

Fundraising Letters 101

When using written communication, always use a structured, sequential approach to all cultivation and solicitation. To the extent possible, solicit from the “inside out” and “top down”—i.e. begin by soliciting “insiders” such as board, and “top” prospects considered capable of the largest gifts, gradually working toward the solicitation of the least-engaged constituencies and the donors with the least financial capacity. (At times, the sequential approach may be relaxed to take advantage of the timing of special events, as appropriate). Use the commitment of early donors as motivation in soliciting subsequent groups.

Best practices should also extend to broad-base solicitation tactics, as follows:

- Whenever possible, personalize solicitation letters. Merge the list so that the recipient's name and address appear on the letter and salutation. It makes matching letter to envelopes a painstaking—but worthwhile—extra effort. If a generic salutation cannot be avoided, opt for “Dear Friend” or another appropriate generic format—never refer to a constituent as “Dear Non Donor” or “Past Donor.”
- Make a specific request for a gift within the first 1-2 paragraphs. Something like “...and we hope you'll allow us to sustain this wonderful living and learning environment by making a gift to *(organization name)* this year.”
- Make another reference to the gift somewhere later—“...show your support in a tangible way...”
- Whatever you really want donors to do must be repeated in a post script (p.s. If you will respond with a gift by December 31, we'll be sure you are recognized in *(named publication and date)*. Yes, that's right, you've asked three times.
- If possible, ask for a specific amount. (“And just as you were stretched intellectually during your visit(s) with us, we hope you'll consider a “stretch gift” of \$1,000 to provide the same experience to a new generation of members.”) Ask for a gift one level higher than the donor's last gift.
- Don't diminish the donor's giving capacity by using phrases such as “any gift will do.” Always encourage the donor to reach a little farther.
- Try not to have a monotonous series of same-length block paragraphs. Change the pace with a three word paragraph or exhortation. Underline. Use bullets. But don't be afraid of a longer letter—although it seems counterintuitive, research repeatedly confirms that longer letters attain higher response rates and larger gifts. On the other hand, there's scant evidence to show that enclosing a separate brochure increases giving—so don't go to this extra expense unless there's a compelling reason.
- As you've done, make sure the letter reads like it's written to one person, not a mass audience (for example, a letter to a reunion class should say “I hope to see you on campus this summer,” rather than “I hope to see all of you this summer”).



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