

The Thank You Letter as a Fundraising Tool

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As a matter of course, Jewish nonprofit organizations send out thank you letters or e-mails to donors in response to their contributions. However, agencies may do so without always understanding the importance that an expression of appreciation has for donors. The real significance of sending a note, a letter, or even an e-mail message is often lost on many of us who work in the nonprofit sector and are constantly handling one crisis after another. It would behoove us to take a step back and think about what an expression of acknowledgment and appreciation means to donors.



Recently this issue was brought to my attention by one of my graduate students in an MA program for nonprofit management. She shared with the class that her supervisor had asked her to send out an e-mail blast numbering more than a thousand e-mails to donors who had participated in a special fundraising campaign. This meant that all donors would receive the same three-line message thanking them for their contribution. Those contributors who requested an official receipt for a tax deduction received the same short message on a piece of stationery included in the envelope with the receipt. The organization had decided that this was the most efficient way to thank the donors.

Sending this kind of form expression of appreciation is almost a waste of time. If read at all, the e-mail will be summarily dismissed and immediately deleted. The reader will think, "I guess they had to send out something so this is what they were able to put together."

The true purpose and function of the thank you letter are missed when it is not treated seriously. A letter that acknowledges a gift made to an organization should not only serve as a legal document attesting to the fact that funds (or in-kind donations) have been given to the agency but it also should communicate something to the donor about the specialness of the gift, explore his or her involvement in the organization, and plant the seeds for a future connection between the donor and the agency. It can be sent to acknowledge both unrestricted donations and targeted gifts for a particular program or capital project.

Donors want to know that their contribution has made a positive difference for the organization receiving it. A thoughtfully worded letter can let them know how they have assisted the agency in fulfilling its purpose. The letter should be focused both on the present gift and on opportunities the donor might have in the future; at the very least it should encourage the donor's openness to make further contributions to the organization.

The letter should communicate that the donor, by making a contribution, has done more than just writing a check. It should convey the sense that such donations represent an investment in the agency and in the services it provides to the community. An investment signals more than a one-time expression of support and offers the possibility of developing a continuing relationship.

Several weeks ago I [wrote](#) about the importance of donors feeling they are actually partnering with the

nonprofit when they support its services. The thank you letter is one way of strengthening their sense of connection to the organization.

Of course, the letter needs to be tailored to the individual donor. For example, a first-time donor needs a different response than would a donor who is providing ongoing support to the agency. Before writing the letter to first-time donors it is important to do some research about them to see what their interests and to determine their potential for supporting the organization. The letter can be crafted to suggest a meeting with the donor or certainly to invite him or her to visit the organization and learn more about the services provided to the community. It is also quite possible that an unsolicited gift has been sent just so the donor can see how the agency responds to the contribution. When the response is not only saying thank you but also offering the possibility of involvement in the organization, then the letter is likely to be the start of the donor's relationship to the agency.

The letter to veteran donors should acknowledge appreciation for their continued support and also explain how the organization will use their gift. The body of the letter can make a linkage between the donors' present support to funds they contributed in the past, thereby reinforcing their connection to the nonprofit.

In today's world of tweets, e-mails, texts, and cell phones we tend to play down the function and importance of a well-thought-out and well-written letter that is sent to express appreciation for much-needed financial support. We should rethink how we thank our donors. The form and content of our communication will let someone know that we do not take their support for granted and we value their connection to the organization.

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