cultivating donors, and testing and analyzing metrics to make the absolute most of end-of-year opportunities. That being said, if you're behind the gun this year, you can still capitalize on the opportunities of year-end giving without waiting until next year — it really is never too late to do *something*. But in today's media-saturated, always-connected, message-bombarded society, how do you make sure your message gets out, gets you noticed, and — most importantly — motivates donors to support your mission?

All the necessary parts of your end-of-year campaign are highlighted in this checklist:

1. **Outline your big-picture campaign strategic objectives.** Potential ideas include the following:
   - ☐ Develop a narrative arc that's sustained throughout the campaign
   - ☐ Include a high number of substantive cultivation and progress reports
   - ☐ Use advanced segmentation
   - ☐ Use video, when appropriate
   - ☐ Introduce donors to program staff and beneficiaries
2. **Identify your goals and your pathway to achieving those goals.** Take a look at these potential goal examples:
   - ☐ Increasing total end-of-year giving by (fill-in-the-blank) percent
   - ☐ Increasing total end-of-year gifts
   - ☐ Increasing average gifts
   - ☐ Increasing new donor acquisition rates
   - ☐ Upgrading current donors to a higher giving level
3. **Identify tactics that help you achieve those goals:**
   - ☐ Do you have a match?
   - ☐ Do you have a celebrity signer with a connection to your cause?
   - ☐ Are you launching an optimized donation form to increase gift conversion?

- ☐ What's your segmentation strategy?
- ☐ Are you upgrading donors by landing them on appropriate forms with higher gift string suggestions based on their highest previous contribution?
- ☐ Are you targeting non-donors with a low-dollar ask or a special acquisition campaign?
- ☐ Are you targeting mid-dollar donors with a high-dollar circle ask?
- ☐ Are you targeting monthly givers to ask them for an additional end-of-year gift?
- ☐ Will you send five e-mail appeals rather than last year's four?
- ☐ Will you appeal to your social network community? How many times?

4. **Identify your theme or narrative arc.** What issue(s) resonate(s) most with your donors? What emotional stories do you have at your disposal? Can you weave these issues and stories together into a cohesive narrative arc that sustains the campaign?
5. **Plan your messaging calendar.** Sit down with your calendar and for each message identify the following:
   - ☐ Theme/story
   - ☐ Launch date
   - ☐ Signer
   - ☐ Call to give/act
   - ☐ Segmentation
   - ☐ Landing page needed
   - ☐ Coordination with your website (feature the message story on your homepage during launch)
   - ☐ Coordination with social media (feature the story/ask on your networks during launch)
   - ☐ Coordination with offline (will this supplement your offline plan?)

After you've checked off the items in the preceding list, relax and know you've started (in advance) the planning process for your most lucrative time of year. You have plenty of time to get these steps done and have a blockbuster end-of-year fundraising season!

# 2 Making Sure Your Message Gets Through

Around 300 billion e-mails are sent every day — and the majority of those are unwanted. According to ReturnPath, a leading company that measures e-mail deliverability, nearly one in four messages never reach the inbox, with 7.4 percent of those going to spam, which costs your organization money and action.

Stats like that are staggering, but they show why there's a need for rules governing e-mail deliverability and best practices. Many considerations go into delivering an e-mail, from speed of delivery and server connections, to the content, and finally, the recipients themselves. This chapter highlights some of these factors and explains how to maximize the chances of your blasts reaching their intended destination.

## Growing Your Opt-In List

No doubt at some point you've felt pressure to build your supporter e-mail list quickly. Perhaps you've been tempted to leverage lists from others or to dip into paid acquisitions, thinking it's best to not know where the recipients are from — but all evidence shows that shortcuts can wind up hurting you in the end when it comes to sending e-mail.

## Ten strategies to expand your e-mail list quickly

If it's already almost year-end, hearing sermons on growing lists organically isn't going to help you at this point, so now what do you do? If you haven't been building your opt-in list, here are a number of ways to reach a wide audience:

- **Social media asks:** Yes, it's possible to grow your e-mail list through social media. Make sure to post to your own social media channels as well as put social sharing on every web page and in every e-mail you send. This process makes it easier for your supporters to spread your message to their friends and family. Make certain that whatever landing page is used has a spot for visitors to give you their e-mail addresses.
- **Social media ambassadors:** Take the path of least resistance. Do you have people on staff or within your community who already tweet, are active with Facebook, or who blog? Or, maybe they write a regular article for a publication? Recruit them to give you a mention. Make certain you give them a URL with a tag to automatically track who sends you new supporters — both to give them thanks and to remember to go back to them again in the future.
- **Tell-a-Friend pages:** Every donation page, advocacy action, event page, or other sign-up page on your site should include an opportunity for supporters to "Tell-a-Friend" by simply inputting an e-mail address for them to send a pre-written message (that they can edit if they choose).
- **Timed reminders:** Set up your e-mail campaign so that two days after people complete a donation page, they receive an e-mail thanking them again for their donation (they should've been thanked once already) and urging them to ask friends to join them in donating. Make certain the e-mail tells them how to tell friends — provide a Facebook post or tweet, give them e-mail copy, and so on.
- **More sign-up pages:** Make sure that every page of your site has some way to sign up and support your cause. If people come to your site from outside sources, you want to capture them as

supporters. Offer newsletter sign-ups, research, and so on in return for their basic contact info. You can turn them into donors later after they're vested in your cause.

- **Peer-to-peer fundraising:** Empower your donors to host their own fundraising pages or host a *distributed event* (they host the event and handle registration on your website). Salsa has tools to make this process easy.
- **Getting offline supporters online:** If they support you offline, they may support your online appeals (and you may be able to eventually remove them from your direct mail list and save money). Use a list append service to turn your direct mail list into an e-mail list. Just remember to give people a chance to opt-out of e-mail.
- **Nonprofit lead generation organizations:** Groups, such as Care2, use their networks to find people to opt-in to your advocacy campaigns. And, because they're already Salsa partners, clients may automatically add their new supporters to their databases through ready-to-go integrations.
- **Chapters and affiliates:** Organizations that allow their chapters or affiliates to manage their own lists often see dramatic list growth when they empower their affiliates. If you don't know how to do this, Salsa has tools that make this easy.
- **Building a coalition of giving:** Work with other nonprofits with similar missions to yours. You may have more success together than apart. With your network of nonprofit partners you may
  - **Establish signup and donation chaining:** The follow-up action on your site actually goes to *another* like-minded site. This process maximizes signups across all groups.
  - **Cooperative messaging:** Selling or swapping lists is bad. But, having like-minded organizations e-mail their lists targeting one of your landing pages (and vice-versa) finds you more donors and gives your donors a great follow-up.

Few points are more important than this: E-mail lists should be opted into. In using non-opted-in lists that make you a spam suspect, you face two big dangers: 1.) E-mail addresses may not even exist or are a spam trap. 2.) Recipients may react conversely to your goals.

Check out these details:

- **The e-mail addresses may not even exist or are a spam trap.** There's an e-mail status known as *User Unknown,* which is a designation that e-mail providers use to indicate that an e-mail account doesn't exist. If you hit enough User Unknown e-mails (1 percent in a 24-hour period), automatic processes may be triggered to block all your e-mails — even the good ones. Spam traps are e-mail addresses purposely left out in the open by e-mail service providers and spam houses for individuals to pick up. These e-mail addresses are decoys and may get you flagged as a spammer.
- **The recipients may react conversely to your goals.** Getting marked as spam by one recipient has repercussions on all your e-mails. The history of the individual to the e-mail sender is being recorded, and that can impact services like Gmail with its priority e-mail. This means that you as the sender need to use the same e-mail address more and more and give a reason for people to not just *open* the e-mail but also *react* in some way other than deleting it. This is why sending e-mail to only people who are interested matters.

To keep your organic lists performing well, follow these four steps:

1. **Segment your list.** Put action takers in one list and people who don't respond in another.
2. **Send e-mails to active supporters first.** Think about the math. If you hit a 0.1 percent complaint limit (people clicking the spam button) early, the rest will have issues.
3. **If people don't respond, remove them from your e-mail list.** You're probably not going to like this step, but remember that these people are making it more difficult to contact the people who care, so stop sending them e-mails.
4. **Remember to unsubscribe all hard bounces.** Hard bounces show that an issue exists with the e-mail — either the address or the domain doesn't exist, like User Unknowns. Like the deadweight mentioned in Step 3, they should be removed.

# Being Mindful of E-Mail Content and Setup

Many folks think content is the only thing that matters and putting a single spam word here or there will cause issues. The truth is, some keywords cause more issues than others, but in reality, context is what really matters. The algorithms that scan e-mails for patterns are smart enough to recognize patterns in sentences and e-mails to determine whether a message is spam as opposed to just looking at one word here and there.

Content does matter, but overall it's one small piece to the very big and complicated puzzle. Here are the major considerations:

- **Make sure your "From" and "Reply-To" addresses exist.** Make sure someone actually monitors these accounts as well.
- **Add a Sender Policy Framework (SPF) record to your Domain Name System (DNS).** If you don't have an SPF record set up, you should. An SPF basically says that an e-mail service provider has permission to send on your behalf; although e-mails may look like they're from your company, they're actually being sent, for example, by Salsa Labs. SPF helps prove you're a legit sender.
- **Pick topics thoughtfully.** On top of the actual content you write, make sure e-mails are relevant to the audience and get them engaged. Also avoid e-mail blasts that cover multiple spammy topics at once. Because you're sending e-mails asking for donations, check the most recent spam words list you can find online or from an e-mail service provider like Salsa. Many monetary-related words that you may use will be on the list.
- **Make sure your subject line (and e-mail, for that matter) makes sense.** Don't use spammy words or phrases like
    - CAPITAL letters
    - Dear (anything)
    - "Lesbian" or "lesbians"
    - Mentions age > 20
    - "Millions of dollars"
    - Subject starts with "Do you"
    - URL shorteners
    - "You can be removed from this list."
    - !!!!!!!!!

- **Write well.** Aside from the obvious problems with poorly written communication, you need to write clearly, honestly, and directly to get your recipients to read what you've sent and respond positively. Avoid gimmicks.
- **Format intelligently.** Don't be cute with formatting, even if you can't imagine anyone else in history using a format like yours. Don't use weird spaces, odd characters, and the like.
- **Always include an unsubscribe link.** Double-check it to make sure it works.
- **Check your e-mail's spamminess.** If you're a Salsa client, check under the e-mail validation tab in Salsa to find your spam score.

# Monitoring IP and ISP Reputation

An Internet Protocol address (IP address) is a number assigned to each device online; your e-mails come from a device with an IP address. These IP addresses are graded by various organizations based on the volume they send and the type of feedback and complaints that are received. A grade is given to the "strength" of the IP address, and if the IP address performs poorly enough, e-mails may be blocked or filtered, no matter how solid your content is.

> Be aware of your reputation with the Internet Service Provider (ISP) you're using. ISP and e-mail address providers look at the domain that e-mails come from as well as the domain of links contained in the e-mails themselves. Do you have a bad reputation for sending spam? No matter the e-mail service provider you use as your blast system, your rep follows you around. Spam houses hold it against you for trying to beat the system by shopping for a new provider, making it even harder to get off their blacklists.

# 3 All Eyes on You: Garnering Attention

People give for many reasons: to be happier by spending money on others, to feel important because they've made a difference, and to be part of something good. When people see others giving, they're more likely to give. (See Chapter 1 for more info on the giving addiction.) In order to get the attention of would-be donors during the holiday season, you need to find ways to help them see — clearly and often — that giving to your organization rewards them with rosy feelings. Like any relationship, though, the donor-nonprofit relationship is an art — one that requires careful and deliberate outreach methods and timing, especially during this hectic time of year.

Although nonprofits have more communications tools available to them than ever before, websites and e-mail are the top two most important ways to communicate. This chapter helps you build a well-rounded plan to use these mediums most effectively during a time when donors are ripe for asking but also when so many others are vying for contributions.

# Determining When to Send

As part of your end-of-year fundraising approach, use a multi-part e-mail campaign with a clear and compelling call to action. Research indicates that a multi-part campaign consistently averages a 400 percent increase in results as compared to the results of a single message. After the initial ask, filter out those who gave and then send a second ask to the balance of that list. After the second ask, filter out those who gave to either message one or message two and send a third and final ask to those who didn't. The timing can vary between messages from a matter of days to a week.

After you've determined how many e-mails to send, you have to think about timing. Knowing when to send ask e-mails is always tricky but is especially so when times are busy and mail abounds. E-mail blasts, however, are *most* effective during these times:

- **Early December:** Send an update e-mail early in December reminding supporters why you appreciate them. ***Note:*** This is *not* your appeal, but a cultivation e-mail.
- **Before December 25th:** Plan to ask by e-mail *at least* twice before December 25.
- **The last five days of December:** Ask *at least* two or three times during the last week of the year. This is the best time to send your end-of-year e-mail appeals!
- **December 31st:** Make sure to send a final reminder on December 31st. You should always e-mail at least one fundraising ask on New Year's Eve, which may be more lucrative in a few hours than some entire months elsewhere on the calendar. Organizations often send two appeals on this day.

# Coordinating E-Mail with Direct-Mail Campaigns

To drive lift, coordinate e-mail campaigns with direct mail campaigns. E-mail messages can precede direct mail campaigns, giving recipients a heads-up that the mail is coming. Or on the other hand, and often more effectively, they can come after the direct mail campaign, reminding readers of the need for support and reinforcing the message of the appeal. Some of Salsa's clients, in fact, have received a 40 percent better response rate to direct mail campaigns by integrating a follow-up e-mail message. But only when you have supporters' e-mail addresses will they be able to receive the message. Check out Chapter 2 for more information on *not* neglecting list growth! (Can I possibly say this enough?)

### How many e-mails are too many e-mails?

The answer really depends on your own audience and experience. However, December isn't the time to be bashful. Remember, a series of appeals outperforms stand-alone appeals; conversion rates and average gift sizes are higher. Studies also show that 85 percent of organizations raise more money by sending more than one e-mail. So keep that in mind as you plan your asks.

On the flip side of the friendly reminder you provide when coordinating e-mail and direct mail efforts is the concept of driving direct mail recipients online. This can take the form of offering online giving options as a way to fulfill their gifts. Make sure, though, that in all your marketing efforts during your end-of-year campaign, you focus on getting your readers right to your donation page. Converting offline donors to online givers can also save a lot of operational costs, putting more resources toward your mission.

## Capitalizing on Social Media

With the prominence of social media, you simply can't (read that: shouldn't) ignore it as a vital part of your online marketing strategy. With a majority of adults on one or more social media site and about half the U.S. population comprising active Facebook users, that's a whole lot of people from which to create a community!

Think about it: It's really difficult to create communities through the mail. And that's the very reason most organizations use social media outlets. Even if I donate and get a thank you note, I'm not going to feel as connected to your larger community.

The great thing about social media with regards to fundraising is that you can create an online community and keep your supporters engaged, which means they'll be more likely to care about, connect with, and financially support your cause.

Show people how your organization impacts the world, and, ideally you can engage more supporters in your conversations. An organization (no

## Making e-mails mobile-friendly

How does your e-mail look on a mobile device? Have you tested it? Can people read it? Can they interact with it? Don't risk losing your potential audience during this crucial giving season (research shows at least 15 percent of e-mails are accessed by phone). Create mobile-friendly e-mail templates and consider whether a mobile-friendly donation form is an option for you. After all, you want your recipients to click through to your form, and if they're on a mobile phone, you want donating to be a good experience. If you're unsure of how to do this, many consultants and contractors specialize in mobile design, so you can hire one to create your templates.

matter the size) can develop a powerful online presence by following a few simple steps:

1. **Determine your online narrative.** This incorporates your organization's mission and goals and reflects the values of your target online audience. In order to maintain a cohesive, message-driven social media campaign, everything you post should be a reflection of this online narrative.
2. **Choose your outlets.** Don't create an account on every site. Stick to the one or two sites that your target audience is already using and that your staff is most familiar with. Facebook and Twitter are great places to start.
3. **Create an updating schedule.** Ensure that your organization posts meaningful content at regular intervals. Create an updating schedule. You don't want folks to stop following your social media because you have no interaction. The schedule should include a list of content (news, reports, events, and so on) posted over the course of the week, with corresponding staff assignments.
4. **Stick to the basics.** As a nonprofit, you really need to worry about only a few types of posts:
   - New website/blog content from your organization
   - Relevant news articles and blog posts
   - Retweets/reposts of content from supporters and partner organizations
   - Calls to action (petitions, e-mail campaigns, and so on) or upcoming events

- Response posts/tweets to questions, comments, or statements from your fans and followers
- Discussion starters (questions, humorous comments, and so on) — whatever gets your audience excited about your content

When posting a link on Facebook, remember that the link preview title and description information can make a world of difference, so they both need to be succinct and powerful. They don't just affect that initial person's decision to share your content; they also impact the decision to share (or not share) of every subsequent person who sees that piece of content in their newsfeed.

5. **Use social media outlets to build your e-mail list.** You can do this by
   - Setting up custom tabs in Facebook

     For helpful tips on doing so most effectively, check out the blog posts at `www.salsalabs.com/social-media-for-nonprofits`.
   - Putting your URL in the About section in Facebook and as the website link in Twitter
   - Continuing to ask your audience to sign up for your e-mail list
   - E-mailing your list and asking them to become Facebook fans and/or Twitter followers
6. **Take advantage of social media management tools.** Hootsuite, Tweetdeck, and Act.ly are all great tools to explore, along with Salsa Labs' new integrated social media features — especially if you're already using Salsa for blast e-mails and other organizing tools.

Make social sharing on your *supporters'* ends as easy as possible by utilizing integrated social sharing tools, either through your web publishing platform or with third-party options like AddThis or ShareThis. People won't scout out ways to pump up your efforts when they've already given financially. Make a simple share easy by including a "Share on Facebook" prompt as part of the Thank you/Confirmation page — one click of a button, and you're closer to attracting the attention of more folks.

### Don’t forget peer-to-peer fundraising!

Peer-to-peer fundraising is another great way to leverage your supporters’ networks to expand your reach. Give your donors the ability to create their own donation pages. If you want to learn more about how this works, visit `www.salsalabs.com/polaris`.

# Hijacking and Other Homepage Treatments

As you enter the holiday season, consider a light-box treatment for your homepage, sometimes referred to as *hijacking*. After users land on your homepage, a pop-up window appears with an opportunity to make a donation or sign up to receive e-mails, while the homepage itself is faded in the background. For supporters who don’t want to donate or sign up (yet!), they simply close the box and go about their business. For those who do, you’ve just given them a direct, no-nonsense method of giving you what you want and being on their merry way.

Hijacking is a great way to ensure that your message is seen, but *how* you approach it is critical. Creating compelling calls to action and utilizing storytelling and compelling content are great ways to highlight the need for support and drive additional donations. (These techniques are also good to use for list growth during other times of the year.)

Approach this tool in a variety of ways. For example, consider having the light box set to only show up for users on certain intervals. That way, you aren’t annoying them with constant blinking lights and begs. Just make sure you have the right resources available (check with IT) to avoid problems with pop-up blockers or other ad-based technology.

# 4 Getting People to Donate — and Keep Donating!

Although fundraising is an area with many variables, this much is for sure — the majority of would-be web donors never complete their gifts. In some cases, as many as 98 percent of visitors to an organization's donation page leave before making a donation. Have no fear; I'm here to help. In this chapter, you find concrete action steps for increasing the percentage of visitors to your donate page who actually complete a gift.

## Creating Targeted Messaging

For animal welfare groups, targeting a message to a "cat" person or a "dog" person can result in a doubling of the response rate. In the same way, you need to know as much as you can about your potential donors and target your messaging to their values and personality types. Understanding the areas that are important to your supporters, knowing who has donated and who hasn't, and using past online actions to drive messaging can all help lift your results.

Although it's true that e-mail is inexpensive to send, an engaged supporter is a valuable resource and shouldn't be squandered.

Generally speaking, your e-mail has, at best, a few seconds to prove its relevance to the potential donor, so it needs to be

- **Succinct:** E-mails should rarely exceed 500 words.
- **Direct:** Don't bury the ask or weaken it by mixing in links to non-donation actions.
- **Powerful:** Ask the heart, not the head. An image really is worth a thousand . . . bucks.
- **Repetitious:** Link to the donation page multiple times — early, middle, and late in the text, plus any sidebars or buttons.
- **Optimized:** Data junkie with a big list? Do *A/B Testing* (that is, send slightly different versions of your e-mails) to see how different e-mails perform.

Those guidelines considered, the problem is that everyone sends ask e-mails, especially during the holiday giving season. So how do you make your e-mail blasts stand out in your supporter's inbox? This section gives you some things to consider.

## Stand out with your Subject and From fields

First impressions are everything. First, avoid using an unknown staff name in the From field. Use either a well-known name (such as your executive director or someone else in your organization who has a reputation with your supporters) or just use your organization's name. Personal names, even those of your executive director, should generally include your organization's name after the person's name, such as "Jayne Dough, Campaign Coordinator for the Human Fund."

But the Subject line is the *really* big deal and one that's still often overlooked. Subject lines are where you win or lose readers, because if you don't have an engaging subject line, the e-mail just won't get opened. Game over.

A formula for a perfect, successful e-mail subject line doesn't exist. But one of the best things to do is play around with it and monitor your statistics. Successful e-mail subject lines are generally teasers. You want to use words or short phrases that spark curiosity or excitement right away. Include action words, and generally, keep your subject line to less than 50 characters. Be sure to think about your audience. Check out Chapter 2 for hints on avoiding spamminess in your subject lines.

## Connect your call to action to a measurable goal

You must set a fundraising goal (which you've probably already done by this point). Then, connect your call to action to that goal if you can. It's much more powerful to ask, "Help us reach $10,000 by December 31st!" than a general "Make a donation," because the goal makes donors feel like they're a part of something.

Depending on your organization, the goal you choose can take many different forms, such as raising a certain dollar amount or getting a certain number of donations. Tie your goals into how they have a positive impact. For example, "Help us raise $10,000 by year-end to feed 1,000 children."

Recent research shows that people are more likely to give and give larger amounts when a goal is aspirational yet attainable with the promise of a real impact. Think of it this way: If your goal is to raise $1 Billion to stop global warming to improve the lives of billions of people, you're less likely to get a donation than if your goal is to raise $10k to build a playground that helps 1,000 kids in their neighborhood.

Matching grants motivate people to give — they get more for their money. So consider seeking out a matching donor, whether it's an individual who's been considering a significant gift to your organization or a corporate partner.

## Plan your layout

People generally skim e-mail asks, so use your introduction, headlines, and captions to tell compelling stories and include descriptive images and even links to videos to break up the copy.

Now is the time to really woo your prospective donors, playing on their soft-hearted sensibilities. Tell them why they should pick you. Identify five things you've done and how they helped make it happen.

Other important guidelines include the following:

- The ask should be in the second or third paragraph and repeated at the end.
- Don't let readers get sidetracked! Include only the URL to donate — *do not* include any URLs for "more info" and so forth.
- Link the donation URL directly to your donation page (not the holiday landing page if you have one).

Make the Donate button obvious, not only in your e-mail but also on your website and everywhere you include it.

## Sprucing Up Your Donation Page

Drive your supporters to the donation form, and this form is where the rubber meets the road in terms of online fundraising. Take the time to audit it to maximize end-of-year gift completion. What's your current form abandonment rate? Take that as the baseline and look for ways to improve on it:

- ☐ Is your form succinct? Are there any extra fields you could remove? Don't ask for more information than you need. Keep the form super simple.
- ☐ Is the call to action clear, prominent, and compelling? Does it relate to your mission? (That is, it shouldn't say "Donate Now" but, instead, "Your gift could [fill in the blank].") Provide clear donation information — tell them how their money will be spent!
- ☐ Is the donation form compelling visually? Have you reinforced the language and graphics used in your appeal?
- ☐ Have you created an ask string related to your average gift and pre-checked the dollar amount of your preferred option? Have you offered options for different types of donations (a one-time donation, a recurring donation, and so on)?
- ☐ Is your complete donation process on a single form, or does it require multiple clicks?
- ☐ Is the security and safety of your donors' information clearly indicated, and have you included a "trust logo" (like Verisign,

Charity Navigator, Better Business Bureau, or the Institute of Philanthropy)?

- ☐ Is the donation experience user-friendly? Test your donation landing pages by giving two of your friends $10 and asking them to donate the money to your website. Ask them to share their donation experiences with you. How was the flow? What was confusing? Did they get frustrated at some point and not want to complete the donation? Tell them to be brutally honest.

Review your form(s) with a critical eye and then make the changes that need to be made.

> At this critical time of year, don't send people to your usual donation page. Your year-end donation page should be specific to your ask, and you should reinforce your message with both text and images (think holiday gift-giving themes).

While you're revamping your donation page, it's also important to think beyond it — how can you link your donation page to other actions donors can take after they make a donation? Some options for your thank you page and e-mail include the following:

- A Tell-a-Friend page ("Thanks for your donation! Will you tell your friends about your donation via e-mail/Facebook/Twitter?")
- An online store (if applicable)
- A "why did you donate?" signup form (The information you gather can be great content for follow-up donation e-mails you send later in the campaign.)

Last but not least, one thing to consider is tracking the donations you receive, so you know what efforts the donations were coming from. This can help you with future planning. If your online donation system doesn't have good reporting tools built-in, you may want to consider a new system.

# Saying Thanks — a LOT!

Sage advice that holds doubly true with your donors is "Always say hello, please, and thank you." I know — welcoming new donors and thanking them is an obvious step, but it's one you really need to do well if you want your donors to keep donating and spreading the love to other potential donors. I'm surprised at how frequently this step gets overlooked.

At this critical time of year, it's worth examining your confirmation page and the auto-responder to ensure they're sending the message you want. Are they specific in acknowledging the support? Do they tie back in to the messaging that drove the gift? Do they reinforce the appeal or simply bring it to a close?

A few days after the auto-responder thank-you message goes out, send another personalized thank-you message. After all, a bounce-back thank-you is just that, a bounce back. Your donors know this. In the second message, take the opportunity to tell them how their donation helped, give them a virtual tour of your organization, or ask their opinions and get them engaged.

Don't ask for a second gift — yet. I'm not against trying to get a second gift quickly, but your thank-you message isn't the place for it. It's a thank you.

For an added touch, if you're a smaller nonprofit, consider sending handwritten notes or enlist board members, staff members, and volunteers to write a personal note to their contacts on each and every letter. Also consider hand-addressing the envelopes. Make sure you personalize strategically, though. The result has to be worth the time and money, so you have to test to see what works.

For nonprofit organizations, big and small, end-of-year giving can result in 40% or more of total yearly donations. Supporters are in the giving spirit and looking to maximize their tax deductions. So how do you make the most of your year-end efforts and reach this primed audience?

*The Essential Guide to End-of-Year Fundraising for Nonprofits of All Sizes* takes basic fundraising principles to the next level with practical advice and effective tips for using online resources to enhance any end-of-year giving campaign. By employing e-mail, social media, and other online tactics, nonprofit organizations can gain insight on

- MAKING THE ASK WITH DIRECT, POWERFUL CONTENT
- THREE KEY DATES FOR REACHING SUPPORTERS
- INTEGRATING MESSAGES ACROSS MULTIPLE CHANNELS
- THE IMPORTANCE OF REPETITION IN MESSAGING AND RESPONSE

A quick read with easy to understand language and advice you can start using immediately, *The Essential Guide to End-of-Year Fundraising for Nonprofits of All Sizes* helps your campaign be a success.

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