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## **Needs, Wants and the Absolute Importance of Relevance**

By Kimberly Seville

Anemic acquisition results. Sinking response rates. Shrinking average gifts. Serious budget shortfalls.

Cue up R.E.M.'s "Everybody Hurts." But wondering when the misery and angst will end won't help — so we had best do something.

People are actively thinking about the difference between "need" and "want" in all their buying decisions like they haven't done since my grandmother was washing, drying and carefully smoothing out the same piece of tinfoil to be used again and again. Being frugal is "in."

That's our new reality, and it means that donors who typically make contributions to 10 or more organizations across a spectrum of interests might be thinking much more than usual about "need" versus "want" when it comes to giving.

And you can bet that while they might want to give you money, if your appeal doesn't resonate enough, the donations will go to other organizations they believe need them more.

### **Relevance matters**

Are your appeals as relevant as they must be amid the all-time-low consumer confidence and uncertainty of this recession? By relevance, I mean speaking to donors about what matters to them most in a way that both triggers emotional response and gives them the backup rationale they need to feel they're making a wise giving decision.

Case in point: I've been receiving a fair number of "Air Gram," "Priority Urgent Gram" and "Emergency Message" packages from various organizations. They're classics, effective in the aftermath of disasters, and many of us have used them successfully in a variety of situations.

However, some being used recently to address the impact of the recession are failing to meet the relevance test. For example: *"I rushed this Emergency Telegram to you early this morning because I need to hear from you within the next 72 hours.*

*"You see, our budget indicates that we must raise \$25 million soon toward ..."*

It turns out the organization doesn't need all of the \$25 million in three days, but there's no reason given for the arbitrary deadline. Nor is the amount broken down into something a \$25 donor can find emotional satisfaction in, let alone real meaning.

Most of the letter is fairly institutional in nature, describing the organization's mission and what the result will be. But "our budget indicates that we must raise \$25 million" was pretty much a showstopper, and it lost me with the lead.

In a climate in which donors carefully are weighing need versus want, relevance is everything. A budget crisis without serious consequences that speak to donors' priority concerns isn't likely to make the cut when giving decisions are made.

### **An alternative approach**

Because it's easy to critique but not always so easy to craft a compelling offer, I'll ante up a suggestion for what I would have done instead of the budget-crisis "telegram": a very personal, even intimate, story-driven appeal from someone who lost a loved one — the very reason the organization was founded.

Help me know that person as the signer did, to relive the unspeakable loss, as well as feel the tremendous hope and proof of resilience that fulfillment of the organization's mission will mean — not only for the signer and others like him or her, but for me, too.

I'd package the appeal to look like a letter from a friend, delivered in a closed-face, textured, ivory Monarch envelope with a live stamp, with the addressing in a large, realistic, handwritten font. (And please note that by a "large" font I mean in a point size that is something resembling the size of the average human being's handwriting. Dinky handwritten fonts scream "FAKE!")

To make the piece look less automated, I'd also use a mailer's cancellation mark over the stamp and move the bar code away from the address block to the bottom edge of the envelope. No teaser, no hype. Make it look as not mass-produced as possible.

As for the letter copy, suck me in immediately with the story, and talk to me about your loved one and what happened. Help me feel as though I would have liked to have met your loved one. Gently remind me about how important it is to remember the loved ones we've lost. Give me the validation I need to make a gift, and you've got me.

### **Check your numbers**

Make sure your numbers are relevant, too. How people respond to numbers is the subject of many studies and certainly a testable issue. We test different numbers all the time with ask arrays — but is that enough?

For example, would an attempt to raise \$100,000 before the end of the month seem more reasonable to a \$25 donor than needing \$25 million in 72 hours? My guess is yes.

I would caution care with use of numbers in other ways, as well. For example, another recession appeal I received took a completely different form and approach. In a six-page, booklet-style letter dense with copy, the nonprofit's founder and chairman describes the many times in the past 30-plus years the group nearly had gone broke. In each instance, one or more donors came through.

Now, though, because the organization is "four million dollars below budget and the deficit continues to mount," and because it made a commitment to its constituents to "live within [its] means," 200 staff members were "released" and more than 50 open positions will go unfilled.

My first reaction: I don't want anyone to lose a job, and I hope those people and their families will be OK.

My second reaction: 200 people were let go and another 50 open jobs got axed? Just how many people work there, and what are they all doing if it's so nonessential that they can be "released" and the organization is still able to carry out its mission?

Yes, be honest always, but also be judicious in what numbers you present and how. Downsizing by 250 jobs might be perfectly reasonable in the whole scope of that organization's operations, but without any perspective, that information is not helpful to the appeal. Reality is one thing, and how donors perceive you is another. *FS*

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