

# How Absolutely, Positively, **NOT** How To Write a Fund Raising Letter

*Ok, I'm going to say this only once: "Before you send a fund raising letter, know what you're doing. Make it a science if you must." A couple of weeks ago, I received a direct mail appeal. Nothing about that upset me; after all, many not-for-profit organizations rely heavily on the charitable goodness of persons receiving the appeals. May their kind increase! Here's what bothered me.*

by Rus Kinzinger

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- 1. They got my name wrong.** It's Russel, not Russell. Not a big deal, but it *is* a first impression and we all know how first impressions matter. When you ask for money, start by getting the name right.
  - **Numbers without comparative parameters are merely snapshots,** nothing more. At least, tell me whether number of persons served is more or less than the year prior, and why. I may be interested.
  - **Give me a perspective on how number of persons assisted is impacted by agency resources,** e.g., staffing. For example, if you tell me that you served 300 persons during the year, what does that mean? Does this imply multiple contacts per month, or a single contact in a year? Is the contact brief, e.g., referral, or is it extended as with counseling?
  - **Tell me why my donation matters.** This particular letter started by stating that I could make a difference but never said specifically how I could do that. It can be as simple as *"We recently lost a critical grant we counted on to provide homecare services and are faced with the real possibility of having to discontinue care to the elderly of our area. With your help, however, we won't have to."*
- 2. The appeal I received from this charity was nearly word-for-word the appeal they sent me last year.** They invested absolutely no creativity in the new ask. It was like, "We've got to do this direct mail thing. What can we write that will take us away from our important work for the least amount of time?" The only substantive change was different statistics. How do I know? I had actually kept the prior year's appeal from this organization and compared the two side by side.
- 3. They thought I would be impressed with numbers.** Did you notice that I used the word "statistics" in my 2<sup>nd</sup> point? Fortunately, the appeal didn't slather me with lots of analytics, e.g., cost per hour per person served, net change in cost per hour per person served this year versus last year, and the like. Just principally number of units served. Here's how it could have been strengthened.
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- 4. They thought numbers would move me to donate.** Admittedly stats have value but they will *never* elicit a donation from me--or from very many others. They're just too cold.
- 5. The appeal I received was ultimately but a listing of services the agency provided.** Missed entirely was the heartbreak in the lives the agency served. The appeal was too much about the organization's services (which obviously impressed the writer) and almost nothing about how those served by the organization saw it as a rescuer. Too bad. It's really a great organization and the service it provides is quite valuable--a point entirely lost in its end of year mail appeal.

Oh well, you get the picture. Right? Direct mail is a great funding method. Done properly, it has pull and it is quantifiable. Do it wrong, however, and you might as well kiss that donor you've wanted to reach goodbye. If you send direct mail appeals, make the process an art and a science. If that's asking too much, by all means sell restaurant subscriptions. Or something!