



Digital Fundraising Playbook Series:

Writing an Effective Email Appeal

Introduction and Program Overview

When we think about making a fundraising appeal, we tend to think about print mail and social media. But email is still a top driver of digital revenue. It's inexpensive, fast and measurable, and almost everyone has an email address.

User behavior has evolved over the years around email, including changes like the Gmail Promotions [tab](#) and a marked increase in the number of people who read on mobile devices. These sorts of changes have been ominously thought of as the end to email, but the truth is in the numbers: Nonprofits are sending more emails than ever, and [open](#) rates and [response](#) rates increased in 2020. To grow your revenue, learning to construct an impactful email appeal is worth your time.

Program Composition

When you're planning out the content of your appeal, keep these things in mind:

- **Identify the right story to tell your readers.** If you're new to this process, check out the tips from [The Storytelling Nonprofit](#).
- **Put the reader at the center of the story.** Your email should center your reader as the hero, not your organization or your staff. Think about using the word "you" instead of "I" or "we." Make your readers feel important (because they are).
- **Put the animals front and center.** Your readers want to hear about the animals who are being saved with their gifts. Instead of "Help us," say "Help this animal" (and name the animal if you can). Connect your readers to a particular animal who has been saved, and then connect that animal to all the other animals being saved through readers' support.
- **Start with your intention.** Your intention is to move people with your appeal; you want your readers to feel something. Make your email feel like it was written by a person. Think about who your inner narrator is, and write from that perspective. Be sure to keep that voice throughout the email; don't lose it halfway through.
- **Don't forget to ask.** You've spent some time crafting a compelling story, but don't forget to ask for a donation, and don't wait until the end of the email. You can add "asks" throughout your copy. A lot of people won't make it to the end of your email, so don't [bury the lead](#).
- **Keep the future in mind.** Maintain your integrity and avoid sounding panicked in your appeals, even if your organization has an emergency and the email appeal is intended to get help with that. Think about the long-term and your future fundraising. Ask yourself: In this appeal, does my organization sound like an

organization that I want to invest in for the future?

- **Stay focused.** Every sentence in your appeal should move the major plot forward, make the story more compelling, or connect the story to what's good about your organization and why readers should be a part of it. Leave everything else out.
- **Focus on the story of one animal, rather than multiple stories.** Once you have the audience focused on that animal, convey scope through language like "Your gift can help Rocky and other pups just like him" or "Your gift can help Rocky and dozens of heartworm-positive dogs like him."

The subject line

It's a common mistake to spend all your time perfecting an email appeal, adding a subject line at the last minute. But the subject line is perhaps the single most important aspect of your email. It has one job — to get people to click on your email to read it. Without that click, no one will see the brilliant job you've done on your email content.

Brainstorm several ideas for your subject line. Don't be shy about seeking inspiration from other nonprofits; take a look at their subject lines. And don't forget about the [pre-text](#) (what shows up in the listings of your emails as you scroll through them). Don't miss taking advantage of this opportunity to convince your recipients to click.

Linking to your donation form

There should only be one place that you link to in an email appeal: your donation form. The entire goal of your email is to encourage people to click on the link to your donation form. That's the way they'll make a donation to your organization, after all.

Include both a donation button and multiple text links in your copy. It's a good idea to add your text link to action phrases in your copy. Aim for 1-5 links, depending on the length of your email copy. And link directly to your donation form, not to your homepage or another landing page. Make it as easy as possible for donors to make their gift in that moment.

Some email do's and don'ts

Do:

- Use your branding and voice.
- Say who you are (use a consistent "from" line).
- Make your email easy to skim. Use short paragraphs and highlight link text.

- Use a real "from" address that can be replied to.
- Test your messages before you send.

Don't:

- Have a misleading subject line.
- Write in all caps.
- Use excessive exclamation points.
- Use red fonts; use one base color and one accent color.
- Underestimate the importance of mobile; most emails are read on mobile devices now.

Customizing your messages

Over time, you'll build many different lists in your email program: lists of donors, volunteers, adopters, and even people who have joined your list and never taken an action. As you grow more comfortable with your email program, look for opportunities to customize your appeal messages for the different audiences.

The first and most important place to start is existing donors and people who have not yet become donors. Being able to express your gratitude for previous giving will help to strengthen your relationships with your donors. You may choose to ask donors for a gift in a different way than you ask people who have not yet donated. Your previous donors, of course, will always be your most responsive audience to an appeal. It's worth spending a little extra time to make sure they receive a great message from you.

When to send email appeals

There's a lot of speculation about the best time or day of the week to send an email, but the reality is that there is no magic formula. Do try to have some "breathing room" between your emails. Don't send two emails on the same day, and leave a buffer of a few days before and after an appeal. Try out different times and days of the week to see if a particular time or day raises any of your metrics. But don't worry too much about it.

Create and use an email template

You'll make your own life a lot easier and set expectations with your donors if you create an email template to use for all your messages. Your email template should include:

- Logo
- Image
- Link style
- Button
- Signature
- Footer
- Social sharing

In the resources section below, there are mobile and desktop sample templates that will give you a sense for placement of the elements above. (Don't be confused by the

greeked placeholder copy. It's a normal convention for digital templates.) And make sure that your template is mobile-friendly.

Conclusion

Email can and should be a strong performer in your fundraising program. Email appeals are most effective during the end-of-year holiday period, but consider sending appeals at other times of the year — perhaps around another holiday or in response to a special need that you have. If you are new to email appeals, [Giving Tuesday](#) and December 31 are key online giving days, so they are a good place to begin. Next, think about what other dates would make sense for additional appeals from your organization. Your donors will start to expect them from you and you'll be providing income for your mission all year long.

Resources

- M+R Benchmarks offers you a glossary and the opportunity download the 2022 benchmark study [here](#).
- Get your creativity going with Nonprofit Donor's [100 Email Appeal Subject Lines](#).
- Here are some sample email templates: [desktop version](#) and [mobile version](#).

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