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**HOW TO WRITE  
LETTERS  
TO  
MAJOR  
DONORS  
THAT  
RAISE MONEY**

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Let's face it, direct mail isn't dead. In fact it's still one of the best ways to communicate with donors.

**IF YOU HAVE  
MAJOR  
DONORS  
YOU SHOULD  
BE WRITING  
TO THEM  
PERIODICALLY.**



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HOW TO  
MAKE  
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# YOUR DONOR WANTS TO HELP

**L**et's begin with a little context; your donor wants to help. They've given gifts to your organization for a reason, right? So let's agree that the following is true for every letter to a major donor:

- It should be easy to read and understand.
- Help them organize what you want them to do next.
- Know that it's not always the right time for them to make a gift and that they might not reply — but that shouldn't change the passion with which you make your case.

# KNOW THE END BEFORE YOU BEGIN

**B**efore you begin writing your letter you should **know** exactly what you want your major donor to do when they finish reading.

Here's a list of what you need to know:

- ☑ The Need (the reason the gift is needed)
- ☑ How much you'd like them to give
- ☑ Exactly what their gift will accomplish
- ☑ How you'd like them to respond
- ☑ When you'd like them to respond by

The reason major donor letters fail is because these five things aren't included or communicated well. If you know these things before you start, and include them in your letter, you're more likely to be successful.

# DESIGN YOUR LETTER TO BE SCANNED BEFORE IT'S READ

**W**e estimate that 80% of donors will visually scan through your letter or proposal before they read it — IF they read it. **They'll only read it if they see something interesting during their scan.**

What does that mean for you? It means you should use design (formatting, bolding, underlining, etc.) to call out the most important elements of your letter. **Just like we do.**

**Take great care in selecting which sentences to highlight** — they will be the first things the donor reads and are the most important sentences in the letter. We recommend highlighting three or four sentences.

These sentences should:

- 1 Summarize the letter
- 2 Include a request for the donor to send in a gift

Here are the most-read portions of any letter in order of importance:

- 1 Handwritten text — that's why the hand-written notes from your CEO or Executive Director are so important
- 2 The P.S.
- 3 Underlined copy
- 4 Bolded copy

If you aren't using these design techniques to grab the attention of your donors' eyes and get them involved in your letter, you're making a huge mistake.

# MAKE THE NEED COMPELLING

**B**e sure to spend time in your letter making the Need for the donor's gift very clear.

Too often people at nonprofits don't talk about the Need because they've internalized it. You know all about it and it seems obvious that we should all be helping.

**But it's not necessarily obvious to your donor. They spend far less time thinking about this stuff than you do.**

If there's a financial shortfall, how big is it? If people are homeless, what is it like to be homeless? If medical research is not supported, what is the human cost?

If you are asking your donors to solve the world's problems with their gifts, you're taking a **huge** risk if you *assume* that they know the problem is as big and urgent as you know it is.

**Pro Tip:** Don't use statistics to illustrate 'the Need', **use stories.** Usually the best way to show the Need is to identify one person whose situation illustrates the Need and tell their story in your letter. We can't *connect* with statistics, and our minds have trouble visualizing large numbers — but if you tell us a compelling story about one person that's in trouble, we'll get emotionally engaged and want to help.



# MAKE THE LETTER ABOUT THE DONOR AND WHAT THEY CAN DO

**M**ost organizations make their major donor letters about themselves. “**We** are helping the poor,” “Won’t you help **us** save the children,” and our personal favorite, “Won’t you send in a gift to allow **us** to save the rain forest.”

**WRONG.** After you describe the Need, then describe what the Donor’s gift will accomplish. **Talk about what the donor’s gift is going to do.** And talk more about the **outcomes** the gift will produce than the *process* that will happen.

For instance, say an organization needs a new machine that costs \$10,000 to perform laser eye surgeries. Most nonprofits will focus on the *process*; the machine itself, how advanced it is, how excited the doctors will use it, etc. **The best organizations will talk about the outcomes:** one person who will be able to see because of the machine and what an amazing, transformational change that will be in their life.

They’ll *mention* that hundreds of people will be helped. They’ll *mention* the efficiency and ROI of the machine. **But the focus will be on the outcomes: people who are blind right now but will be able to see when the donor gives a gift.**



# INCLUDE A CLEAR CALL TO ACTION

**T**he letter should make it very clear exactly what you'd like the Major Donor to do after reading the letter. You should say something like the following at least two times in every letter, "I hope you'll fill out the enclosed response form and send it to me with a check today."

**We can't emphasize this enough. Tell them exactly what you'd like them to do.**

# KNOW HOW MUCH YOU'RE ASKING FOR

**E**very letter you send to a major donor should have a gift ask amount customized for that letter and that donor.

**The most successful major donor programs know each donor, their giving history, and their giving potential.** They use that information, along with the specific need they are trying to meet, to determine how much to ask for.

Your gift ask should fall into one of two categories:

- 1 FULLY CUSTOMIZED:** the amount is set for each donor based on how much you think they can give at this time (and is often based on a giving goal you've set for your donor for the year).
- 2 SEMI-CUSTOMIZED:** this is a gift ask based on the donor's most recent gift.

# READ IT OUT LOUD

**W**hen you're finished writing your letter, read it out loud. If it doesn't sound natural, you have more re-writing to do.

This is a Major Donor you're talking to. Don't ask them to wade through copy that sounds like a Ph.D. dissertation, or like it was written by someone in Junior High. Value their time by making sure your letter is clear, easy to read, and sounds like a letter to a trusted partner.





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