



**CREATIVE**  
FUNDRAISING ADVISORS

# GUIDE TO DONOR COMMUNICATIONS AND OUTREACH



[Creative Fundraising Advisors \(CFA\)](#) has assembled the following guide on donor communications to help you achieve better engagement with one of your organization's most important audiences: your donors. Below you will find basic concepts and key steps toward implementing donor communications along with best practices to help your organization elevate its fundraising.

## WHAT ARE DONOR COMMUNICATIONS?

Donor communications refer to content designed to activate and cultivate connections between your organization's mission and the people who have the inclination to support it. Donor communications include direct mail appeals, philanthropic news, and social media campaigns and are a consistent component of the fundraising and development function of any nonprofit organization.

Donors deserve gratitude for their contributions to your organization and regular updates to keep them apprised of progress toward mission delivery and the organization's vision for the future. Prospective donors identified as having an inclination to give require ongoing engagement to increase the likelihood of a donation.



## DISTINCTION BETWEEN DONOR AND NONPROFIT COMMUNICATIONS

Donor communications are an integral part of your overall nonprofit communications strategy. Nonprofit communications and donor communications strategies reinforce each other but are distinct. Nonprofit communications, or nonprofit public relations, are designed to reach and respond to everyone, while donor communications focus on engaging supporters and prospective donors.

## WHEN AND WHY TO USE DONOR COMMUNICATIONS

Long-lasting donor relationships are the foundation for a nonprofit's growth, which is why donor communications must focus on engaging donors and reaching prospects. Donor communications are a year-round initiative that is equally critical during times of success, crisis, and business as usual. CFA has found that organizations need to engage with their prospects anywhere from 10-24 times before it is time to ask for a financial commitment. These numbers are a general rule and illustrate the necessity of a comprehensive donor communications strategy. [Forbes Nonprofit Council](#) recommends engaging seven times with a donor before making the ask.

# COMPONENTS OF A DONOR COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY

The expected outcomes of donor communications include acquisition of new donors, funding for annual and special campaigns, and donor retention. A donor communications strategy is built upon an organization's fiscal development goals and annual fundraising timeline, and key components of the strategy include data analytics, staffing and expertise, and correlation with the overall brand of the nonprofit.

## ▶ Donor Data and Segmentation

To increase donor engagement and retention, nonprofits must understand and appreciate their target audience and personalize their communications approach using [donor data strategies](#). Your organization's development team can leverage data by segmenting donors into two or more distinct groups based on giving history and donor inclination scores. Segmentation allows for the creation of more tailored communications.

Customer relationship management (CRM), also known as donor management software, is an invaluable tool for managing donor and prospect relationships. A CRM application, or donor management software, can help your development team keep track of where donors and prospects fall within your [Donor Cultivation Cycle](#) to determine what type of communication is best to approach them and at what time.

## ▶ Staff and Resources

Creating compelling appeals, managing a schedule of donor communications delivery, and designing digital and printed content requires time and expertise. It is important for an organization to plan annual and [capital campaign budgets](#) that leverage writers with storytelling expertise, visionary designers, direct mail and digital platforms, and fundraising advisors.

## ▶ Coordination with Brand Identity

Brand recognition is important for several reasons, and chief among them is fundraising. When an appeal arrives at a potential donor's doorstep or email inbox, they will be more likely to read it and contribute if the brand is known to them. Using similar content and graphics across all channels will reinforce the organization's message and brand identity, which will increase the likelihood of a donor's commitment.

# FOUR TYPES OF DONOR COMMUNICATIONS

There are four types of communication that can make up your donor communications strategy to increase donor engagement:

- 1 Acknowledgment**

Acknowledgment messages are not only important for providing donors with the appropriate tax information, but also in expressing gratitude. Read more about donor acknowledgment as part of ongoing stewardship [here](#).
- 2 Informational**

Regular updates are imperative to donor engagement and retention. Examples of informational donor communications include annual reports, newsletters, videos, and emails that highlight donors, volunteers, and beneficiaries and illustrate how philanthropic gifts drive social impact.
- 3 Persuasive/The Appeal**

Strong fundraising appeals have a clear ask for support with a specific dollar amount or percentage increase request. Examples include sharing a campaign [case for support](#) with prospects in face-to-face meetings, direct mail solicitations with enclosed pledge forms, email messages with links to online donation forms, and social media posts with quick and easy ways to give. Follow-up messages reminding people to give are also an appropriate part of persuasive donor communications.
- 4 Feedback**

Communications is a two-way street. Organizations must be open to receiving as well as distributing information. Examples include surveys (electronic or hard copy forms), stakeholder interviews (such as those used for strategic planning and feasibility studies), social media engagement, and face-to-face conversations.

## DONOR COMMUNICATIONS METHODS

- ▶ **Direct Outreach** – Face-to-face meetings and video calls are the most effective way to communicate with top donors and prospects, and direct phone calls are a great alternative.
- ▶ **Print** – Printed materials are impactful and direct mail remains an effective way to raise dollars. Many people enjoy a brochure to hold in their hands and read, especially creatively designed materials that dovetail with digital efforts.
- ▶ **Digital** – Nonprofits must have a strong website with compelling messaging and a clear call to action to make a donation and all digital communications should lead back to this giving page. Email, digital presentations (such as PowerPoints), social media (such as Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn), and digital tools (text-to-give) are examples of digital channels.
- ▶ **Multichannel** – Using a [multichannel approach](#) that employs more than one donor communications method is proven to have a higher success rate than using a single channel. According to Nonprofits Source, marketing campaigns that used direct mail along with one or more digital media tools experienced a 118% increase in response rate compared to those that only used direct mail.

## DONOR COMMUNICATIONS PLAN AND TIMELINE

Four to six months ahead of a new fiscal year, set out a plan for donor communications that clearly states the timeline, budget, tasks, and staff member responsibilities. Plan steps for each donor segment including a calendar for which segments to approach with which communication method. Your organization's development and public relations must collaborate to maximize brand identity and audience engagement.

## MEASURING DONOR COMMUNICATIONS

Tracking donor engagement will allow you to measure the return on investment of donor communications. Recording gift amounts, event attendance, and volunteer participation, along with measuring open rates, click-through rates, or conversions to gifts, informs how to segment your donor and prospect data and provides insights for the development team to assign “inclination scores” to each donor. [Tracking and inclination scores](#) are very useful for determining which types of communication resonate with each donor or prospect and what strategies to implement in future appeals to increase return on investment.

## DONOR COMMUNICATIONS BEST PRACTICES

- ▶ **Personalization** – Marketers have found that adding personalized elements to communications resonate with donors and result in deeper engagement and higher return on investment. People are more likely to answer a call, letter, or digital communication when it arrives with their name on it and references how their contribution can or has helped your organization deliver on its mission and fundraising goals. In fact, [one study](#) found that 92% of marketers also believe that their prospects and customers expect a personalized experience.
- ▶ **Storytelling** – People are more likely to read and respond to content that focuses on a single individual who can benefit from their generosity. [Deborah Small](#), Professor at the University of Pennsylvania, found that people are more likely to give to help one individual rather than an overall cause or statistic.
- ▶ **Testimonials** – Leverage powerful supporters and experts to encourage donors and prospects to follow their lead in supporting the cause. Testimonials from major donors, influencers, politicians, and community leaders are an extra stamp of approval.

### How Outside Expertise Can Help

At CFA, we partner with you and your organization to maximize data and communications strategies and uncover the insights that elevate fundraising. We help create messaging that resonates and reflects the vision for annual, major gifts, and capital campaigns and can walk you through the best ways to pitch your prospects. We also develop case for support materials, website language, digital presentations, and more as part of our clients’ donor communications strategy.

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