

The GuideStar Blog retired September 9, 2019. We invite you to visit its replacement, the [Candid Blog](#). You're also welcome to browse or search the GuideStar Blog archives.
 Onward!

GuideStar **Blog**

Is Your Fundraising Appeal Cluttered? That Won't Do

by [George Crankovic](#), on 4/2/19 8:00 AM



Share



Marie Kondo is the high priestess of tidying up. The essence of her method, which everybody's heard of by now, is this: If a thing gives you joy, you keep it. If it doesn't, you thank it and let it go.

What does this have to do with fundraising appeals? Only everything. Try this: look through one of your fundraising appeals, but don't ask yourself whether it gives you joy. Instead, ask yourself—more importantly—whether each part of it gives your donors joy. That's what counts. For example:



Image by Efes Kitap on Pixabay

- The section in your appeal where you talk about your nonprofit's founding and history. Does that give your donor joy? Sorry. Toss that out. Why? Because you're bragging about how great the nonprofit is, not talking to your donor about her concerns and what she wants to accomplish.
- The article in your newsletter where you profile the staff person who schedules your volunteer projects. Does that give your donor joy? Nope. Toss that. The staff person is wonderful, of course, but that story simply isn't relevant to why a donor would give.
- The first line of an appeal that states the obvious, like starting an appeal for a food bank with, "Food is essential to life." Does that give your donor joy? No. Get rid of it. It doesn't generate

interest. It doesn't speak to donors about impact. And geez it's boring.

- › Saying “you” like a million times in an appeal because somebody suggested that it's what “donor centric” is. Does that give your donor joy? Nope. Gone. Overusing “you” just makes it sound like your appeal was generated by an SEO robot. And that's an appeal that sounds weird to humans.
- › Writing in formal, overly proper, business-letter English with long paragraphs in which you staunchly eschew sentence fragments, contractions, and sentences starting with “and” or “but.” Does that give your donor joy? No. In the trash. It keeps donors at arm's length. Not good.
- › Using euphemisms such as “food insecure” when you mean someone is going hungry. Same goes for “housing insecure,” “experiencing homeless,” and similar terms. Does that give your donor joy? No. Toss that. If donors wanted a sociology textbook, they'd read one. They want plain talk.

All these things and many others like them are just clutter that's only good for one thing, collecting dust. What do you do with them? Like Marie Kondo says, let them go. But sometimes, as with clutter in your house or office, it's hard to let go. Some of the things that fail to give donor joy might be expected at a nonprofit, like going on and on about a nonprofit's history. In some cases, it might even be the executive director who's behind these things. Still, for the good of your fundraising and your nonprofit, you have to let them go. You'll be better off.

Now that some of the de-cluttering is done, what do you keep? Well, let's see:

- › The compelling, specific offer in your appeal that describes the need, highlights the solution, and details exactly what each gift will accomplish. Does that give your donor joy? Absolutely. Donors want to know what their gifts will do and that they will matter. Definitely keep that one.
- › Using a serif font like Times New Roman, making it big enough to actually read, indenting the paragraphs, and not putting color behind the type. Do layout basics like these give your donor joy? Yes! Keep them. Why make reading a struggle?
- › The photo that portrays the essence of your nonprofit's mission, like the photo for a soup kitchen of a grizzled homeless man sitting at a table with a plate of food in front of him. Does that kind of iconic photo give your donor joy? Yes, because it shows what the donor's impact can be. It shows what the nonprofit stands for. And it shows how the world can be better. So, yes, that gives your donor joy. That's a keeper.
- › A clear presentation of the problem to be solved, whether it's hunger, homelessness, animal cruelty, or any other. Does that clarity give donors joy? Yes! Your donors are adults. They appreciate being spoken to as adults, and that includes straight talk about a problem they find troubling. Another keeper.
- › Writing appeals in a friendly, conversational, informal tone at about the sixth-grade level. Does that give your donors joy? Of course. Donors like friendly and conversational—which makes sense. But sixth-grade level? Isn't that dumbing things down? Won't donors feel you're talking down to them? No, it's writing so you're understood easily and immediately. Keep this one.
- › Giving free reign to emotion and drama in appeals. Does this give donors joy? Yes, without question. Donors want to feel something about your cause. Let them. When the level of emotion seems over the top to you, then it's just about right for donors. Keep this.
- › The story that illuminates your cause and how your nonprofit helps. Not a look-at-how-great-this-nonprofit-is story. Not a story that's thrown into an appeal just to have a story. But a story that portrays the full humanity and urgency of what your nonprofit does. Does that give your donor joy? You bet it does. It's an essential part of your appeal. Keep it.

When you de-clutter an appeal, taking out those things that don't give your donor joy, what you're really doing is opening up space for the things that do. Your appeal will be more streamlined, more focused, and more pointed in the case its making to your donors. And that has to lead to better fundraising. And ultimately more joy for you and your nonprofit.



George Crankovic is an experienced, award-winning fundraising copywriter and strategist. He helps nonprofits engage their donors through multichannel direct response, combining strategy, messaging, offer, and audience to maximize results. An in-demand writer, George has published articles in Fundraising Success magazine, Nonprofit Pro magazine, and other national publications. He is a guest blogger at Jeff Brooks's Future Fundraising Now site, and he blogs at www.marketing-fundraising.com.

Dennis Fischman

Wonderful piece! But it's "free rein," not "reign."

← Reply to *Dennis Fischman*

Brita Darany von Regensburg

Need help how to create a story for a peer- to- peer fundraising event on social media - Yes!

← Reply to *Brita Darany von Regensburg*

Lynda Bluestein

This is fundraising gold. I am so tired of scanning (I never read after the opening sentence) appeal letters that tell me all about who wonderful (and needy) the NFP is. Boring, boring,

boring. A letter to a long time supporter should be like a conversation with a friend, not a talk given at Rotary.

← Reply to *Lynda Bluestein*

Cheryl Deep

Excellent advice. My new mantra.

← Reply to *Cheryl Deep*

Sarah Clampitt

Super advice! Thank you!

← Reply to *Sarah Clampitt*

John Winers

Impressive.

← Reply to *John Winers*

Jim

Interested in fundraising do's and don'ts such as the George Crankovic blog piece.

← Reply to *Jim*

Randi Sunshine

Please only use sans serif and not serif as stated in the article. Sans Serif fonts are accessible to those who are visually impaired. This way "reading is not a struggle" for everyone reading your appeal including those with visual impairments. Is your online appeal ADA compliant? There are many online sites to check for you. People with disabilities are not just recipients of service. They are also donors.

← Reply to *Randi Sunshine*

Tom Kobinsky

gonna steal this and use it!

← Reply to *Tom Kobinsky*

protected by reCAPTCHA

[Privacy](#) · [Terms](#)

[Submit Comment](#)

🔍

RECENT POSTS

-
-
-
-
-

POSTS BY TOPIC

-
-
-
-
-



BLOG ARCHIVE



FROM OUR BLOG

SUPPORT

[Contact Us / Help / Support](#)

[Community](#)

[Privacy Policy](#)

[Legal Notice](#)

[Term of Use](#)

[Site Status](#)



Foundation Center and GuideStar are Candid.