



Effective Letters: 50 of the Best

Model letters to help community organisations
fundraise, connect, lobby, organise & influence





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Foreword

Words are liquid action. You're involved in a community organisation because there's something you want to get done that you can't do by yourself. You need other people to help you.

In order to get other people to join with you and do what needs to be done you have to communicate your commitment to them. You need to move them to action. And for this, letter-writing is an important weapon to have in your arsenal.

Whether you're writing to a member of the public to ask them to give you money, or to a foundation asking for a grant, or to an MP to invite them to speak at an event, or a business to voice your approval or disapproval of an action (or inaction) of theirs, you write because you want someone to do you a favour – to do something for your group that they don't have to do and that will involve them in some trouble and expense. You can't order them to do it, and you can't afford to give them much in return.

Your task as a letter-writer is to find the most effective path from where your readers are now to where you want them to be.

As new forms of communication evolve almost weekly the place of the letter is becoming more clearly defined. A letter carries weight, and allows for attachments that are as extensive as necessary. It stays around on the record and shows that you've done something. It lets you set up your effects as you want them, without having to be put into plain text or suddenly changing format.

Oh, and people want a letter that's written to them and to them alone, and as far as possible that's what you have to give them. The letters we feature in this book are examples, not templates. You can't just copy them out – you must recreate them.

Letters allow you to use the full resources of storytelling worked out over the last two and a half millennia by sages and poets. Your letter can contain drama, pictures, word pictures, and statistics. You can put in to it as little or as much of yourself as you think will please your readers. You can enlarge your strengths and trim away your shortcomings.

And, at the end, you can move the reader to act. And things will change.

Denis Moriarty
Group Managing Director, Our Community





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Part One – Fundraising Letters





I. Public Appeals via Direct Mail

Absolutely the first rule in fundraising is 'Don't apologise.' We all tend to shuffle our feet and clear our throats when asking for money, because that's the way we were brought up. You'll have to set these prejudices aside – you're not taking people's money, you're offering them an opportunity to share in your successes. Stand up straight and proud and stick your hand out.

There are a number of ways of appealing for money, and one of them is through direct mail.

Direct mail is sending a letter to hundreds, thousands, or even millions of people by bulk mail. It isn't a quick fix, but it's still probably the least expensive way to reach the most people with a message that they can hold in their hands and examine at their leisure.

Used properly, direct mail is one of the most powerful donor acquisition strategies a small community organisation can have – but do take particular note of that phrase 'donor acquisition'. The real point of using direct mail is to find new donors, and direct mail probably still does it better than any other strategy. A cold mailing to a new list will be lucky to break even. A second mailing to the people who gave the first time will do much better.

The key to the success of any mail appeal is the list of people it goes to. Draw up your lists carefully. Make sure that each person's name is spelled correctly and that the address and the postcode are correct. Nothing turns people off faster than finding their names misspelled on letters asking them for a donation, and an incorrect address or postcode may mean that the letter won't even be delivered (see Appendix 3 for more information on how to correctly address your mail).

Experienced fundraisers divide mailing lists into three categories: hot, warm, and cold. These describe the likelihood of people on that list making a donation.





Hot Lists

These are people who have already made some kind of commitment to your organisation. They are:

- Your current donors, from whom you can expect on average a 10%-66% response to a mail appeal
- Lapsed donors from the past two years (average 5%-10% response)
- Volunteers and board members who are not yet donors (should not be lower than 5% and could be as high as 100%)
- The close friends and associates of all of the above people who are not yet donors (2%-5% response).

Most people's friends share their values and commitments. To find new hot names for your appeals, ask current donors and members for the names and addresses of friends they think might be interested in your organisation. Other sources of hot prospects are board members, volunteers, and staff.

Warm Lists

These are people who have heard of your organisation or your services or are donors to similar organisations but haven't heard of your group. These lists should yield a 1%-3% response.

If your organisation gives people advice, referrals, or other service over the phone or through the mail, create a system to gather the names of people served.

When people call, ask if you can send them more information about your organisation. People who don't want an appeal will decline to give their name.

People who attend special events who are not donors should receive an appeal soon after the event. Pass out a sign-up sheet, or conduct a door prize drawing to get names and addresses (make sure you ask their permission to send them information).

Cold Lists

A cold list is any list that is more than a year old, or any list of people about whom you know little or nothing – the phonebook, for example, is a cold list.





A well-designed and well-written direct mail piece sent out to a cold list of people who have never heard of your organisation can still yield a 1% response. Though small, this is better than any other way of reaching large numbers of people who don't know about your group.

If you're a small group with a local reach, look at a list that can offer a breakdown by region. If you have the money to spare, Australia Post has reliable mailing lists.

Hot and Cold Lists

An Our Community staff member was recently sent a cheque by a larger community organisation in payment for some work he'd done. In the envelope with the cheque was an application for a fundraising lottery.

People your organisation corresponds with are both hot (they know you exist and they have dealings with you) and cold (they haven't necessarily shown any interest at all in helping you). The point, though, is that you've already gone to the expense of buying an envelope and a stamp and already gone to the trouble of typing out an address – what can it hurt to throw in a fundraiser? If you haven't got a lottery, a simple appeal to donate would do.

Sybunts

They haven't written, they haven't called, they won't answer your letters ... well, nobody has to draw you a picture. You can take a hint. You know what your lapsed donors are trying to tell you.

They want you to try harder.

Every fundraising campaign wants donors. When they get them, they want the donor to stay around and keep giving, more and more. Which is nice when it happens, but sometimes it doesn't. That's when you have on your lists lapsed donors – or what the American fundraisers refer to as “**lybunts**” (donated Last Year But Unfortunately Not This Year) and the even more dreaded “**sybunts**” (donated Some Years But Unfortunately Not This Year).

You've already put a lot of trouble into getting them to give. These are people who have shown that they do respond to your appeals. Somewhere in your aims or good works or client group is something that they can bond with and that they have shown themselves willing to support.

But not any more. They're not giving. And you want to know why.





This sort of letter is sent to known donors, not cold names

Although tax time is a good time for fundraising for any group, don't offer a tax deduction if you don't have DGR status.

The advantage of a tax-time mailing is that it has a built-in urgency. If people can put off sending money, they'll forget about it entirely nine times out of ten.

Humanise your appeal whenever possible.

Blowing hard to fire up that warm inner glow.

The essential online donations facility – don't send a letter without it.

The words 'you' and 'your' come up nine times in seven sentences, helping to create a link between the person and the cause.

If that doesn't make the donor feel a wonderful humanitarian – the kind who gives generously to this kind of appeal – nothing will.





Model Letter #1: Direct Mail – Hot

Stephen Leary
11 Peach Street
WOOROO NSW 8285

Dear Steve,

I am sending this letter as a personal plea to you – one of our most valuable supporters – for an additional Tax Time gift towards the Parlia Action Network’s crucial work in the fight against human rights abuses in Parlia and around the world.

Please send an urgent tax deductible donation of whatever you can afford before June 30.

Recently I appealed for donations through our appeal highlighting our work on human rights abuses in Parlia. I told the story of Chuye, a local nun arrested for her beliefs, and her harrowing treatment in Parlia’s notorious No.8 Prison Camp:

“We were working all day carrying rock, and for food we had only the melons we could grow ourselves – they gave us nothing – and if we were too weak to work we were beaten, and some were taken away and did not return.”

We still need to raise more than \$50,000 from this appeal by 30 June in order to reach our target. I am hoping I can count on you to help me.

I know that you really care about the appalling human rights abuses in Parlia and around the world. Please help now by making a special online donation of whatever you can afford by clicking on this link and completing the form: <https://www.humanainc.org.au/specialappeal>.

Thank you for all your support of the Parlia Action Network, your generosity and your compassion for fellow human beings.

Kind regards

Leeanne Parratt
Director
Parlia Action Network Inc

Marketing

Building Stronger Communities Through Stronger Community Organisations

