

## Contents

|   |   |
|---|---|
| Uses for Email.....                             | 1 |
| Building Your Address Book .....                | 1 |
| Identify the Audience for<br>Your Message ..... | 2 |
| Define a Goal for Your<br>Email Campaign.....   | 3 |
| Craft Your Email Message .....                  | 3 |
| Review and Edit Your Message.....               | 3 |
| Distribute Your Message .....                   | 4 |
| Measuring Success.....                          | 4 |

# Effective Email Communications

Relationships are built on communication, respect and trust, which are earned when you demonstrate daily that your organization is worthy of supporters' investments of time, energy and money. Email offers a cost-effective way for nonprofits to send personalized communications to donors, members, alumni and volunteers, and it enables constituents to respond to your call of action at their convenience.

As nonprofits embrace the power of the Internet, email is emerging as an increasingly important communication tool. Nonprofits that take the time to learn the communication preferences of their donors and prospects will have the advantage when competing with similar organizations for donations.

Email works most effectively when used in conjunction with your other communication efforts. If your organization does not yet have a Web site, you should work with your staff, consultants or techno-savvy volunteers to create one. For tips on developing a strong Web presence, read our executive briefing on "E-philanthropy Strategy for Nonprofits."

## Uses for Email

Assuming your organization already has a Web site, you can use email to drive people to specific areas of your site, where they can:

- ◆ Learn more about your mission by reading a letter from the director and reviewing case studies of your work
- ◆ Register for an event such as a fundraiser, class or seminar
- ◆ Make a donation for a specific cause or to honor or memorialize someone
- ◆ Search volunteer opportunities or share information about their skills
- ◆ Review membership levels and benefits and join online

Once you determine which constituents prefer emails to other types of communications, you can also use email to send:

- ◆ Pledge reminders
- ◆ Membership renewals
- ◆ Reminders of volunteer commitments
- ◆ Alerts with a call to action
- ◆ Newsletters
- ◆ Campaign updates

## Building Your Address Book

Before you can begin tailoring emails for specific groups of constituents, you will need to collect email addresses. This can be a daunting task because some people have multiple email accounts, and they often change. Don't let the dynamic nature of email accounts discourage you though — many people prefer this method of communication and will be more responsive to emails

than to glossy direct mail appeals. Once you implement some ways to collect and update email addresses, you'll realize that the benefits of email are well worth the research.

Many organizations have had success by adding a simple subscription field to their Home page, enabling site visitors to type in their email address to receive alerts and newsletters. This is a good way to build your list, but keep in mind that this method prevents you from collecting any additional information about these constituents. It will be tough to tell whether an email address matches up to someone already in your database or whether it is a new opportunity to build a relationship.

As you collect this valuable information, take another moment to clarify your constituents' communication preferences. It may be helpful to note whether your contact prefers emails in HTML or plain text.

In addition to putting your Web site to work, use any interaction as an opportunity to collect email addresses:

- ◆ Phone conversations
- ◆ Personal meetings
- ◆ Special event registration
- ◆ Pledge reminders
- ◆ Membership applications
- ◆ Volunteer feedback forms
- ◆ Alumni information updates

As you collect this valuable information, take another moment to clarify your constituents' communication preferences. It may be helpful to note whether your contact prefers emails in HTML or plain text. If a donor, member or volunteer is hesitant to provide an email address, find out whether the person would prefer a more personal phone call or traditional mail instead. Get specific: if phone calls are preferred, make a note of the number and time frame when your contact is most open to hearing from you.

Reduced expenses are an important benefit of using email to communicate, and many people will respect your efforts to improve the bottom line. Even so, there will be people who prefer another communication method, despite the cost to your organization. That's okay — just note their wishes. Keep in mind that your ultimate goal should be to establish a more personal relationship with your constituents, based on their needs. Exercise diligence in storing communication preferences, and make sure your storage method enables you and your staff to easily access and act on this information.

## Identify the Audience for Your Message

Once you have gathered email addresses for a subset of your constituents, review your data to determine the percentage of each constituent group for whom you have email addresses. You may find that you had more success collecting email addresses for certain groups of donors, members, volunteers or alumni. Generally speaking, email enables you to reach a younger, more diverse audience than direct mail typically does. However, this demographic is shifting, as seniors are the fastest growing group of Internet adopters and email users.

A key benefit of email is that it gives users the ability to quickly send customized messages at very little expense. Customizing traditional mailings, while effective, can be cost-prohibitive because it involves printing different messages for various audiences.

Keep in mind that the more succinct and scannable your message is, the more likely it is that your audience will read it and take action. If your message requires some details and explanation, be sure to break up the information using bullet points and blank lines.

## Define a Goal for Your Email Campaign

Now that you know which group to contact, the next step is to define the goal of your message. Like direct mail, emails should have a specific purpose and/or a call to action. What do you hope to achieve by sending this email? Examples include generating online donations for a specific campaign, building awareness of an issue, informing volunteers of the latest news, driving members to complete an online survey, or soliciting registrations for an upcoming event. The success of your email campaign will be based on how it helped you accomplish your specific goal.

## Craft Your Email Message

After defining a purpose for your message, you can begin drafting the message. Keep in mind that the more succinct and scannable your message is, the more likely it is that your audience will read it and take action. If your message requires some details and explanation, be sure to break up the information using bullet points and blank lines.

Customization makes your communications more personal and will demonstrate to your donors your eagerness to build a long-term relationship. Begin your message by addressing the recipient in the way your contact prefers, but don't stop there. The best emails use mail-merge functionality to incorporate other types of information such as last gift amount, last gift date and which fund the donation was designated for.

Which message would you be more likely to respond to? Customization helps solidify your relationships.

Dear Sir or Madam,

Thank you for supporting Lowcountry Preservation Society. We have been very busy this past year and have used your donation to fund some important projects. We continue to need your help to reach our goals. If you'd like to contribute again, please click here.

Dear Mr. Lovett,

We appreciate your support of the Lowcountry Preservation Society. Thanks to your generosity, we have had quite a year! Your last donation of \$500.00 helped us fund the Medway Plantation Renovation. Click here to see photos of our progress on this project as well as several others.

Our records indicate that you last contributed on 06/07/2000, and we hope that you will consider making another contribution to support our work. Click here to donate and learn about other properties we are working to preserve.

## Review and Edit Your Message

After drafting your message, save it and review it thoroughly. Also, ask a co-worker or two to look it over — written communications can always benefit from another set of eyes. The following questions may be useful during the editing process:

- ♦ **Is the entire message pertinent to your target audience?** Refine your letter by removing any references that could potentially confuse the recipients.
- ♦ **Is the tone of the note both friendly and professional?** Email lends itself to a more conversational tone than quill and ink on crisp ivory letterhead, but be sure to represent your organization in the manner it deserves.

In addition to being cost-effective, email communications enable your organization to track the effectiveness of the various messages and tailor future messages to enhance your results.

- ♦ **Does the message demonstrate that you value the recipients?** If you're reaching out to people who have already supported your organization, forge the relationship by declaring how important they are to your mission.
- ♦ **Are the links to your Web site correct?** Test all links to make sure they direct your readers to the appropriate areas of your site. Have a few other people double-check them, too.
- ♦ **Will the purpose of the message be obvious to the recipients?** Whether your goal is education, inspiration, registration or donation, make sure that recipients will know how you want them to take action.
- ♦ **Have you checked (and re-checked) the message for misspelled words?** Professional communications require attention to detail.
- ♦ **Does the message have a catchy subject line?** Although some of your recipients may appreciate a clever opening, clear, concise language will certainly suffice. Be up front with supporters about the reason for your message — vagueness may cause recipients to mistake the note for unsolicited email. You may even use the subject line to reiterate your call to action, particularly if you're sending a follow-up communication, such as a pledge reminder or membership renewal.
- ♦ **Does the "From" field need to be changed?** If the membership manager "signs" the email, ideally, her name should appear in the "From" field. Even if she does not send the message, consider that replies to the email will be streamlined if they are directed to someone with the knowledge to respond (a membership assistant, for example).
- ♦ **Have you included an opt-out clause?** You should always add an opt-out clause to the bottom of the message — even if your recipients have given you permission to email them. By providing a simple, consistent means for enabling people to "unsubscribe" from your email communications, you demonstrate your flexibility by acknowledging that constituent preferences can change.
- ♦ **Should you encourage recipients to forward the message to others?** Some types of emails are good prospects for "viral marketing," which is the idea that your constituents will pass along newsworthy information to friends and relatives. If your message could be relevant to a broader audience, encourage recipients to help your organization spread the word by forwarding the message.

## Distribute Your Message

With a polished communiqué at the ready, you can now decide the best time to distribute your message. Depending on list size and your system's bandwidth, you may opt to send the message in the evening to lessen the burden on your email server. Such constraints can be eliminated should you choose to enlist a vendor to host some of your Web-related services.

## Measuring Success

In addition to being cost-effective, email communications enable your organization to track the effectiveness of the various messages and tailor future messages to enhance your results. When you include links within email messages, your organization will benefit from learning how many recipients click through to the various pages of your Web site. It will also be helpful if you can track the activity that your emails are generating, such as online donation totals, event registrations and membership renewals. The easier it is for you to report on these results, the more time you will have to act on what you learn.

## about Blackbaud

Blackbaud is the leading global provider of software and related services designed specifically for nonprofit organizations. More than 15,000 organizations use Blackbaud products and consulting services for fundraising, financial management, business intelligence, and school administration. Blackbaud's solutions include The Raiser's Edge®, The Financial Edge™, The Education Edge™, The Patron Edge®, Blackbaud® NetCommunity™, The Information Edge™, The Researcher's Edge™, WealthPoint™, and ProspectPoint™, as well as a wide range of consulting and educational services. Founded in 1981, Blackbaud is headquartered in Charleston, South Carolina, and has operations in Toronto, Ontario; Glasgow, Scotland; and Sydney, Australia.

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Another important piece of the measurement puzzle requires coordination between your email database and your fundraising management system. Because emails serve as another method of communication, you need to tag your constituent records to reflect that you sent an appeal, membership renewal or pledge reminder via email. Maintaining all your donor information in one place will ensure that each member of your staff sees the "big picture" and can access the details, which will aid your efforts to build lasting relationships capable of sustaining your organization.

**For more educational papers like this or to request a speaker to present on this topic, please visit the Resources section of Blackbaud's Web site:**

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