Tips for Making the Most of Your Fundraising E-mails

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You've heard the whispers in the wind — more and more people, especially younger ones — are eschewing personal e-mail and relying on social-networking sites like MySpace and Facebook to communicate with their friends. As a result, many personal e-mail accounts are not much more than repositories for marketing messages whose subject lines get a quick glance before the owners hit the "Delete" button.

Whether things have gone that far or not (and we don't believe they have, yet), the fact remains that anyone with an e-mail account is the target of hundreds of marketing messages a day and the potential target of thousands — many of them fundraising appeals from you and your (for lack of a better word) competitors. Your job as a legit professional looking to raise funds via e-mail is to make your e-mail messages stand out amid the ads for male-enhancement pills and diet breakthroughs and the latest appeal from the beleaguered Nigerian prince who wants to give someone a million dollars to help him keep his family fortune from falling into the hands of his oppressors. It's a pretty straightforward goal, but it's not an easy one.

But before we talk about what makes for an effective fundraising e-mail, let's quickly define what doesn't. You might be tempted to think that simply making a PDF of your direct-mail pieces or your physical newsletter and popping it into an e-mail will work. It won't. Neither will "crafting" a one-line e-mail that asks recipients to click a link to your donation page. Nonprofit e-mails — whether to raise funds or awareness — are their own animals and need to be treated as such.

Now, on to what works!

Crafting your message

Writing an e-mail is easy, right? You do it all the time … click the "Forward" option on the last message from Aunt Hilda, add "LOL" to the top of the new message box and — voila! — 27 more people can thank you for the latest offering from icanhascheezburger.com.

Simple enough … if all you want to do is share a joke. But if the object of your e-mail is a little more ambitious — raising money, say, to feed starving children, finance a new arts center or rescue animals from abuse — it gets somewhat more complicated.

The main thing to keep in mind, according to all of the experts we talked with, is to K.I.S.S. or "Keep It Short, Silly." Yes, we've already said that a one-liner that points readers to a link to your Web site or a PDF of a direct-mail appeals isn't the answer, but neither are cumbersome tomes. The nature of anything with an "e" in front of it is quick, concise and easily digestible, and this is especially true with your fundraising e-mails an e-newsletters.

"E-newsletter readers, even more than your print readers, have less patience because it's just so easy to move from one piece of content to another online," says Nancy Schwartz, president of marketing and communications firm Nancy Schwartz & Co. (nancyschwartz.com). "It's been proven that people register what's on their computer screen for about a tenth of a second and make a decision whether to continue reading or not."

Keep content pithy and succinct, Schwartz says, in the top few inches of the e-newsletter so it's viewable in a preview pane, and include a mini table of contents that links to each element in the e-newsletter.

Beyond brevity, there do seem to be some other universal truths when it comes to writing for e-mail appeals. Fundraising consultant Kivi Leroux Miller, president of EcoScribe Communications and keeper of the nonprofitmarketingguide.com, wrote recently for Network for Good (fundraising123.org), that "good e-mail writing is friendly and conversational. "

"While there are certainly times where the newsy, facts-only, journalistic style can work, most nonprofit newsletters should be much more personal, and even a little chatty," she said. "People give to and support nonprofits for highly subjective reasons. Your supporters get something deeply personal out of their affiliation with your organization as a donor, volunteer or advocate. So why would your response back to these passionate people be institutional, monolithic and completely objective?"

She suggested that nonprofits "break out of the '501(c)(3) speaks to the masses' writing mode" and offered these tips:

1. Speak directly to your readers by calling them "you" and refer to yourself and your nonprofit as "I" or "we."
2. Use bylines. Let your readers know who is writing the article.
3. Make people central to your content. Include your staff, donors, volunteers clients, and others by name in your articles.
4. Tell stories. Tell stories in your e-newsletters to engage your donors in your work, to reinforce their giving decisions, to inspire them to do more, and to encourage more word-of-mouth marketing on your behalf.

5. Include headshots or photos with people. Show your readers who's talking and who you are talking about.

"Your supporters give their time, talents and gifts with passion for your cause," Leroux Miller wrote. "They are part of the family. Write to them that way."

In its valuable resource "The Nonprofit Email Marketing Guide," Network for Good lists the qualities of good and bad nonprofit e-mails. According to the guide: Good nonprofit e-mails address the reader directly as "you"; are short (hundreds of words, not thousands); can be skimmed in a few seconds and include great headlines, subheads and link text; focus on just a few items — and ideally only one; direct the reader to some kind of next step; and are designed for the preview pane so recipients can read them without a lot of scrolling.

Bad nonprofit e-mails must be thoroughly read, not skimmed, in order to be understood; involve lots of scrolling; cover too many topics; sound academic or formal; and leave the reader hanging, according to Network for Good.

Finally, it's imperative to harness the power of storytelling in your fundraising e-mails. Stories don't have to — and shouldn't — be long, but they do have to be compelling. Don't be afraid to talk about the good work your organization does, and be sure to include the important connection between that and donor dollars. Let your e-mail recipients know that their dollars are affecting change but that the need still exists and will only be met with their continued help in partnership with your organization.

When it comes to writing compelling fundraising appeals for e-mail, the rules are generally the same as for direct mail; the differences lay mainly in format and other technological considerations.

Oh, those pesky spam filters

As the amount of e-mail sent to consumers and donors has increased, so too has the use of e-mail filters to sort spam and unwanted e-mails. An e-newsletter that gets caught in a filter and fails to get delivered is a missed opportunity to touch a would-be donor or build a relationship with a long-time constituent.

Schwartz offers these tips for ensuring that your e-mails stay out of spam filters.

Research your e-newsletter service provider. This has implications for all of your e-touches. Make sure your service provider is on the whitelist (protected list) of personal e-mail service providers such as AOL, Hotmail, Gmail and Yahoo — to name a few — so your messages will get through.

Only send your e-newsletter to those who opt in. Schwartz says a single opt-in process is essential (actually, a legal requirement). You can't just add people's names to an e-newsletter subscriber list. A double opt-in policy is even better and prevents spammers from registering for your e-newsletter. When people subscribe to your e-newsletter, send them an e-mail that includes a link that they must click on to confirm their subscriptions.

Make it easy for e-newsletter recipients to unsubscribe or change their subscriber information. "In our increasingly transitory world, folks are changing jobs and e-mail providers all the time, so you want to make it easy for your subscribers to manage their subscriptions, as a courtesy," Schwartz says.

Once you've drafted and formatted your e-newsletter, run it through a spam filter. How many times do you use all caps? How many times do you include words such as "click" and "free"? These words are red alerts for spam filters. Use the spam filter test to see what can be corrected so what you deliver is as clean as it can be.

Test, test, test. Schwartz says she has e-mail accounts at most of the major e-mail service providers so she can send test versions of her e-newsletter to all of her e-mail addresses to ensure proper delivery before sending it out to the entire subscription list.

"Formatting can differ from e-mail provider to e-mail provider," she adds. "I always want to know that the e-newsletter is going to land in my subscriber's mailbox looking good and easily readable and all the links will work."

Send subscribers a welcome e-mail when they sign up for your e-newsletter. Some e-newsletter service providers will have this as an automatic function. In this e-mail you can alert subscribers to what the "From" and "Subject" lines for your e-newsletter will be, so they know what to look for.

Ask subscribers to add the "from" e-mail address to their inboxes' whitelist of approved senders so your e-newsletter is not filtered into a junk or spam folder.

Beware of trigger words and phrases that have been flagged by filters because they are typical in spam messages. Some of them are "click here," "congratulations," "free," "special promotion," "dear friend," "unsubscribe" and "winner."

Don't send e-newsletters as attachments. Attachments are a burden for recipients to have to download and run through virus protection. Either send your e-newsletter within an e-mail format or send an e-mail with a link to the e-newsletter.

Give subscribers the option to receive e-newsletters as text rather than HTML. And be sure that your e-newsletter service provider offers the capability for the e-newsletter to automatically switch to text format for those subscribers who can't receive HTML.

Don't send your e-newsletter as a blind copy to everyone on your subscriber list. "It's hard to believe, but there are still folks who are sending out an e-newsletter to, let's say, 500 subscribers via their own e-mail, just plugging those 500 names into the 'bcc' field in an e-mail form," Schwartz says. "Actually, I'm working with an organization that's very sophisticated in many other ways, but they just didn't know."

The chances are great that an e-newsletter sent this way will be caught by a filter. If the e-mail is sent from an organizational e-mail address, then your organization will be identified as a spammer.

"Not only are you decreasing the chances of receipt of the e-newsletter, you're really causing a problem for regular e-mail correspondence for you and your colleagues," Schwartz adds.

E-mail no-nos

Loren McDonald , vice president of industry relations for engagement-marketing solutions provider Silverpop (silverpop.com), blogged recently about the biggest e-mail design and marketing blunders . His list was referenced all over the blogosphere and included:

1. Making it difficult to unsubscribe.
2. No "welcome" message and/or waiting weeks to send the first message.
3. Overmailing.
4. Using a large single image as the core of your e-mail.
5. Not using alt tags (descriptive words that appear in place of a graphic that cannot be loaded).
6. Relying on graphical links.
7. Not having a preference center that allows recipients to control how you communicate with them.
8. Not designing for the preview pane.
9. Using a person's name in the "from" line.
10. Hiding e-mail registration.

Your e-mail list

All of the best advice in the world about writing e-mails can't help if you're sending those brilliantly crafted messages to the wrong people. And if you're sending them to people who didn't ask for them, you could find yourself in hot water.

Gene Austin, CEO of nonprofit technology provider Convio (convio.com), says, "The first step in any effective e-mail marketing strategy is to build an e-mail file — the fuel for your e-mail marketing efforts. Many nonprofit groups discover that, despite their large and detailed constituent databases, they have few supporter e-mail addresses on record. Although the prospect of building a usable e-mail file can seem daunting, you easily can grow your e-mail file using several proven tactics."

Austin outlines a number of opportunities for building an e-mail database, including offline, online, viral marketing and e-mail appends.

Offline

Every time you communicate with supporters or prospects, take advantage of the opportunity to collect their e-mail addresses, he says.

- **Gather addresses through every interaction.** Planned interactions such as renewal appeals, membership drives and event invitations are perfect times to ask for e-mail addresses. Simply add a field for e-mail collection to all response forms. At events where you will interact with a large number of constituents, consider setting out a newsletter sign-up sheet, or conduct a giveaway for attendees who drop in cards with their names and e-mail addresses.

- **Promote the benefits of e-mail communication.** When asking for e-mail addresses offline, remind people that communicating online saves your organization money and administrative manpower, allowing more funds and human resources to go directly to fulfilling the organization's mission. Also, underscore the advantages of timely communication — with e-mail, the organization can respond in real time to compelling events and update constituents quickly about important news, developments, events and programs.

Online

Your Web site is the best source for reaching new prospects and existing constituents, and collecting their e-mail addresses, Austen says. Web site visitors are interested in your organization (or they wouldn't be coming to your site) and most likely will be more willing to provide their e-mail addresses.

- **Drive traffic to your site with each communication.** Maximize Web site traffic by including your URL wherever you list phone numbers, mailing addresses or other contact information. This includes brochures, advertisements, staff e-mail signatures, voice messages, phone "hold" or introductory messages, and business cards. Tell prospects and supporters about the resources available to them on the Web site, and keep the online content current, informative and engaging so visitors will return.

- **Promote the benefits of online registration.** Make registration compelling for site visitors so they will provide the information you want. Create special benefits for registered members, and link to a separate page explaining the perks, such as free e-mail newsletters, advance notification of upcoming events, members-only pricing for ticket sales or special premiums. Then, invite site visitors to register by using an action phrase such as, "Register to receive updates," or "Sign up for our educational newsletter."

- **Provide an online registration mechanism.** Use a Web-based form that allows site visitors to register — preferably one that automatically captures their information in an online database. The registration form should be easy to complete and a fast read. Minimize the number of required fields that registrants have to complete — the more fields, the less incentive to register. Provide examples if the system requires data to be entered in a particular way (e.g., "Please enter dates in mm/dd/yyyy format") to avoid frustrating registrants.

- **Use "quick registration."** Instead of requiring site visitors to complete a lengthy registration form, consider requesting only basic information (such as name and e-mail address) in order for a supporter to sign up to receive updates, e-mail newsletters and other communications. Once you have captured this basic information, use follow-up communications such as online surveys to gather more information about each constituent, e.g., interests and motivation for getting involved with your organization.

- **Give site registration prominent placement.** Dedicate a consistent area of your homepage to promoting online registration. Place it in an eye-catching spot "above the fold" to reflect its importance. Consider using an image or graphic to draw attention to this message. Promote registration throughout the rest of your Web site by, for example, including a registration link on every page.

Viral marketing

"Forward to a friend" e-mail campaigns, also known as viral marketing, can help you reach new supporters and grow your e-mail file efficiently, Austen says. In a viral campaign, the organization sends an e-mail with a call to action (such as a solicitation for donations, event invitation or public policy action alert) to the existing e-mail file or to selected groups of constituents in the file.

The e-mail also asks recipients to forward the message to friends, relatives and co-workers so they, too, can get involved. When a new supporter from this previously untapped network of friends clicks through to your Web site to register and take action, you can request permission to communicate with him in the future.

Imagine the effect of one person sending 10 e-mails and then each friend forwarding another 10 ... and so on. If this happens five times, a single e-mail would reach 100,000 people.

E-mail greeting cards, or "e-cards," are another way to build an e-mail address list through viral marketing. With e-cards, constituents can create their own e-mails — using your e-mail greeting card template, with your organization's branding — to send to their friends and families.

E-mail appending services

If you have an extensive donor or supporter database but only a small number of current e-mail addresses, Austen suggests using an e-mail appending service to quickly begin connecting with supporters via e-mail. These services add a constituent's e-mail address to the constituent's existing record in your database. The e-mail address is obtained by matching records from your database against a third-party database to produce a corresponding e-mail address.

However, match rates vary, and while appending solves the problem of matching e-mail addresses to current supporters, it is not a substitute for a long-term strategy to build and maintain your e-mail file.

As effective as it can be, the e-mail append option isn't always well-received. Catherine Algeri, account director at data-processing services firm Triplex, an infoUSA company (tdmc.com), explains that, done correctly, it can be a real boon to your organization's e-mail efforts.

In the early days of e-mail appends, horror stories about the process resulting in all kinds of e-mail no-nos abounded. But, Algeri explains, that's all in the past. And, she says, "many nonprofits bring in $5 to $10 in contributions for every $1 spent on e-mail append processing," making it a worthwhile option to explore.

"[The fear of an e-mail append resulting in your messages being flagged as spam] speaks to the difference between a good e-mail append and a bad one. The early days of e-mail append certainly generated a few horror stories. Fortunately, the industry has really learned from its mistakes," Algeri says.

"Today, most reputable vendors send welcome e-mails on your behalf — on their own servers — and only return the valid e-mail addresses that did not opt out of e-mail communication," she says. "This way, when you start e-mailing these addresses, you're in the good graces of your donors and the Internet service providers."

In order to ensure the viability of an e-mail append program, Algeri suggests asking the service provider you choose to work with these questions. She also provides the answers you should be looking for.

Q. Is the database permission-based?
A. E-mail addresses should never be guessed or deduced. Your vendor might not be able to reveal every source of the data, but it should be able to confirm that every e-mail address has opted in to third-party e-mail messages.

Q. Are you CAN-SPAM compliant?
A. Breaking the law generally is a bad way to kick off a fundraising campaign! Congress passed the CAN-SPAM Act of 2003 to protect consumer e-mail rights. Make sure your vendor complies!

Q. Do you send a welcome message or just add the data to my file and ship it back to me?
A. If anyone offers to slap some e-mail addresses onto your file and then hand them back to you … run like the wind! A welcome message protects your server score with the ISPs and ensures that you only add valid, permission-based e-mail addresses to your file. Plus, no one wants to pay for bad e-mail addresses.

Q. What is your typical match rate?
A. This will help you set realistic expectations and strategies for your campaign. It also is an opportunity to find out if your vendor can do a name and postal address match. If it is able to link postal information, this typically increases the number of ways you can find a new e-mail address.

Q. Do you have a multivendor approach?
A. No vendor has all the e-mail addresses in the United States. See if your vendor is able to check your file against multiple databases, remove duplicates, and handle the process for you and your staff.

Q. Do you charge based on all matches or just valid matches (post-welcome message)?
A. Again, no one wants to pay for bad e-mail addresses. Make sure you find out up front if the vendor charges for every match found or for every valid match returned to you post-welcome message.

Q. Is this a household match or an individual-level match?
A. A household match is an e-mail found for the postal address of your donor. An individual match is linked specifically to your donor. If your cause is political or controversial, an individual match is critical.

Q. What type of a suppression file do you use?
A. Ask the vendor if it maintains a suppression file of complainers, bad addresses or spam-button pushers. Also ask if it uses the DMA Email Preference Service file as suppression.

Testing 1, 2, 3

Maybe back in the early days of e-mail marketing it was just fine into send your message out in the e-sphere and forget about it. But with more and more organizations vying for donor attention via e-mail, it is increasingly important to send e-mails that engage readers and make them feel like a part of your effort to do whatever it is your organization does.

Sure, writing for e-mail success is important, as is sending those messages to the right people. But ongoing evaluation of your efforts is vital, as well. In a recent story in the *FS Giving 2.0* e-letter, *FS* Managing Editor Abny Santicola covered a webinar offered by NTEN (nten.org) titled Evaluating Your Email Marketing Efforts for Success!

"Four years ago, e-mail was a one-way communication vehicle, and the only thing you could do with an e-mail list was send out a 'blast,' she wrote. "The measure of success was the size of your list and how many people were opening the e-mail.

"Today, it's all about action-oriented, advocacy-driven e-mailing where the purpose is getting a two-way dialogue going," she explained. "Organizations' e-mail efforts should have two broad goals: to build online communities that empower members and get them to take action … and to make online organizing accessible, measurable and repeatable."

Speakers at the NTEN webinar were Lauren Miller and David Leichtman, director of e-mail programs and director of analytics and technology, respectively, for Blue State Digital (bluestatedigital.com), the firm highly recognized for its work on President Obama's campaign. Sharing tips on evaluating e-mail marketing efforts, they said that organizations can accomplish those two goals by creating an ongoing conversation with members; creating e-mails that use real voices and personalities to communicate with recipients; ensuring that e-mails are timely and relevant; and including a call to action in each e-mail so you can test and evaluate its success.

In her story, Santicola listed the speakers' three steps to e-mail evaluation. They are:

Planning

Segmenting your e-mail list is one of the most important aspects of creating an e-mail program. This involves breaking down groups by characteristics, e.g., activity level, high-dollar donors and geography. You might want to time e-mails so everyone in every time zone gets it at the same time. Segmenting allows you to target your ask so people feel a personal connection.

Always have a metric to measure. What is the purpose of the e-mail? If it's signing a petition, then the number of sign-ups is your metric. If it's donations, the donation dollars you pull in are your metric.

Set goals based on past performance and what has worked before. What are you trying to accomplish? Know in advance if there are budget restrictions and if your organization needs to hit certain milestones.

According to the Miller and Leichtman, important stats to pay attention to are:

- **Open rate.** A good open rate varies from organization to organization. Do a comparison over time with your own e-mail list to determine who your audience is and what it's interested in.

Measurement of open rates is never precise. For example, a lot of people have the automatic loading of graphics turned off, so that won't register an open, and if someone previews an e-mail in Microsoft Outlook, that will register as an open. Compare open rates of e-mail campaigns against each other.

- **Clickthrough rates.** This metric is more important than open rate, as it shows, of those who opened the e-mail, who clicked through.

- **Action conversions.** Who clicked through and actually took action, e.g., signed a petition or made a donation? You want the conversion rate to be high. If it's not, it could indicate that the text of your e-mail wasn't clear enough about what you wanted people to do, or you had a bad landing page with the action bogged down in too much text.

- **Your main metric,** as mentioned above, be it number of signatures collected or donations received as a result of a specific call to action.

Targeting, segmenting and testing

Targeting ensures that your e-mails go to the right list. Targeting should be based on data (e.g., demographics, dollars). For example, if you're organizing an event, make sure your e-mail goes to people who can actually attend.

Testing is the bread and butter of evaluation. Break up e-mail factors into test groups, and send e-mails to small, but significant segments. Test as much as you can, but be careful to not over test.

Come up with four subject lines and send an e-mail with each to four different segments of your list, and see which performs the best.

Things you can test include:

- Sender name. Edward or Eddie?
- Subject line.
- Content length. Maybe you need extra length to explain what you're doing at your organization, or maybe your readers just

want something short and quick that they can take action on. Test this.

- Images. They might compel people to take action because they explain what's going on. Or they might not help at all or, worse yet, hurt.
- Image color. A big, red donation button might work well — or maybe not. Maybe a blue donate button works better. Or green.
- Placement of images and links. Which perform better, links within a paragraph or on their own?
- URL vs. text links. Do you show the exposed URL or a hypertext "click here" link? Either on can work, but you need to find out which works best for your organization.
- Formatting options. Should you use a template? HTML e-mail vs. plain text or both?
- Phrasing. Should your ask be aggressive, e.g., "Make a donation now," or milder, e.g., "Will you chip in?"

Evaluating for success

When evaluating your e-mail program's success, Miller and Leichtman advised using real, statistical significance and comparing and retesting. And if you're not sure, test again.

But they warned not to overevaluate your program. If you already know something works, don't test it. Test in a limited sense and only if you know that you stand to benefit from it.

"Don't test all of this at once. Only test one thing at once so you know if it's statistically significant," Leichtman said.

Landing-page optimization is important to do as well, as getting people to take action is very dependent on what your Web page looks like. Test your landing page format, e.g., a one-column format vs. a two-column format, and video vs. no video.

Also consider how recent and how active your list members are (and the correlation between the two). People tend to be more likely to donate if they took action more recently.

If you don't have time to do A/B testing and can't do feedback in real time, the presenters advised cutting your list in half and sending one e-mail to one group and another to the other. You can always do an ex post facto look back in your data and make an experiment out of it later on.

A word about ESPs

No, not extrasensory perception! But, if you think about it, your e-mail service provider can act as somewhat of a sixth sense when it comes to getting your e-mail appeal delivered.

Just about everyone we talk with in the sector advises against using tools such as Outlook or Gmail to deliver your e-appeals. There are just too many potential pitfalls to go it alone. For the most effective campaigns, organizations need to partner with companies that specialize in the delivery of e-mail. The nonprofit creates the content and controls the lists, but the ESP stores all of the data and sends the client's e-mails from its server. Good ESPs are well-versed in the technical side of e-mail delivery, which includes spam regulations and results measurement, among other things.

Finally, in the "Why You Really, Truly Can't Do This Out of Your Own Email Account" section of its "Nonprofit Email Marketing Guide," Network for Good warns:

"It may not happen right away, but if you repeatedly send the same message to large numbers of e-mail addresses, at some point, your Internet Service Provider (the company that connects you to the Internet and/or sends and receives e-mail on your behalf) will cut you off and may even label you as a spammer. You won't be able to send email to your boss, your best friend, anyone at all, let alone your mailing list of supporters. And sending e-newsletters by putting lots of names in the BCC or (heaven forbid) the CC or TO field marks you as an amateur.

"Doing it on your own is also incredibly time-consuming — splitting up your list into smaller groups to get your e-mail program to send the message, responding to all those people who want on or off your list, dealing with all of those bounced e-mails that end up flooding your inbox every time you send. All of these administrative tasks eat up valuable time you should be spending on creating great content.

"You also have no way to track who is opening your messages and clicking on your links, making measuring the effectiveness of your campaigns nearly impossible. And odds are you aren't in compliance with the federal CAN-SPAM regulations either.

"Paying for an ESP is well-worth every dime you'll spend on it."

NOTE: Portions of this whitepaper were taken from previously published articles in *FundRaising Success* magazine, and the *FS Advisor* and *FS Giving 2.0* e-letters. To download Network for Good's Nonprofit Email Marketing Guide, go to web.networkforgood.org/email-fundraising-guide.