

## Online communities will change the way we do business

*The Online Industry Summit, which took place in Johannesburg from 7-9 February, was an intensive three-day platform for industry leaders to exchange views about the online space and its development.*

*Sheila McCallum, head of Downes Murray International's Online fundraising division, was there.*

**T**he over-riding message coming through loud and clear at the recent three-day Online Summit in Johannesburg is that the Web 2.0 social networking sites will change the way we do business.

No longer the preserve of computer geeks debating technology issues, Web 2.0 is increasingly a place where millions of savvy Internet users hang out. Essentially a collection of interactive blogs, the social networking sites give ordinary people a voice.

Had a bad experience flying SAA, or endless problems with your new BMW? Go to [www.hellopeter.com](http://www.hellopeter.com) and tell everyone else about it. And if you're irate enough, there's nothing to stop you even setting up your own site like [www.bellkom.co.za](http://www.bellkom.co.za) or [www.dontflysaa.com](http://www.dontflysaa.com)

### Controlling the message

Sites like these attract millions of visitors every month, exposing consumers to messages that are far more powerful than those created by advertising agencies – because they're so much more believable.

Luisa Mazinter, CEO of The Marketing Site, and Mike Stopforth, Managing Director of Cerebra, both identified the scary fact that marketers and advertisers are no longer controlling the messages around their brands. They can only enter the conversation.

And what are fundraisers, if not marketers?

### What about NGOs?

If you're not squeaky clean, totally transparent and accountable, you could be exposed.

On the flip side, if you're doing a good job, some well-placed comments on the right site could get your message out to millions of potential donors!

And if you have something catchy or clever enough to say – or show, via video feed – you don't even need to initiate your next viral mail campaign. The community will do it for you.

### Target audience

Like their corporate peers, South African non-profits tend to discount the Internet as a communication medium, based

on the fact that only a small percentage of the total population has Internet access.

Still, that small percentage amounts to about 3.7 million people – most of whom have high levels of education and earn an above average income. In fact, the very people most likely to contribute to charitable causes!

In her presentation, Gillian Meier, Business Manager of Bid or Buy, disclosed that the company has over 170 000 registered users and turns over R5 million monthly. Still think online fundraising is not for you?

### And what about the future?

If online fundraising is already a force to be reckoned with, one thing is guaranteed: it's going to become even more important in the years ahead.

Rudolph Muller, founder and manager of [Mybroadband.co.za](http://Mybroadband.co.za), had interesting facts to share about Internet usage in America and Europe. And even though cost is currently a limiting factor in South African broadband usage, we know that sooner or later, we will follow those trends.

Research conducted overseas indicates that people now spend more time online than they spend watching television or reading newspapers and magazines. In advertising terms, we all know you have to 'be where the eyeballs are'.

### Rocket science

Of course, Internet users have millions of sites to choose from. So how do you make sure yours is one of the ones they visit?

According to Vinny Lingham, Chief Strategist at Incubeta, search engine optimisation and pay-per-click advertising are the top two most effective tools for driving traffic to your site. Banner ads and e-mails to rented lists are the worst.

As someone who has dabbled in pay-per-click advertising myself, I identified strongly with Lingham's admission that at Incubeta, they literally do employ a rocket scientist to calculate bids and keyword combinations!

This final point does however highlight an important fact: even if you start small, the time to engage the online community ... to find out what works and doesn't work for your organisation ... is now! Get left behind now and you may never catch up. ■

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# Five New Year resolutions for you

**H**aving resolved to be less critical and more positive in my column this year, let me start by suggesting some resolutions which you may want to consider to improve your fundraising performance.

1. *Take a critical look at your newsletter through the eyes of your typical donor.*

Is it set in a serif typestyle large enough to be easily readable by someone with less than perfect eyesight? Does it have catchy headlines focused on making donors feel really good about their support? Are there good, clear pictures of your projects and your beneficiaries, or are they mostly pictures of staff and board members designed to stroke egos? Is there frequent usage of 'you' and 'your' in both headlines and body copy – or is it a 'we, we, we' publication talking mainly about how wonderful or hard working you and your staff are?

One of the best ways to ensure that you don't fall into any of these traps is to always refer to your newsletter as a 'donor newsletter' because that should be its foremost purpose – making your donors feel important and giving them positive feedback on how you are putting their money to good use.

2. *Resolve to examine your special events as if for the first time and keep only those that pass the test of an acceptable return on true investment.*

So many organisations fail to honestly put the real cost to golf days, charity walks, donor dinners and the like.

Put a cost to the wear and tear on your board and your volunteers and the huge amount of time and effort which goes into the preparation, publicity and execution of an event.

### **Strain**

And decide whether the net income is really worth all the strain or whether your time (and that of your key people) could be more profitably employed calling on major donor prospects, putting together a compelling proposal or devising a cause-related marketing proposition for a major company.

Finally make sure that you are getting the names and addresses of all attendees so that they can go into your direct mail donor acquisition programme and be encouraged to become regular donors to your cause.

3. *Develop a 'Wish List'.*

A 'Wish List' of items that you really need (whether they cost R100 or R10,000) is a wonderful tool that you can use throughout the year. Get your team together and brainstorm a

list which you can use in your newsletters, in your appeal mailings and on your website and produce it so that it looks like a shopping list but with an explanation and short motivation for each item based on the benefits they will bring to those you help.

Where practical, develop a list of suppliers of some of the key items and then approach them individually or send them a letter enclosing the list and asking for their support.

4. *Resolve to take a hard look at your donor thanking programme.*

If you are not getting your thank you letters out within two days (three at the most) from when you receive a donation, then do whatever it takes to get this right.

### **Donor retention**

Retention of donors is becoming more and more important in the competitive environment of fundraising and making donors feel that their gifts are appreciated is a vital step in the process.

This is especially so for those who are giving to you for the first time, as they are unlikely to ever give again if they feel that their support is not important to you.

Also make certain that you confirm in your thank you letter that their gift will be put

to good use and talk about what it will help to achieve. And what about testing a phone call to thank all first time donors as a way of building the relationship?

5. *Find out what your donors are thinking.*

One of the worst things we all sometimes do, is to make assumptions for our donors. You and I are almost certainly not examples of the average donor to an organisation – and a donor to an environmental organisation will often be very different from one who supports child welfare.

So think about ways and means of polling the opinions of your donors about what aspects of your work are important to them, what motivates them to support you, how often they would like to hear from you and what you might be doing better to make them feel appreciated.

You can use the telephone, a mailed questionnaire or even e-mail (if you have enough e-mail addresses) to find answers to crucial questions which will help guide the way you treat your donors and keep them loyal and happy in the future.

I hope that at least some of these five suggested resolutions will be useful to you in planning your fundraising year ahead – and wish you every success with your programme and many more happy and contented donors. ■

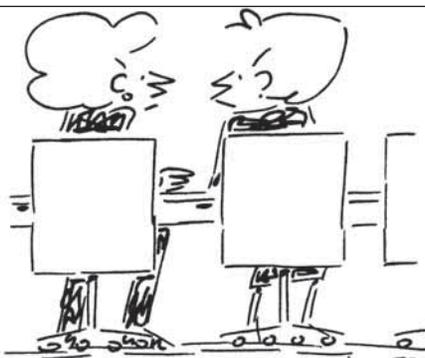


*Terry A Murray is former chairman of Downes Murray International and recently retired president of DVA Navion South Africa.*

**“Find answers to crucial questions which will help guide the way you treat your donors and keep them loyal and happy in the future.”**

# Milestone Thinking

*On-target observations in brief*



*'All this time I thought a matching gift came in the same colour and style.'*

*The Chronicle of Philanthropy  
August 3, 2006*

Every good relationship is built on open communication, and your online programme is no different. Give your members ample opportunities to weigh in on your issues through surveys, comments on blogs, interactive quizzes, and contests.

*With acknowledgement to  
Rachel Allison in Mal Warwick's Newsletter  
January 2007  
Visit [www.malwarwick.com](http://www.malwarwick.com)*

It is by understanding the essential voluntary nature of giving, and by treating each prospective donor with the great respect this knowledge entails, that fundraisers enhance the joy of giving for their donors.

*With acknowledgement to  
The NonProfit Times  
August 1, 2006*

Research has found that thanking donors personally (by telephone) promotes their commitment to a cause and increases the amount of money they subsequently give.

*With acknowledgement to  
The Chronicle of Philanthropy  
November 23, 2006*

To tap into the lucrative e-commerce market, a growing number of charities are experimenting with creative and unusual ways to get potential donors to register online, and build an e-mail database for future efforts.

*With acknowledgement to  
The NonProfit Times  
June 15, 2006*



## A sanctuary of love and caring

**B**orn with hemiplegia (paralysis of the left side), Thabo\* arrived at Woodside Sanctuary almost six years ago after being abandoned by his family.

Therapists at Woodside had little background information on Thabo, but one thing was obvious – he was severely traumatised. With difficulty, his mental ability was assessed, and through constant love, patience and attention, therapists finally made a breakthrough.

Because of his inability to communicate he was assessed at the Centre for Augmentive and Alternative Communication at the University of Pretoria.

In an effort to enhance his verbal communication, careworkers – who are in daily contact with Thabo – were introduced to appropriate ways to communicate with him.

Physiotherapy has improved his ability to walk, and since the beginning of 2005 Thabo has shown a marked improvement in his overall development.

He's been accepted as a learner by a school for children with special needs, and today is an energetic and delightful little boy – one of 110 residents who find love, and a caring touch at Woodside Sanctuary.

\*Name changed to protect identity.

**(Readers are invited to submit photographs, together with a brief overview of their organisation's work, for inclusion in this regular feature.) ■**

*Since 1956 children and adults with neurological and physical disability have found love, care and a special touch every day at Woodside Sanctuary.*

## FUNDRAISING FORUM

Fundraising Forum is a regular newsletter dedicated to the enhancement of management, fundraising techniques and the promotion of community service, welfare and not-for-profit organisations of all kinds.

It is published by Downes Murray International and circulated, free of charge, to anyone with an interest in the growth and improvement of the non-profit sector and those served by it. In addition to regular features written by Downes Murray International staff, there are extracts from worldwide fundraising publications which are reprinted with acknowledgement to the publishers.

We welcome submissions for publication from all writers involved in not-for-profit work.

Visit [www.dmi.co.za](http://www.dmi.co.za)

# Strategic advice pays off for Guide Dogs Victoria

Terry Murray reports on how Downes Murray International has assisted in growing the donor base of Guide Dogs Victoria, in Australia.

Last year the Downes Murray International team were asked by their sister company in Melbourne to assist with a new business 'pitch' to Guide Dogs Victoria.

The opportunity was to go 'head-to-head' in a new donor acquisition challenge with the incumbent direct mail agency who had been handling the Guide Dog account for 15 years.

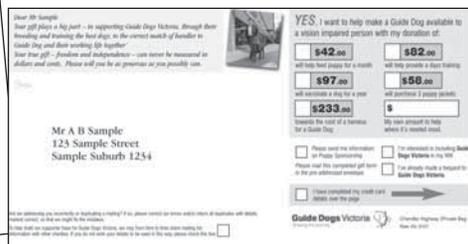
We were each given the same budget – AU\$75,000 and allowed to create a new mailing package and choose which mailing lists to test. The result – a resounding win for DVA Navion, our sister company. The

package which Downes Murray International created produced a response rate of 3.1% and outperformed the opposition by a resounding 550%. 1244 new donors were gained at a cost of just AU\$10.15 each.

The result was that DVA Navion were awarded the account and with DMI's strategic and creative assistance have within just six months grown the donor file by over 30% by identifying new donors and reactivating lapsed donors who had not given for more than four years.

In this same period the net income to the Guide Dogs Victoria direct mail programme has increased by 41%. To top it all the latest Autumn donor renewal mailing has just raised twice the amount achieved by the Autumn mailing of the previous year.

The plan now is to forge ahead with further new donor acquisition mailings and to double the size of the donor base within the next year with net income topping the AU\$1 million mark within the same period.



Head of Downes Murray International Online, Sheila McCallum, is excited about the growth in online giving. Not only is it a safer giving option than sending a cheque in the post – the money is also in your bank account immediately!

## Catholic Welfare & Development builds on Internet fundraising success

As with most things, success in online fundraising relates directly to the amount of time and effort put into it. Catholic Welfare & Development's annual Buckets of Love Christmas campaign is a case in point.

Building on the successful 2005 campaign – promotional activity was stepped up for the 2006 campaign. The result was a further 70% increase in funds raised online during the Oct-Dec period.

Overall, online giving doubled from 2005 to 2006 – a trend mirrored by other DMI Online clients.

Starting with the website, the home page was transformed into a dedicated 'Buckets of Love' appeal – which was emotion-driven, and linked to a press and radio campaign.

A dynamic map was created, showing the areas where buckets were to be distributed. As visitors 'moused-over' each area, a pop-up window appeared, showing photographs of people in need, together with a running total of buckets still required in that area.

### Interactive

Donors had the option of choosing in which area they wanted their buckets delivered, typing in a personal message (which was printed out by the organisation and attached to the sponsored bucket) and then seeing the number of buckets on the home page recalculate in line with their donation.

There was also an opportunity to download a printable gift card, for those making the donation in lieu of a gift for friends or relatives.

The campaign was supported online by pay-per-click and banner advertising, as well as e-mail and viral mail. Offline, we used direct mail, press, radio, and outdoor advertising.

Donors who made gifts online were asked to check a box indicating how they heard about the campaign. This produced valuable information that will guide future strategy.

### Interesting facts

More interesting facts and figures:

- 65% of donors were local; the balance donated from the USA, UK, Ireland, Australia, Germany and elsewhere in Europe.
- 38% of online donors are new to the organisation – indicating that the Internet is a valuable acquisition medium.

Catholic Welfare & Development is not the only DMI Online client tapping into the potential of the Internet. Those with young fundraising programmes, in particular, are finding that a significant portion of total funds raised comes from online giving.

Factor in the cost advantage of online communication, and it's no surprise that the Internet is a valuable fundraising tool.

# Charities' treatment of donors key to understanding Why they stop giving

**M**any donors stop giving because they hate the way charities approach them for money – or they don't feel they get enough information about how their money is used.

That is the conclusion of several researchers who have examined why people don't give.

Penelope Burk, president of Cygnus Applied Research, a Chicago fundraising consulting firm, has conducted research on the giving attitudes and behaviour of more than 250 donors in the United States and Canada.

She has also examined more than 370 charities in the two countries that responded to 200 questions about their fundraising operations.

Donors were nearly unanimous in what they said they wanted from charities in return for continued support. Large majorities said that they would continue to give – and even increase their contributions over time – if they received prompt acknowledgments of their gifts, confirmation that the contributions were used as they intended, and evidence of measurable results about what their donations had achieved, all before they were asked for more money.

## Meaningful communication

But the same donors said that most charities do not communicate with them in any meaningful way about how their donations are used. And more than 90% said that 'none' or 'hardly any' charities had contacted them without asking for money.

'The pattern of receiving a gift and acknowledging it while at the same time asking for another donation doesn't work for donors,' Ms Burk says, adding that charities fail to respond to donors' needs in other ways.

Charities told Ms Burk that they spent a third of their fundraising budget on plaques, certificates and other trinkets that acknowledge donors for their gifts. But while more than three-quarters of donors said they had received such tokens of appreciation, only 5% said they display them. Most donors said they throw them away.

Nearly 90% of the charities publish a newsletter for donors, with 59% reporting that their newsletter is from eight to 16 pages long. Two-thirds of the donors said that they don't have time to read such newsletters, and 65% said that they would prefer a one-page bulletin about the specific programme or service their money supported.

One reason charities don't give donors this information is that they apply the gifts to their operating budgets and send donors only generalised information about their work, 'the tenor and content of which leaves donors cold', says Ms. Burk.

'Put the gift somewhere so you can give donors measurable results,' she says. 'If you assign their gift to a programme or service, you can talk about that, which is much more compelling.'

Charities, she notes, spend the most time and effort on people who have made large gifts, and those donors are allowed to designate gifts to the specific projects they care about.

But fundraisers should consider taking the opposite approach: lavishing attention on new donors and giving them specific projects to support to help ensure that they become loyal supporters too, Ms. Burk says.

Once a donor becomes a long-time supporter who trusts an organisation and makes large donations, she says, that person is often willing to let the charity use his or her money where it is needed most.

'Many fundraisers take the position that since such a large percentage of first-time donors will not renew, their investment should be minimised for this uncommitted group,' she says. 'In fact, few first-time donors renew precisely because they do not receive the essential information they feel is needed – measurable results on their gifts at work that would make them want to give again.'

In another series of studies with 20,000 donors in Britain and the United States who participated in focus groups and surveys from 1998 to 2004, large numbers of donors said they had stopped giving to charities because of the poor 'quality of service' they receive.

According to the research, described in *Building Donor Loyalty: The Fundraiser's Guide to Increasing Lifetime Value*, by Adrian Sargeant and Elaine Jay, people judge the overall effectiveness of an organisation by how they are treated as donors.

## Evaluation

Those who stopped giving to one or more charities were significantly more likely than repeat donors to say they had been solicited too often, not thanked appropriately for their gifts, or not given an adequate choice on how much to donate.

To keep donors, Mr Sargeant and Ms Jay advise fundraisers to conduct periodic evaluations of how satisfied donors are with solicitations and other information they receive from their organisations and make changes that improve donor satisfaction.

But despite the fact that companies routinely measure their customer-service efforts and charities often evaluate their programmes and services to help others, they write, 'nonprofits have shown surprisingly little interest in the notion of service quality in the context of fundraising'. ■

*Penelope Burk, President of Cygnus Applied Research in Chicago, says her research has found that donors hate it when charities thank them for their donations and at the same time ask them to make another gift. Holly Hall reports on the results of recent surveys on the giving attitudes of donors.*

*Adapted from  
The NonProfit Times  
November 23, 2006  
Visit [www.nptimes.com](http://www.nptimes.com)*

# Creating an oasis of Calm in the board room

*Sure, you say. The board room is never an oasis of calm, unless you mean the kind of resigned calm that comes over a normal human being while being mercilessly bored to tears.*

**F**or most, the board room is an oasis only of enforced silence that spreads over the poor unfortunates who gather on the third Wednesday of every month to re-learn lessons of passivity and delayed reactions.

But a good board room is an oasis of calm, at least of the conceptual variety – the atmosphere is not rushed or cramped, and allows participants to go on journeys of discovery and learning.

If this sounds hopelessly naive, consider this simple observation: most good boards of directors operate with a deliberate and unwavering orientation to the long term.

## Dysfunctional

Let's look first at what causes dysfunctional board meetings. The biggest wrecking ball is sheer boredom when executives spend most of their time talking at the board. This promotes passiveness and encourages members to disengage. Why? It's because this approach is the complete opposite of what makes for effective board meetings – it forces everyone concerned to operate in the past.

In most cases the decisions have already been made and it's too late to do anything.

Another familiar complaint about boards is micromanagement. This is a perfectly accurate and revealing phrase. The board's job is leadership, not management. These two types of tasks each have their own proper time frame. Managers must have a relatively short time frame.

Leaders' time frame should be measured in years, not months, so if the board gives up its leadership role to manage the management, who is left to focus on the long term?

## Benefits

Orienting one's self to a long-term horizon is a form of intellectual discipline. Orienting the board to a long-term like this makes it easier to craft a strategy. In fact, it practically demands a strategy since that's the only construct that can make sense of such a long time frame.

The primary benefit of a long-term focus to the leadership task is that it makes challenges look like they're coming at you in slow motion.

When one can extrapolate trends as emerging month-by-month and year-by-year, it's easier to spot patterns. What would seem like a crisis five years from now will look more like the inevitable conclusion to a long run-up. Replaying the future tape may also give some insight into how to prevent the problem from occurring.

A strong commitment to seeing things in future terms tends to keep boards from looking backward, or being consumed in today's minutiae.

Boards make these kinds of mistakes when they see their primary task as being supervisory rather than providing strategic leadership.

Combine the mistaken perception of a primary supervisory role with some management terms' tendency to create passive listeners and it's easy to see how a board could degenerate into nit-picking and trivialities.

## Slow down

The practice of management is like a game of *Whack-a-Mole*, that carnival favourite featuring a big rubber mallet and a board full of holes through which mechanical moles poke their heads and then zip back down.

At the beginning of the game only one or two moles pop up, but by the end of the game they're popping up everywhere and the poor player can't possibly whack them all. Many managers feel like they're already losing at *Whack-a-Mole* by 9.45am every day.

Here's the hard truth: managers get paid to play *Whack-a-Mole*. Their success is measured by the number of moles they get others to whack. The more problems whacked – or prevented – the more productive they are as managers.

But *Whack-a-Mole* is the complete opposite of a long-term orientation. In *Whack-a-Mole*, the future looks like the next mole – or problem – and it's always just a nanosecond ahead. When does the manager ever get to the really big things that matter? The answer is that he or she never does, as long as they stay in that frame of mind.

That's where the Board Room Oasis comes in. This is the place where time slows down, and nothing needs to be done with split-second timing.

In the Board Room Oasis, the focus is on ideas, not personalities. The discipline of thinking in the long term permanently shapes all dialog. Performance is measured in years.

Why aren't all board rooms oases of calm? It's because *Whack-a-Mole* is fun. It's fast-paced and it's all about getting things done. Board members want very much to do the right things, and they gravitate to what they know best, which is often their own version of the mole game. But a board and a management team that whacks problems together is asking to be whacked by an unseen change in their environment.

Make the board room a place where the smallest unit of time is six months. Evaluate every item that seeks a spot on the agenda by whether it helps shape the future or simply ratifies something that already happened. Use the oasis to anticipate crises, not to resolve them. Relax and think long term. This is the Board Room, Oasis of Calm. No moles in here.

*Thomas A McLaughlin is a nonprofit management consultant with Grant Thornton in Boston. He is the author of the new book, Nonprofit Strategic Positioning (John Wiley and Sons, 2006). E-mail thomas.mclaughlin@gt.com* ■

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Visit [www.nptimes.com](http://www.nptimes.com)*

# Starting a lifelong conversation

**W**eaned on cell phones, e-mail and text messaging, many are busy establishing careers or struggling with tuition debt.

Unless they were provided with a strong sense of institutional loyalty during their campus days, direct mail appeals to these folks often do not generate desired results.

If direct mail is not likely to be effective, does it make sense to do it? I think the answer is emphatically 'yes'. Running such a programme at slight loss – or even if you don't come close to breaking even – should be regarded as a long-term investment.

That's because direct mail is an excellent way to build loyalty and begin a lifelong conversation. The earlier you establish this relationship, the better your long-term prospects.

However, too often fundraisers draft a letter to established donors and then 'segment' it for younger alumni by changing a sentence or two. It's certainly easier, but is it effective?

## Change your thinking

Address young alumni for who they are, and recognize their gifts are likely to be small. Take advantage of direct mail's flexibility to care for them as a unique audience. The key is to establish the relationship, not the Rands.

You need to be committed and willing to do a few things differently: researching, testing, and, perhaps, changing your strategy. Look at what other schools are doing. (Though there's no guarantee that what worked at one institution will also work for you. Testing is your best tool.)

## 40/40/20 rule

The conventional wisdom in direct marketing is that 40% of your results are attributable to the right audience, 40% to the right offer, and 20% to the right message.

In this case, audience is not a variable. So we need to examine the relative importance of offer versus message, since the offer is twice as important as the message.

Your appeal is fundamentally a 'sales' operation. Most young alumni aren't going to 'buy' unless you're selling something they want. What 'customers' want are benefits. So your message needs to describe the benefits the reader receives by responding.

Think in terms of the offer. Adopt the mindset that you're not soliciting your audience to give money. You're providing them with reasons why donating will benefit them – and informing them of new opportunities.

Most mailings I've seen, to the extent they mention benefits at all, refer only to the good feeling of giving back. While important, this shouldn't be your only selling point. You need to identify as many benefits as you can and include them in every appeal.

Not sure what those benefits are? Ask the people who already know: your donors. By

asking them why they give, they can provide you with a wonderful list you can adapt to your younger audience.

## Get emotional

Direct mail letters can be passionate messages to the reader or institutional information. Treat your young alumni as you would your friend, by introducing those same emotions into your appeals. Humour, pride, desire, even guilt are great motivators.

You attract attention with the envelope, so your 'sale' starts there. Envelopes are wonderful vehicles for testing. Introduce colour, try dramatic teasers, use different sizes, add humour – anything to make readers pause and wonder what's inside. This isn't their father's (or mother's) direct mail appeal, so change it!

## Premiums

In my opinion, when utilized correctly, premiums always increase response rates. The question is, do they do it profitably?

I don't think I've ever seen a conventional premium (coffee mugs, license plate frames, etc.) used effectively to young alumni. But many programmes do extremely well with such upfront 'freemiums' as address labels, greeting cards, personalized notepads, and bookmarks.

Before you say, 'I'd never cheapen my message with a tacky premium,' consider whether this is institutional policy and/or your own personal preference. Your job is to create unique appeals to your young alumni, while providing immediate benefits. If you set aside your personal preferences, you're free to try anything.

## Cost of testing

If you don't try something new, you may miss an opportunity to connect with this important constituency.

Remember, you don't need to blow your budget to test a new piece. You just need to become resourceful. For example, examine your current postage costs. See if you're getting every postal discount available. Speak with your printer. She can often suggest ways to test a new envelope size or ink color at little additional cost.

Look at the frequency of your appeals, the type of mail pieces, and the overall quantity mailed. Some schools are mailing less to longtime never-givers and redirecting the savings toward testing their younger audience.

## Final thought

Ultimately, young alumni may not be a dream demographic. But if you want to increase alumni participation, they're your programme's future. So start the conversation now. They'll be far more likely to keep up their end of the discussion later.

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*Young alumni could be considered a direct mail nightmare for university fundraisers. As a whole, they represent a fast-growing portion of your alumni base, while providing a serious challenge to participation goals.*

*With acknowledgement to Mal Warwick's newsletter  
January 2007  
Visit [www.malwarwick.com](http://www.malwarwick.com)*

## Say 100 000 thank you's – and mean it

**M**y start in direct mail fundraising was truly at the bottom. After college, rather than move back to my parents' and pick apples for a living, I settled for a job writing letters to angry donors.

I discovered that, like apples, angry donors are rarely in short supply. For donors who were angry about common things, I wrote form letters. The form letter that got the most use was called the 'Too Much Mail' letter. For donors angry about something specific, I wrote thousands of different personalized responses.

In crafting these letters day after day – and getting them chopped apart and put back together by my boss at the time – I learned lessons about donor motivation that I still use today.

Most of all, I discovered that donors want to be heard. I'm convinced that most donors aren't upset about the amount of mail they receive. Donors will complain about too much mail whether they receive three mailings a year or 30. Donors are upset they're being asked for money without being adequately thanked for the contributions they've already sent.

Of course, direct mail fundraising makes it impossible to thank every donor with a personal letter. But, today, there's no reason a well run donor acknowledgment programme can't produce letters that are personal and grateful. Thank you's don't need to be well-written – in fact, if they're a little awkward, I think that's a good thing. You just need to be sure you're choosing words that are bringing the donor close to you, instead of pushing the donor away.

'We are grateful' pushes the donor away. 'I am grateful' makes the donor feel that somebody took notice of her gift.

'Many of you responded generously' cues to the donor that this is a form letter. 'You responded generously' makes the donors feel she didn't write her cheque in vain.

I try to avoid all words that evoke large, distant organisations or masses of indeterminate donors. Every 'you' must be one person and one person alone – the donor reading the letter. And almost every 'we' should be crossed out and replaced with an 'I'.

I know, as simple as it seems, it's hard to write this way. Especially if you're writing in someone else's name, it's easier and safer to hide behind an organisation and offer a broad expression of gratitude.

But donors are human beings, and they give charitable gifts for personal reasons. To hear a word of thanks from someone they admire and respect will thrill them to the core – much more than the loftiest language about an organisation's important work.

### Personal

And, finally, if you're actually writing a personal note to a donor – either because her gift was that large or she was uniquely angry – I think it's an opportunity wasted if you don't lard the letter with cues that her acknowledgment is special.

When I wrote personal replies, I would put in any information I knew about the donor. I'd ask how her children were, I'd repeat word-for-word the complaint she expressed in her letter – or I'd thank her specifically for the number of years she had been a donor.

My favourite aspect of that job right out of college was the letters I received back from donors after I'd written them a personal reply. Many times donors would write back in grateful mortification. If they knew a real person was going to read their letter, they wouldn't have written in such an angry tone. After their apologies and words of thanks, these donors would end their letter with one request: that they might be put back on the mailing list again.

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- *Successful Fund Raising*, PO Box 4528, Sioux City, Iowa, 51104 (12 issues per annum \$149) website: [www.stevensoninc.com](http://www.stevensoninc.com)
- *The NonProfit Times*, 190 Tamarack Circle, Skillman, NJ08558 (\$129 per annum) website: [www.nptimes.com](http://www.nptimes.com)
- *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*, PO Box 1989, Marion, Ohio, 43306 (24 issues – one annum at \$95) website: <http://philanthropy.com>
- *Mal Warwick's Newsletter* – Successful Direct Mail, Telephone and Online Fundraising. Strathmoor Press Inc, 2550 Ninth Street, Suite 1040, Berkeley, CA 94710 (6 issues per annum \$79). website: [www.malwarwick.com/newsletter](http://www.malwarwick.com/newsletter)

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