



# Writing Holiday Donation Emails

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Writing Holiday Donation Emails - [OnlineMarketerBlog.com](http://OnlineMarketerBlog.com)

# Making YOUR Campaign A Success

I have written, managed, and measured a lot of holiday donation campaigns done via email. In this e-book, I will outline the best practices and handy hints that have maximized each campaign's success. Since each organization is different, this is not meant to act as a definitive checklist. Rather, this is a collection of universal ideas that have increased participation and the amount of donations brought in.

Three important notes:

- Most of my experience is in the non-profit/advocacy/political realms, so give proper weight to a particular tip depending on your industry. That said, *almost all of these tips can be applied to your organization's holiday email campaign.*
- If you find these tips useful, please subscribe to this blog: <http://OnlineMarketerBlog.com/Subscribe>. All email and RSS updates are free.
- Forward this to your development and marketing departments. They'll thank you for it.

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# Priorities

If you have 15 priorities, they're no longer priorities; they're items on a laundry list. Be prepared to rein in upper management if necessary. Sometimes they approach a donor list like it's an ATM. Convince them with the relationship argument: Do you want to risk list burnout or cultivate a long-term affiliation? (There is more about the appropriate email frequency later in this e-book.)

[This Forrester report](#)<sup>1</sup> sums it up:

“[B]adly targeted, irrelevant business emails irk customers, don't generate sales or satisfaction, and can tarnish customers' perception of a once-trusted brand...Because of [Hewlett Packard's email newsletter's] emphasis on deep customer research, relentless testing, and continual improvement, 'Technology At Work' influences over \$100 million in revenue and saves millions more in defrayed customer service costs.”

I recommend only one call to action per email. Build the content around that focus.

<sup>1</sup> - <http://bit.ly/MqEE>

# Content: Tone



Ensure the tone fits with your group and its mission. Peta and Greenpeace can be a little more cavalier than the Center for Responsive Politics. If your group rabble-rouses, the email should incite. If you are engaged in serious debate or advocacy, your reserved tone will come across as staid in a smart way.

And just because we are in the crazed internet age does not mean you can neglect a proper salutation and a “thank you” or “sincerely” at the end. It sounds so basic but I have seen prominent organizations send out emails as though they were talking to a friend rather than asking for money. We do not trust rude people as much as polite people and they will only donate if they trust your stewardship.

# Call To Action

If you are composing a holiday solicitation email, you are asking for money. However, keep in mind for this email (and the many others throughout the year) that you should only have one main action or “ask” per email. Even for holiday solicitation emails, various staff member may approach you. “Can we ask them to check out this webpage I just wrote?” “Can we encourage them to join our MySpace/Facebook/Flickr/del.icio.us/etc. groups?” “Can you include a mention of this article?” Enough.

Your audience doesn’t have a lot of patience. They are rushed. They would appreciate being led. So lead them. Leave all the periphery actions people want to include in other emails or at least buried at the bottom.

I also recommend using a friendly URL ([www.commoncause.org/donate](http://www.commoncause.org/donate)) rather than a bunch of junk (<https://www.kintera.org/site/apps/ka/sd/donor.asp?c=dkLKN...>). Also, give your donation link its own paragraph and make it bold. This will draw the readers’ eye. Check out how Common Cause got it right. Notice the two stand-alone links to the donation page, plus two links in the upper-right box and another at the end of the email.<sup>2</sup> Sprinkle links generously - you never want your reader to need to search for them.

hours left!

1: Bob Edgar, Common Cause (CauseNet@commoncause.org)  
: Tue 11/06/07 2:02 PM  
David Francis (mailto:David.Francis@commoncause.org)

Dear David,

There are only 12 hours left to **Get it Straight in 2008** and we still need \$19,309 to reach our fundraising goal and to fight effectively for a political system that is fair, open, and free of corruption.

With recent elections scarred by electronic voting machine failures, unconscionable plots to deceive and harass voters, and ongoing efforts to throw barriers in the path of voters exercising their right to vote, we can't just assume that the 2008 elections will be conducted fairly and freely.

**Get it Straight in 2008!**  
We have less than 12 hours to raise \$19,309.  
Help us reach our goal before midnight tonight

**With only 12 hours left before the one year to Election Day deadline, please donate to Common Cause to protect the integrity of our elections.**

We can't afford to have another election called into question because of electronic voting machines. In the 2006 elections, Florida's 13th district was marred by controversy as 18,000 votes were lost due to error or tampering with the electronic voting machines. This could be fixed by passing the Holt bill, which requires a voter-verifiable paper record of every ballot cast.

However, this crucially important bill has been held up in the House of Representatives for months. We have already sent more than 92,000 messages to Congress letting them know we want a vote on the Holt bill now, and freeing it up by insisting on an immediate vote on the top priorities of our **Get It Straight in 2008** action plan.

**Donate now to support Common Cause's Get It Straight in 2008 agenda.**

Whether it's insisting on voter-verified paper records, passing public financing in at least 5 more states, exposing abuses of power and corruption, or fighting to keep the Internet free and open, we've got to demand that those responsible for protecting the health and vibrancy of our voting process **Get It Straight in 2008**.

That's why, with one of the most critical elections in American history less than a year away, it is vitally important for you to join Common Cause in support of our **Get It Straight in 2008** drive. There are only 12 hours left and we need you by our side. **Please donate today!**

Thanks for all you do,

Bob Edgar  
President, Common Cause

<sup>2</sup> - <http://bit.ly/hFyU>

# Design Best Practices: Overall

Your design should have the following goals: to appear professional and worthy of donors' money, to build trust in your mission, and to grow pride through aligning with your organization. Each design element must play into these goals. Consider the following in regards to your own campaign:

- Is your logo visible across the top or in the upper-right corner? (You're saving the top left for your salutation.) The eye and brain of the reader are able to discern in a split second whether s/he is affiliated with your organization. Trusted emails get read. Everything else is trashed.
- Check what your email would look like with images turned off. Is some text still above the fold (high enough to be read in a standard computer screen)? Needless to say, do not rely on HTML images to communicate your message. It may look pretty, but what's the use if no one sees it?
- White space is your friend. If you stuff in a ton of text, you end up looking like harried Ralph Nadar rather than classy Frank Sinatra. Go for classy.
- You may want to show the incremental increase of funds from week to week in a visual form. See [Howard Dean's bat](#) for an example.<sup>3</sup> If you know your designer will be busy during the campaign, have them put together different images for each week of the campaign prior to its launch. Then you can deploy the images as needed. Or your designer can simply gauge from week to week in respect to the money coming in. Either way, give them some advance notice.

<sup>3</sup> - <http://bit.ly/16tWo>

# Design Best Practices: Text

While images and general design is integral to your message, consider how the text looks as well.

- Small paragraphs are easier to scan than long ones. If mine isn't the first blog you've ever read, you probably know what I'm talking about, having seen what is out there in the blogosphere. Shoot for 2-4 sentence per paragraph.
- Vary your sentence structure - no bunches of complex sentences or tons of semi-colons. Also avoid repeated simple sentences. This has the effect of sounding sharp and abrasive, so use simple sentences mostly for emphasis.
- When you require emphasis, short/emotive sentences are good. Remember that you have about 1.2 seconds to snag the reader or your email goes into the trash.
- Bold and italics are OK, but only in the most important sentences (usually your call to action). You need to communicate quickly and that occasionally means grabbing at eyeballs. However, chose your emphasis sentences (or words) carefully and be moderate. Too much formatting makes you look a little crazy.

# Font Style

Let's get granular! Your choice of font should be decided by:

1. Your conventions or style guide - keep things consistent.

2. How your organization should be viewed. I recommend serif fonts (Times New Roman, Garamond) for a professional portrayal and sans-serif font (Ariel, Verdana) to seem down-to-earth. (Sans-serif is easier to read online, but decide for yourself depending on your organization.)

Shoot for at least 12 point font. While your eyes may be spry, more mature adults have worse eyes and more in the bank. You do the math.

Some folks prefer the antiquated look of Courier - reminiscent of typewriter days of yore. These are usually people who also enjoy multiple font colors and garish backgrounds. We're not selling used cars folks, we're selling ideas and those are worth money. Like your Momma said, don't go out looking cheap. (And don't even think of using [Comic Sans](#).<sup>4</sup>)



<sup>4</sup> - <http://bit.ly/HmLO>

# Timing

Ideally, start as early as possible. At the time of this publication, it's already November. If you haven't started yet, do so immediately.

Ideally, you'd want to give yourself a month to plot out the strategy, meet with the decision-makers to get their support, do several drafts, etc.

One email does not a campaign make. Since email costs are minimal, plan to send out several (as long as you have new content and something to say). This frees you from including everything in just one email.

In my experience, and contradictory to what old-school copywriters tend to suggest, the longer and more comprehensive any particular email is, the *less* money you will pull in. Time out your email sends so you can talk about one aspect of your mission with one call to action per email.

Do not plan to send out the exact same email twice unless you segment your list to suppress any people who opened it the first time around.

I like a strategy of one email per week for four weeks. It gives four touch-points - enough to highlight several aspects of the work you do, yet the campaign is short enough not to drag on.

# List Cultivation

Holiday emails should (obviously) go out prior to the holiday in questions. Most times, this means November/December. You can start even earlier if you are collecting funds that will need to be spent prior to a holiday project. Heck, even the occasional “Christmas in July” usually doesn’t hurt. Just do not *only* ask for money and don’t ask for money all the time.

One oft-overlooked feature of this is cultivating a list in the first place. You should be building trust, providing value or a service to your readers throughout the rest of the year. If you do, and can prove that your holiday campaign is worthwhile, you will succeed. If you ignore your list until December, forget it.

The best way to cultivate a list of potential donors is to tell about all of the great work you’ve done in the past with previous donor’s money. Provide value through interesting content in your e-newsletters. Engage your audience by asking their opinion, including them in your work, listening to their suggestions, and making them feel like a true team member.

If you do this year-round, your engaged list will jump at the chance to support your work with their money. Because by then, after all, it will be their work too.

# Frequency

When you are cultivating your list throughout the rest of the year; how often should you send emails? It depends on your mission, your audience's involvement, and the resources you have to devote to it.

- **Mission:** What is your purpose and how does your communications plan fit in? [Daily Candy](#)<sup>5</sup> and [Very Short List](#)<sup>6</sup> deliver terse, daily emails. But if the Red Cross started doing that, I would definitely unsubscribe. Most importantly, send emails when you have something to say and keep it in line with your overall mission.
- **Audience:** How often does your audience want to hear from you? How does your email fit into their lives? Devote a couple of months to testing this. Consider this example: Split your list in two, and then start the first group with frequent emails (say, four times/week) and gradually decrease over two months to just one email every two weeks. Compare this with the other group which you start sending emails to slowly and build up to four times/week over the same amount of time. Because this is over the same time period, seasonal reading habits won't effect you. Plus, by splitting the group you negate the variable of how the frequency was changed (build up or slow down) and can focus on your audience's interaction with your content. How did they respond when they got more frequent emails vs.. less frequent ones? A short testing period usually produces clear trends.
- **Resources:** Writing, editing, proofing, coding, and testing emails takes time. Plus, your writer needs to read enough or be in enough meetings to know what s/he is talking about. Are you willing to devote the time and staff costs to that? Do not budget in 2 hours/week and expect e-communications gold. You get out of it what you put into it.

<sup>5</sup> - <http://www.dailycandy.com/>

<sup>6</sup> - <http://www.veryshortlist.com>

# Directness - Getting Your Piece Of The Cake

I was at a birthday party many years ago and someone said, “I want a corner piece of cake with the giant frosting rose on it.” That stuck with me. What gumption! What nerve! I’d never have the temerity to utter those words. Ha, that’s what I thought.

Solicitation emails are not rude. It is not impolite to ask for money. The faster you get over that, the more successful you will be. You are giving donors the opportunity to invest in your mission. This is probably the most important thing I have learned about development over the years.

Ask for the piece of cake you want. As long as you can justify that you will use their money wisely, most donors appreciate pluck. Besides, they are used to people kissing their asses all day long. It is a nice break for them to meet with a confident, knowledgeable person such as yourself. And I guarantee that you will take home more money than the ass-kisser. Repeat this mantra: Ask for the piece of cake that you want!

# Testing



Test, test, test. Test anything, even crazy ideas. You never know how people engage your emails and the information you garner could be invaluable.

Some ideas: test tiny changes to your subject line, left and right alignment for an image or informational box, or whether a table of contents helps open rates (Outlook users often use a preview pane and a TOC can help entice them to read further).

However, do not include so many variables that one might effect another. If you test six different things all at once, you cannot reliably say which variable had a given effect. Be patient and test little by little.

Never assume you know everything about your audience nor the way they engage your emails. Your list is always changing, with new people joining and other dropping off. Always be testing.

# Metrics

One of my co-workers once said, “Metrics only matter when you have something to compare them to,” and it’s true. Sure, things like open rate, click-throughs, and bounce rates for particular pages are important. But make sure that you are comparing apples to apples.

I hear people worry about whether their email performs “better than average.” The truth is that there is no average. There are so many factors, including your industry, mission, and list demographics, that it is impossible (and useless, frankly) to try to discern an average in the first place.

Instead of comparing yourself against others in your field, compare one metric against another metric over time. Did you open rate improve within the last six months? Great, now determine what factors influenced that change.

However, email metrics are not foolproof. Did you know that when individuals view an email in their Outlook preview pane that it does not count as an open? All HTML emails (emails with images or hyperlinks) contain a  $1 \times 1$  pixel image that is the equivalent of an invisible picture. Images in your email are actually located on the sender’s server. When you open an HTML email, images are pulled from the sender’s server, trigger that  $1 \times 1$  picture, and that is how they know the email has been opened - because that tiny image has called out to serve up the “picture.”

This is just one example of a misleading so-called fact, but there are many, many examples just like this one. There is a lot you can discern from metrics. But you should also have a healthy distrust of assumptions based upon them as well.

# Good Luck!

I hope this white paper helps you improve your donations this holiday season. This is in no way a definitive list of everything you need to know about online solicitation emails. However, I hope these tips sound reasonable because they will increase your bottom line. Good luck and let me know how it goes!

Please feel free to contact me at [OnlineMarketerBlog \[at\] gmail \[dot\] com](mailto:OnlineMarketerBlog@gmail.com) if you have additional questions about writing holiday donation emails or if you would like information regarding my freelance rates.

Finally, please visit my blog at: [OnlineMarketerBlog.com](http://OnlineMarketerBlog.com). You can sign up for free weekly updates sent to your email address or RSS reader by going to [OnlineMarketerBlog.com/Subscribe](http://OnlineMarketerBlog.com/Subscribe). I never spam and you can unsubscribe at any time.

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# Contact

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-You! Thanks for reading. Please feel free to subscribe to my blog and pass along this e-book to your friends and co-workers.