



Aligning Donor Messaging with Donor Motivations

The Value of a Communications Assessment

by Dale Hedding

With the arrival of each new year, and the spirit of optimism that comes with getting a fresh start, cultural organizations can embrace the opportunity to take a fresh look at the way in which they communicate and connect with donors to ensure that fundraising efforts make the biggest impact possible. Considering today's realities of lean staff teams and scarce financial resources, how can organizations maximize fundraising results within these limitations?

The Value of a Donor Communications Assessment

Several technical processes are available to increase fundraising results, such as informed analysis and interpretation of donor data, which can be identified through a formal development program assessment. However, one of the most effective ways to improve results - immediately and within current resources - is to ensure that messaging used in fundraising efforts aligns with the values and motivations that drive philanthropic decisions among donors.

Many successful companies routinely endeavor to improve sales by undertaking performance assessments of every facet of communications that impact customer behavior—branding, perception of product quality, reputation and customer value versus a product's cost. Cultural organizations can also examine their communications within these critical and hard-to-measure areas. With this in mind, organizations may find great value in taking a fresh look with a communications assessment to evaluate the manner, frequency and messaging with which their core values, mission and impacts are conveyed in fundraising communications.

Understanding and Responding to the Reasons Why People Give

In recent years, a progression of nonprofit industry surveys has identified the reasons why people give to charitable causes. The main reasons for giving—regardless of the type of charity—almost always fall into these general categories:

- Desire to make an impact; make a difference
- Personal satisfaction of giving
- Sense of commitment and responsibility to give back to community
- Providing for, or setting an example for, future generations

Giving is a very personal behavior to meet emotional needs and personal philanthropic goals. Fundraisers, executives and volunteers with fundraising responsibilities often serve as philanthropic matchmakers between the organizations they represent and donors who want to meet their own personal goals and achieve emotional satisfaction in helping others.

Evidence suggests that when charities meet the emotional needs of donors, the increased personal and emotional connection yields much higher giving. The 2014 Bank of America *U.S. Trust Study of High Net Worth Philanthropy*, conducted in partnership with the Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy, found that 73% of donors reported achieving personal fulfillment from their charitable giving. Those who reported personal fulfillment donated five times (5x) the amount of those who were not fulfilled. The study also indicated that more than half (53%) of donors monitor or evaluate the impact of their giving, and those who monitor their giving donate more than three times (3x) more than those who do not monitor.

Cultural organizations can determine if they offer the most compelling case for giving, and the right case, in a donor-centric manner. Many organizations shape their communications with donors around past results and accomplishments based on organizational needs. However, donors often make their philanthropic decisions based on meeting personal goals, as well as understanding the impact their gifts will make. Consequently, organization-focused communications can create a disconnect between donors who appreciate the successes of an institution, but who need to know how their giving played a part in this success. As seen from research mentioned above, communications that empower donors to better understand the impact of their giving can make a dramatic improvement in fundraising results.

Exactly How Much Do Donors Want to Know?

Donors want to know much more now than ever before. Since 1990, the number of nonprofit organizations in the U.S. has more than doubled from approximately 700,000 to more than 1.5 million, far outpacing population growth. This has increased the volume of fundraising traffic directed at donors, which has amplified the pressure on donors to choose between causes. With the evolution of information sharing and social media, as well as the advent of entities that measure and grade the performance of nonprofits, there is an expectation of greater accountability and transparency. Considering the competition that exists for donor support, cultural organizations must make it easier for donors to become more knowledgeable about the ways in which their contributions will be used.

As organizations evaluate the effectiveness of messaging, reviewing specific content can be beneficial. Development programs should consider the degree to which they discuss these topics with donors. Are some not discussed at all? If not, should they be added to the messaging mix? Do communications with donors on these topics help the donor better understand the impact of their giving to create positive change versus the organization's internal needs?

Does an organization:

1. Communicate the full spectrum of program offerings

A common observation of underperforming development programs is that they understate the scope of what their institutions accomplish. Most organizations are identified by one overarching discipline or program in which they excel. However, almost without exception, organizations make other contributions to the communities they serve. These contributions take many forms, such as education and mentoring programs, volunteer training, and partnerships with community groups.

In communications, sharing the full range of what an organization offers provides great value. The goal remains to give donors as many reasons as possible to find an emotional connection to an organization. For example, donors may be driven by the desire to provide educational opportunities to underserved students, but they do not associate these services with a local theater. Upon learning that the theater has a program to teach history through the arts, a personal connection can be established to align their philanthropic goals with the work of the organization.

2. Demonstrate financial soundness

A historic bias against discussing the business practices or financial position of cultural organizations definitely exists. This is driven by the fear that donors will be uninspired by a pragmatic approach that signals a choice of business over art. However, as the industry has seen in recent years, it is almost always precarious financial positions that sink cultural organizations (and almost never a perceived lack of artistic quality). Donors understand the importance of good financial management in today's challenging economic environment. In fact, they want and expect assurances that sound plans are in place to make the best use of their money.

3. Make personal connections beyond statistics

Donors are as diverse in their thinking as any other group and respond to information in different ways. Some will respond best if provided data-driven information that reports quantitative results such as numbers served, sales and attendance figures, percentages of capacity, numbers of student involved, and awards and achievements. However, many respond best through an emotional connection, such as personal stories and testimonials that communicate the impact of donations on a personal level. A beneficiary's story can have a more profound impact on a donor than statistics.

Fundraising staff must be prepared to discuss the same program or activity in multiple ways. Testing responses to both styles of messaging—by preparing A/B versions of a direct mail to understand how many donors respond to different versions of the same story—can also reap significant benefits.

4. Disseminate timely and frequent communications

Along with messages that inspire giving, organizations can be proactive by creating as many opportunities as possible to communicate with donors to move them along the knowledge curve and increase giving and retention levels. Infrequent communications convey poor stewardship, diminish response rates and gift levels, and can result in a donor forgetting about an organization altogether as they engage with other causes that court their interest. If solicitation appeals are the only occasion donors hear about the work of an organization, increasing donor engagement will be significantly more challenging.

Even on a limited budget, there are simple ways to establish a regular stream of non-solicitation communications with donors. These communications vehicles can document quality stewardship, improve donor knowledge of an organization, and reinforce the impact and emotional return on the investment that gifts provide. Newsletters in print, email or social media can be very effective. Sharing news articles, positive reviews and feedback, and other validations of an organization's success can be incorporated into other marketing, public relations and fundraising communications. An insider's update from the CEO, artistic director or an exhibition curator may help donors feel special and more informed.

Resources are rarely the true barrier to better donor communication. There must be intent to develop a donor-centric mentality. Creative solutions typically follow.

5. Share organizational learnings

Donors give because they want to make an impact, make a difference and provide opportunities for future generations. They share the same enthusiasm for success as the organizations they support. They also share many of the same apprehensions. Donors understand there are inherent risks in the work nonprofits do in the course of trying to find new solutions, chart new directions and build new programs that better serve communities.

Organizations should never be afraid to have honest dialogue with donors, even if it involves sharing what did not work. Similar to scientific research, setbacks are stepping stones that support more informed choices going forward. Sharing the journey toward success, even if it is rocky, will make donors feel more invested. This kind of honest dialogue is a very different message than sounding an alarm or appearing hopeless without a plan, which is, of course, not a motivating message.

6. Eliminate barriers to giving

A thoughtful review of ways to create more engaging donor messaging should also include a look at minimizing barriers to giving. Not being appreciated is often cited as a barrier to giving. This usually manifests itself as not being properly thanked or recognized. If these barriers exist, and/or the other regular donor response of "I wasn't asked" is also apparent, these fundamentals must be addressed. Recognition is rarely

the primary reason for giving, but failing to recognize a donor's generosity suggests that an organization does not care.

Of the reasons cited as "barriers to donating more" from a study in *The Philanthropist* covering several years (2004-2010), there was one barrier to giving that increased markedly. The number of donors who did not think their money was used efficiently rose by 23%. This jump suggests that donors did not understand how their money would be used, and therefore assumed that it would not be used effectively. As a recurring theme throughout this discussion, improving and increasing messaging that nurtures a donor's knowledge of an organization will most likely reduce this concern.

Conclusion

Considering the clear links between thoughtful donor communications and increased giving, undertaking a regular communications assessment can add tremendous value and improve fundraising results in the short term and for years to come. This immersive process can also have the effect of reminding an organization of the ways its work impacts communities and inspires donors to share in the journey.

People want to be moved by great causes, which is why development programs should never underestimate the power of frequent, honest and illuminating conversations with donors. Donors are insightful and intelligent, so fundraising communications must be as well.

Some content in this article provided courtesy of [Arts Consulting Group](#)