

The Procrastinator's Guide to Year-End Giving - Part I

By Donna Ann Harris, CMSM, Heritage Consulting Inc. | From *Main Street Story of the Week* | December 4, 2013 |



The Procrastinator's Guide to Year-End Gifts - Part I: Tips for Creating a Quality Fundraising Campaign

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Procrastinators, unite! Main Street programs can still plan and execute a quality year-end fundraising campaign, even now, after many of your holiday events are over. Over the next two weeks we will provide you with the advice you need to ask your friends and supporters for gifts to support your Main Street program. It is truly worth the effort to go after these donations — according to [Network for Good](#), thirty percent of all donations happen in December and ten percent of all giving happens the last three days of the year.

This post provides the best practices and tips for you to create five compelling emails or e-newsletters for your year-end fundraising campaign. For this campaign to work, your office will need to be open the week between Christmas and New Year's Eve so that you are able to send out each of the five messages and process the donations you receive. This campaign should coordinate with any other year-end public relations that you normally do, including any December newsletter, press releases or stories you pitch to local media outlets.

Your Email List

This last minute fundraising campaign needs some advance planning. To start, you will need to a high quality email list from your e-newsletter, Facebook fan page or Twitter feed. Make sure these lists are up to date and if you can personalize the mailings, even better. Add any new email addresses from raffle tickets, signup sheets from events, and other sources to your existing email lists (if you have the person's permission to add their name to your solicitation list). Don't forget to purge the hard and soft bounces from your newsletter list that did not go through — you want the best list you can get.

Create a Goal

You need to create an ambitious but achievable goal for this campaign. As a guide, review your other fundraising successes from this past year, especially your annual membership appeal and yearly fundraising events, and pick a goal that makes sense for your community, the local economy, and your organization. Tell your friends and supporters about the goal in these emails, especially if you are close to achieving it.

Your 'Donate Now' button

Make sure your online donation page works flawlessly and that it is easily accessible from your web site's home page. Test it by asking someone who is not overly familiar to your organization to make a donation and give honest feedback. Is the 'Donate Now' button obvious? Do you really need all the information you are collecting from your donors? Can you make the page simpler? Do donors get a thank you email immediately? Were there any glitches? You have time now to fix any of these problems before you send out your end of year donation emails.

Your Email Message

Create five short interesting stories to use in each of the e-blasts during your last week of the year campaign. You should also repost each of these stories from your email/e-newsletter to Facebook and Twitter, so you will get the maximum impact while only having to write the stories once.

For each email, create a different short message about your impact downtown. Use a compelling quote and some great statistics from this year, but make it about people you've helped—a property owner who restored a building, new business owner in town, local shoppers, or how you worked with a partner organization (just be sure to get their permission first). Use a high quality photo, handsome graphic or colorful chart that shows your impact on downtown in these email messages/e-newsletter.

Ask your supporters to make their donation in the first line of the second paragraph, and again at the end of your message. Explaining that your supporter's gift goes toward general operating expenses is unappealing. Instead, your last week of the year campaign should focus on general programs that meet your mission, such as your summer band concerts, the flower beds or new trees you planted, how you maintain a sparkling downtown, your seasonal banners, or the other beloved annual events such as the farmers market. If at all possible, ask for unrestricted gifts, rather than gifts aimed at specific projects.

For the final two emails to be sent on December 30 and 31, change the tone of your message. Stress urgency and reinforce the tax deadline for donations. These final two emails will be the ones that shake loose the most donations based on research from Network for Good, so save your most compelling stories for last.

Start to write these email messages today — they don't have to be long, about 250 to 400 words will do.

Using Traditional PR to Reinforce Your Campaign

As you plan this last week of the year campaign, consider how you can use your traditional public relations tools to reinforce your relevance leading up to this campaign. Does the community know what your Main Street program accomplished this year? Do you prepare a year in review report or other retrospective about your work? You can use much of those statistics and stories for one or more of your five emails to supporters.

Hang a banner on your building, write a press release, and tell people about your campaign during your regular

December e-newsletter and on your Facebook page or Twitter feed. Be sure to give your supporters some notice about your end of year campaign, because there will be a barrage of emails to them during the last week of the year.

Consider Offering a Challenge Gift

One of the most effective tools in fundraising is the challenge gift. We all are familiar with them from public radio, where an individual or small group pledges to match any gift given during a specific time period of a fundraising campaign up to a fixed amount. This permits your supporter to double (or even triple!) the value of their gift. Perhaps a few Board Members would be willing to pool their year-end gifts and create a challenge gift that you can advertise in your email messages for the campaign.

Keep the Office Open during the Week of Christmas

Now that you have written your email messages, get ready to send them out. Our research on end of year fundraising suggests that one of your five emails/e-newsletters should go out on each of the following days: 12/24, 12/26, 12/27, 12/30 and 12/31 this year. Sending so many emails may sound excessive, but research has shown that more emails result in more donations. Repost each email/e-newsletter to your Facebook page or Twitter feed the same day, and make sure the post includes a link to your Donate Now button on your home page.

Please stay tuned for next week's post in which we will discuss timing of these five emails/e-newsletters, email subject lines and how to recognize the gifts received.

[Click here to learn more about year-end gift campaigns.](#)

Donna Ann Harris, CMSM, is the Principal of Heritage Consulting Inc. a consulting firm based in Philadelphia that practices in downtown and commercial district revitalization, historic preservation, heritage tourism and nonprofit organizational development. She has written five feature articles for Main Street Now. Contact her at atdonna@heritageconsultinginc.com.

The Procrastinator's Guide to Year-End Giving - Part 2

By Donna Ann Harris, CMSM, Heritage Consulting Inc. | From *Main Street Story of the Week* | December 11, 2013 |



Last week [we laid out the basics](#) for your last week of the year fundraising campaign. This week we will focus on the timing of your campaign, some tested email subject lines, and how to thank donors and recognize the gifts given to your Main Street organization.

When to Send Your Emails/E-Newsletters

The five emails you will be sending during this campaign should be sent early in the day (between 9AM and 11AM). Convio, a fundraising and marketing software company for nonprofits, says that email open rates decline significantly after lunch. Network for Good, a digital giving platform, says that thirty percent (30%) of all donations happen in December, and ten percent (10%) of all giving happens the last three days of the year with the peak being on December 31 between 12 noon to 7 PM. Be ready! Your Main Street office should be open, you should be at the computer, answering the phone, and opening the mail. Not everyone will donate via email so make sure your mailing address is on every email/e-newsletter. You may get some checks, but make sure you deposit them on or before December 31.

Email Subject Lines

As you are preparing your messages, consider the impact of the email subject line as a way to increase open rates, and to attract attention on Facebook and Twitter. We collected actual subject lines from last year's crush of end of year appeals from various preservation, museum, and downtown organizations that we received, and we learned a lot about what makes an effective pitch. Here are three tips:

1. Make your subject line about the donor (not your organization) and their gift's impact on your organization.

2. Use your organization's name or the words "our downtown" in at least one of the five emails, especially if your email reply includes an acronym or shorthand.
3. Create urgency for your donor's gift, and remind them of the looming end of year tax deadline, especially for the December 30 and 31 emails.

Here are some samples of effective email subject lines for each day of your campaign:

December 24

- Happy holidays! Our Board will match your gift (if you have challenge gifts)
- Please remember name of your organization in your year-end giving
- 5 4 3 2 1 Tax deductible giving
- Share your hopes for downtown, make a gift today

December 26

- Seasonal Sprit Downtown! Double your gift (for a challenge gift)
- You can help us reach our downtown goal! Match our Board's Gifts (for a challenge gift)
- Your opportunity to make a year-end gift to name of your organization
- Only a few days left to support the name of your organization's year-end campaign

December 27

- Your gift can be doubled today! (if you have a challenge gift)
- Double the power of your year-end gift today (if you have a challenge gift)
- There is still time to give!
- Give a gift to your downtown!

December 30

- Your gift will be matched, but our offer expires in 24 hours (for challenge gifts)
- Your matching gift opportunity is almost over (for challenge gifts)
- Almost to our goal, help name of your organization today
- Last hours for tax deductible gifts for downtown

December 31

- Last Chance to Match Your Gift (for challenge gifts)
- Urgent! Only a few hours to double your giving power (for challenge gifts)
- Last day for matching gifts (for challenge gifts)
- And it's over at midnight, help us reach our goal for downtown
- Last minutes to help your downtown

We also identified a variety of subject lines that *don't* create urgency to give. Here are some examples:

- Happy Holidays from name of your organization
- Happy New Year from name of your organization
- The end of the year
- To a new year

Track what subject lines generate the most gifts each day. Experiment with your subject lines if you have the ability to track their performance and keep notes about what works best, so you can use that information for next year.

Review Your Donation Levels

You may want to review your donation levels as part of this campaign. If you know you have a large clutch of \$100 members, you might want to offer a new giving level at \$125, or offer a modest level such as \$20 if you don't have one already in your pyramid of gifts. Finally, you might want to offer an "other donation amount" option. This permits donors to give you an amount of their own choosing. For your end of year campaign, any contribution is welcome.

Get Ready to Say Thanks!

Write your thoughtful thank you letter now. Everyone who makes an online donation should get a paper thank you letter within a week. They also should get an immediate thank you email after making their online gift, so work with your online donation software provider and make sure to add that capability. If you use a third party system to take donations such as PayPal, Network for Good, or other online payment processor, change your confirmation email to be a heartfelt thank you for this campaign. Think about creating links to your Facebook page or Twitter feed on the thank you email, and suggest to donors that they share the good news about their donation to your organization with their friends and followers.

Once someone makes a donation, if at all possible, please take their email address off your solicitation lists for this campaign. Because five emails will be going out during seven days, this is an especially important part of donor relations.

Email gifts will come in at the very last minute, so automating thank you letters helps. The IRS permits mailed gifts to be postmarked by December 31 to be considered in that tax year (see IRS Publication 526). Tell your accountant about your campaign and date your thank you letters correctly.

Show the Progress of Your Campaign

Your website's home page is the best place to keep a daily record of your campaign's progress. You can use a traditional thermometer or other graphic device to show the campaign's progress. Telling potential donors how well you are doing will be especially helpful in your December 30 and 31 messages. These messages can be changed to show progress or to ask people to help you to meet your goal.

Tell Everyone about Your Success in the New Year

Tell everyone about the results of your campaign the week after New Year's Day. Send an e-newsletter with your successes to your entire list. This may pry lose some additional donations in the new year.

Make sure you publish your list of all year-end donations in mid-January. You can post your list of contributors on your web site, or in the next issue of your e-newsletter. Organize your list based on the giving levels, not alphabetically.

Take a few days to recover, and start the New Year knowing that you've started 2014 with a nice start from your year-end fundraising efforts.

We hope these two posts were helpful. Please let us know how you did!

[Click here to learn more about year-end gift campaigns.](#)

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