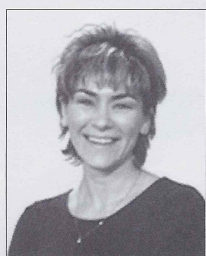




It pays to be polite

Adhering to **Lisa Sargent's** eight laws for the perfect donor thank-you letter will ensure your donors feel appreciated and compelled to give again



Lisa Sargent is a US-based donor communications specialist. She has owned Sargent Communications since 2002 and works with charities and other non profits on both sides of the Atlantic, including Shriners Hospitals for Children and Merchants Quay Ireland. Lisa is the voice of SOFII's popular clinic on donor thank-you letters and writes articles on copywriting tactics and donor communications. She publishes *The Loyalty Letter* e-news and has been featured in places like *Fundraising Success Magazine* and *Mal Warwick's Newsletter*.

www.lisasargent.com

Your charity's donation thank-you letter holds amazing power to cement your relationship with new donors, boost loyalty among your existing donors and improve your fundraising results. Indeed, a letter which your supporters are waiting for and are practically guaranteed to open.

They want your thank-you letter to make them feel good. They want a reason to love you but you must get your letter right. Only then will you plant seeds that blossom into a lifelong relationship with your new or existing supporters. Get it wrong, and the unhappy donor will label you 'just another charity' and you will be cast into the frigid abyss of attrition. Fine people of fundraising: don't you want to get your thank-you right? Of course you do. So here's how:

(1) Send promptly

Nearly every fundraiser around the world, from Penelope Burk to Ken Burnett, recommends sending a thank-you letter within 48 hours if you can. Wait too long? Your supporter has long since forgotten you. So, be quick. And make sure everyone gets a thank-you because little gifts lead to large ones. Besides, not saying thank you is bad manners.

(2) Be relevant

In order to be relevant your letter must be personalised. I can't count the number of thank-yous I've received that begin 'Dear Member of XYZ Charity', so please – call your donor by name. And if you assign member ID numbers, omit them on this letter; no one wants to give to an organisation that calls them Member #5367809. Being relevant also means tying your thank-you to the campaign or appeal that generated the gift. If this isn't possible, you should update your letters quarterly.

(3) Focus on 'you'

I'm talking about 'you,' the donor. Most donation letters are all about what the organisation is doing, when instead they should focus on all the good things the donor makes possible. Try this exercise – get your current donor thank-you letter and see how many instances of the words 'we' and 'our' you can find. Then see how many you can revise to focus on 'you,' the donor. Your letter will be better for it.

(4) Include contact information

Short and sweet will suffice: 'If you ever have questions, we'd love to hear from you. Please call us on ...' And if you include an e-mail address, don't use something generic like info@xyzcharity. Donors will not swamp your inbox I promise you – it's all in the gesture.

(5) Put it in perspective

Pretend you are plopped down in a forest behind your home, at midnight. Once your eyes adjust you can see the way but it takes a moment to get your bearings. Your donors are like this and your job is to point the way. In your thank-you letter let them know when they'll hear from you next and how. By newsletter? With a phone call? Then say so.

(6) Report progress

Your thank-you must, must, must let donors know that their gift has been put to use and how it is helping. No need for a manifesto: 'Your gift is now working hard to [protect mothers and their babies in Asia]...' is perfectly fine.

(7) Balance enthusiasm

In the US, we're a little over-the-top. So our thank-you letters are often peppered with things like 'all because of you,' and 'you made it possible.' If this is too much for

your donors, engage with phrases such as 'you helped make it possible...' and 'your gift joins with others to...', or 'through your gift, you're helping to...'

(8) P.S. — postscripts get read, even in e-mails

Here you can invite donors to tour your programmes, visit your website or add an update. And always remember to include one more thanks.

Some extra ideas to consider:

- Consider a two-part thank-you, like US-based Smile Train. (*See* 'Something to smile about' in *Mal Warwick's Newsletter*, May 2009. www.malwarwick.com).
- Handwrite your thank-you letters (and if you can't handwrite the whole thing, have your president or CEO handwrite margin notes for middle and major donors).
- Try a thank-you-as-heirloom: it's no secret that elderly people display their cards, so why not create cards worth displaying? Consider photos, artwork from your clients or volunteers, or paw print art for humane societies.
- Recognise tenure and/or cumulative giving thresholds in your thank-you (*See* 'Acknowledging Donor Loyalty,' www.theagitator.net).
- Use both sides: put the formal tax receipt on reverse, saving the front for a warm, donor-friendly thanks.

See how it's done

SOFII's thank-you letter clinic features annotated, before-and-after samples of thank you letters from nearly a dozen organisations worldwide. Find it at www.sofii.org.

