

# Writing Successful Appeals:

## How to convince your members (and prospects) to give in this economy!

### *A 12 Step Program*

Yes, things look and are bad out there ... and perhaps close to home, too.

Yet, even at a time of 10% unemployment, 90% of people have jobs.

Many – probably most – of your members are in this situation. Your goal is to convince them that giving to your organization is as or even more important now than in the past.

Here are some tips to keep in mind as you craft your communications with your members and prospects. Whether you are corresponding by snail mail or email, making a phone call, talking one-on-one, or making a presentation, be sure to:

- #1: Focus on your strengths
- #2: Be provocative
- #3: Be compelling
- #4: Be personal
- #5: Emphasize today's opportunities for success
- #6: Explain what a contribution will do now
- #7: Ask for a donation
- #8: Stress the urgency
- #9: Ask again
- #10: Make it easy to give
- #11: Be appreciative
- #12: Do something nice for you

#### **Focus on your strengths:**

Your members joined you because they share your organization's goals and value the good work you do. Now is a good time to look back at what specific aspects of your work have resonated most in the past. Look at the responses to your past appeals. What has worked in the past (and what hasn't)? Consider updating one of your most successful pieces to use again. There is wisdom in the adage, "Don't fix what ain't broke."

#### **Be Provocative:**

Today, your members and prospects are receiving more communications than ever before. Face Book, email, text messaging, blogs, and more are crying for attention. Add to that radio, TV, newspapers, and billboards. And then there's snail mail, still the workhorse of the nonprofit community.

The best way to make sure your message rises above the noise is to make sure your lead is powerful and engaging – and unexpected. Take a look at the email subject lines of messages that you open up. What patterns do you see? Now, apply those same techniques to your communications. A provocative email subject line is often a great first line of an appeal letter, too. One sample for today:

“We’ve gotten what we wished for – now help us make the most of it.”

### **Be compelling:**

Do you know why your members support you? Many members are drawn to conservation organizations through a love of wildlife and outdoor activities. That’s why pictures of mother and baby animals are so effective; they trigger a natural protective mechanism, plus they offer the reminder that everyone hopes to see this scene in the wild one day.

Trails are also attractive. People of all ages can enjoy trails – or at least plan to some day. If the lands you focus on include trails, or could include trails, feature them.

If you don’t know why your members support you, ask them. You can find out a lot with a few open ended questions. Your survey can be as elaborate as Survey Monkey or as simple as a brief script to use when calling 25 members. Consider segmenting your list to target key audiences: lapsed members, new members, your best members, event participants, etc. Your members will tell you what they find the most compelling about your work.

And be visceral. Threats are usually most compelling. Tell a story. Make me an insider. Paint a picture I will remember – and need to respond to.

### **Be personal:**

How can you bring your work directly into the life of your member? Your goal is to emphasize all those ways that your organization touches the life of each member and prospect, and makes those lives better.

- Feature close-to-home projects, place names, and pictures. If your audience covers several metropolitan areas, be sure to use examples from each of them.
- Show people like me. Demonstrate that your group is inclusive through the pictures, programs, and spokespeople that you use. Diversify by age, race, gender, and ethnicity.
- Use my name. When possible, include a personal salutation on each communication. Have name tags at every event. When in doubt, ask: “Do you prefer ‘Robert’ or ‘Bob’?”
- Show that you remember me. Make sure your next contact refers to the last contact. A thank you note should refer to the reason for the gift. Use your database or personal files to keep notes on how you met, events attended, special interests, etc.
- Recognize me. Honor members at intervals of five, ten, or more years. Reward what you want people to do; how about a special club for those members who give more than once a year?
- Remind me how unique I am. This is especially important now, when so many causes are calling for attention. Emphasize how not everyone understands how crucial it is to keep focused on conservation, the environment, and wildlife. Your mutual success is dependent upon smart, savvy, knowledgeable people like your member.

### **Emphasize today’s opportunities for success**

How long have you been waiting for today? Finally, after a dozen years, at least, we have a friendly White House and a friendly Congress. Now, with your members’ and prospects’ support, you can accomplish things that have not been possible for more than a decade. Your members brought you through the bad times. Now, together, let’s assure the success we’ve waited so long to see.

### **Explain what a contribution will do now**

The classic way to do this is to relate a specific donation to a specific expenditure: “Your donation of \$43 now will send a local activist to the state capital for Lobby Day.” “You can protect an acre of wilderness for just \$8 because we don’t have to buy the land; we just have to convince Congress to safeguard it.”

You can also put a donation in perspective by showing the whole goal and how a gift now will help reach success. “We’ve already raised \$18,400 of the \$23,000 needed; help us make the goal.” “A generous supporter will give \$25,000 if we can match it with gifts from new members like you.”

Use real numbers. Keep them in the realm of the prospect’s giving level. Include the real costs of doing the project, and break it into segments, if the total is too much.

### **Ask for a donation**

Reread your email, your newsletter, your annual report, your prospecting letter. Make sure you tell your audience specifically what you want them to do. Email asks frequently include several links to the donation page; make sure your other communications are that specific: “Please join us today. Just complete the form enclosed and mail it with your donation in the envelope provided.”

Consider training all your staff and leaders to increase their comfort level with asking in every situation. Provide a script and packets of giving envelopes or brochures to your outreach staff to use at every presentation. Time is still our most valuable commodity. Someone who has invested an hour to hear about your work should also be willing to donate, if approached specifically and personally.

### **Stress the urgency**

Don’t let your appeal be put in the file for attention later. Give your audience a reason to respond *NOW!* Give them a deadline: “Your donation will be doubled by this generous challenge if received by May 15.” “We expect the agency to release their new rules within 90 days. Your contribution now will help us have the resources to respond immediately and effectively to save the places you and I both love.”

### **Ask again**

People are busy. Usually, no response is not a rejection; it’s just not quite gotten on their radar screen yet. Try again.

- Be more personal: a hand-addressed envelope gets opened; make a call; set up a meeting; arrange an introduction.
- Give an update: Write about how far you have gotten on your challenge grant – and how a donation now will help you reach the goal. Mention community leaders who are now on board. Talk about how the time is ticking away.
- Get someone else to ask: Have your second ask come from your field staff, a key volunteer, or someone touched directly by what you are trying to accomplish.

### **Make it easy to give**

Include a return envelope and a form. Accept credit cards online and by snail mail. Invite installment plans and monthly giving. (After all, someone can give \$300 a year, at just \$25 a month.) Give someone an envelope with a stamp on it – they will keep it until they use it.

## **Be appreciative**

Kim Klein says, “Thank before you bank” to make sure you get those acknowledgements out promptly. Call when you can: high donors, renewing members, long time members, new members. Enlist others to also thank supporters: a board member from their town, enthusiastic volunteers, interns, your executive director, someone mentioned in the appeal. List supporters’ names on your website, in your newsletter. Announce them on your Face Book page. Do something unexpected: send a card or clipping or photo, just for fun. You can never thank someone enough.

## **Do something nice for yourself**

Now breathe. Working for a nonprofit organization is stressful enough. The fate of the world as we would like to know it is on your shoulders. Meanwhile, every radio show, TV program, newspaper, and magazine is blaring how bad things are. You know you were stressed before; what do you call now????

One of my first EDs had the best advice. He made me promise to find one day a week where I did no work. Not a special event. Not a donor visit. Not catching up on emails. A total day off. Link up with (non-work) friends. Go to a movie. Visit the beach or a museum. Plan something fun with kids – your own, your niece or nephew, a friend’s children.

Taking that one day off a week is not as easy as it sounds. But you will feel better for it ... and the world and your organization will still be there when you return. Plus, you’ll have some great stories to share when you make that next thank you call!

Don, that first ED, had one other important piece of advice. Never let a day go by without chocolate. That’s one lesson I’ve never forgotten. Let’s compare notes soon.

*Written for The Brainerd Foundation by Ellis M.M. Robinson  
Author of The Nonprofit Membership Toolkit published by Jossey-Bass  
[EllisRobs@aol.com](mailto:EllisRobs@aol.com) ☆ 239/472-9159*

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