

The Nonprofit Marketer's Guide to Donor Reengagement:

How to Ask for Money

How you ask for donations can have much more influence on the success of a campaign than you may realize. Following are some best practices for asking for money.

Ask for time, get money.

Studies have found that people behave differently when they have been thinking about time versus thinking about money—and the order matters. In one study, participants were asked how interested they were in volunteering for or donating to a certain project; other participants were asked the same questions in reverse order. The control group was not primed with any questions at all. All participants were then given the opportunity to donate the \$10 they had earned for participating in the study to the cause. Those who were asked first about donating their time gave the most, while those who had been asked first for money actually gave less than the control group.

The researchers concluded that when people are asked for money, they focus more on their own monetary goals, which can make them stingier donors.

By contrast, thinking about time connects them to their life experiences and a more emotional state, which can boost generosity.

Your organization should be cultivating a volunteer program in addition to soliciting financial supporters. By asking potential donors to give their time, you may receive larger gifts, even if they do not end up volunteering.

Start small and grow.

Most people will not donate to a new organization up front but may be willing to take a small step that can lead to a larger commitment down the road. The psychological explanation is *consistency theory*.

Consistency theory proposes that people like to think and act in ways that are in line with their previous beliefs and behaviors.

This is why asking potential donors to sign a petition, send an email to their congressperson, or take another small, nonmonetary step can be so effective. Once they have engaged in some way, these people are more likely to donate to your cause as a follow-up action reinforcing that initial choice.

Peer pressure works.

All donations are helpful for your organization, but as a fundraiser, you may feel like you are stuck between a rock and a hard place when it comes to asking for a specific amount. You don't want to ask for so much that you scare away a potential donor, but you don't want to ask for so little that you leave money on the table. So, what should you do?

Psychologists note that people generally rely on cues from their peers to make decisions—and social information can lead to higher donations. One study during a radio station phone drive checked to see how much knowing what a previous donor gave impacted donations. It found that donation sizes were largest when a caller was told that a previous caller had given the 95th-percentile gift of \$300. Another study confirmed that quoting a donor who had given less

than the prospective donor's initial donation caused them to downgrade their giving significantly.

These studies imply that it is better to ask for a good deal more than the average donation your organization typically receives—and to make it clear that others are giving at a higher rate.

People like progress.

As all seasoned fundraisers know, it is much harder to raise money at the start of a campaign than near the end. That is because people feel a greater sense of accomplishment and excitement when the team

they are part of is closing in on a goal. That is why so many campaigns show progress bars or thermometers to visually cue the campaign's momentum. The good news is that as you get closer to the end of a campaign, raising money can be easier, but this also means that getting started can take additional effort.

One popular strategy is to get an anchor donor or a group of core donors to help launch a campaign so that you can come out of the gate with a partially filled thermometer (so to speak). Matching gifts can also help drive donations, as people see that their impact on the goal will go further than their actual contribution. ■

Bonus Tip!

Matching-gift programs represent a major missed opportunity for most nonprofit organizations. It's clear that donors are more than willing to increase their support when they know it can be matched by their employers, and companies are happy to offer employees these options in order to streamline philanthropic outreach. The potential impact of matching gifts is significant, but awareness is low. Nonprofits should consider the success of matching-gift programs and reach out to local businesses of all sizes to develop these opportunities.

