

# 10 Tips for Writing Appeals in Direct Mail

(Excerpted from "What Every Person Raising Their Own Support Needs to Know" (Alston-Kline, Inc. 2003), p. 87. Used with permission.)

## 1. Zero in on your "offer."

Don't write a word until you know *why* you are asking your readers to help, *how* they can make a difference and *what* they should do next. The answers to these questions are your "offer" - what you are offering your audience the opportunity to accomplish.

The very best offers are specific, e.g. "Your gift of \$22 will provide food, blankets and medicine for a homeless family in Kosovo." The worst offers are generic, e.g. "Your gift will help the DoGood Foundation continue its wonderful work." The offer can single-handedly make your mailing a success or failure, so pay attention to it!

## 2. Know your audience.

Are you writing to people who have never heard of your organization and asking them to give a first gift? Or are you speaking to faithful current donors? Make sure you know who will be receiving your letter and speak to them appropriately. Segment your mailing list and make appropriate offers to each segment.

## 3. Write to a person.

However, once you know your audience, don't write to *all* of them as a big, impersonal group. Instead, pick *one* imaginary person in your audience - perhaps someone like your mother or a crotchety old uncle, and write a personal, persuasive letter to that individual.

## 4. Capture attention immediately.

"You can't bore people into buying something," commented David Ogilvy, the founder of one of New York's largest ad agencies. Nor can you bore them into giving you a gift. The average person will decide within just a few seconds whether or not he is going to trash your letter, so make sure you capture his attention and give him reasons to keep on reading ... and reading ... and reading.

## 5. Understand what motivates people.

People want to give to basic needs that resonate with their emotions and perceptions of what is important, like feeding a hungry child or bringing renewal to a church community. And they want to provide simple, immediate solutions - like shipping a box of food right now. More advanced causes - such as providing agricultural training in a poor community so that children don't get hungry in the future - are much harder to sell by mail.

So whenever possible, try to position your cause in basic, immediate terms that a donor can understand at an emotional level. And describe the solution in a way that the average donor on the street can visualize in her mind.

## 6. Focus on your envelope.

Your envelope has one job - to get opened. Whether you decide to make a bold splash (neon orange paper with the teaser headline in 20 point type) or go the subtle route ("Personal Invitation Enclosed"), put time and effort into developing a carrier envelope that your specific audience will find intriguing and open. Be sensitive to your current donors with transition pieces during organizational change. Don't move to 4-color brochures from plain bond narratives. Take a simple step in creating a changed communication that will cause them to wonder what is happening and to measure if it is good.

## **7. Lead with purpose and punch.**

Open your letter with your most compelling ammunition. Don't waste your time on "warm up" copy - explanations, platitudes, how your organization was founded, etc. Instead, jump right in.

For example, *"Dear Mrs. Smith: Have you ever held a dying child in your arms? I have - and it broke my heart ..."* Or you can also begin in a simple, businesslike fashion, e.g. *"Dear Mr. Jones: I'm writing today because little children are dying in Africa, and I need your immediate help to provide nutritious meals and medicine to save their lives."*...Or you can begin with a simple statement regarding change or renewal during change, e.g. *"Dear Ms. Clark: We're still here doing what we've always done. We are learning to do it even more loving."* Whatever tack you choose, get right to the point.

## **8. Write like a real person.**

Do your friends compliment you on your expansive vocabulary and perfect grammar? Those are habits you'll need to break for direct mail. Instead, write like people talk. That means you use sentence fragments. Break rules of grammar. Start sentences with "and" and "but." You also need to purge big words. Don't say, "his responsibilities included"; instead say, "his job." A simple word like "tool" will always work better than a fancy word like "implement." Write everything at an eighth grade level, and use a personal, friendly tone of voice.

## **9. Cut the fat.**

Fred Astaire had this advice about composing dance routines: "Get it until it's perfect, then cut two minutes." The same holds true for direct mail. You'll need to ruthlessly edit your first draft. Are you telling a heartbreaking story of a family in need? Then include only the essential details - not all the background information. Keep snipping until every remaining word is critical to the success of your letter.

## **10. Ask for money.**

This is tough. You absolutely must do this - multiple times if possible. Ask for money at the beginning of the letter. Ask for it several times throughout the letter. And focus on a gift at the close of your letter and probably in the P.S. (which every fundraising letter should have). This is important because people scan letters instead of reading them from beginning to end. This is a difficult transition and part of your marketing strategy to determine. If you have had years of not asking for support directly then you ask it will seem awkward. Practice this skill to keep it authentic and soft. But, if you need help, ask. And, always connect the request for a gift to something of concrete substance that is needed.

Remember, all of this asking and strategizing is for a good cause, *your* cause for meaningful work. Follow these rules to raise more money and you'll help make this world better for us all.

*"Reach for the stars. You won't catch them, but you won't end up with a handful of mud either."* Leo Burnett