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That Coulda Gone Better: Three Fundraising Mistakes You Don't Have to Make

by [George Crankovic](#), on 12/14/18 8:00 AM



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“Only he who has traveled the road knows where the holes are deep.” So goes the ancient Chinese proverb. And of course there’s loads of truth in it, especially when it comes to creative strategy for fundraising—a road with plenty of potholes to cause problems.

So, in the interests of sharing some knowledge of the highway ahead and helping others avoid some typical newbie mistakes, here are three lessons I learned the hard way.



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MISTAKE NO. 1: CLEVER VS. CREATIVE

The client, a publisher of an inspirational/religious newsletter, wanted a mailing to persuade donors to give in order to distribute their newsletter to hospitals, churches, and other similar organizations. All in all, a good cause and an acceptable platform for an appeal.

We’d had success with a previous appeal for this client, so this time we wanted something really out of the box. We brainstormed until we were sure we had “it.”

Since the issues of the newsletter are passed around to various people at the hospitals and other places where it's distributed, our idea was this: create a faux issue of the newsletter, complete with handwriting, doodles, coffee mug rings, and dog ears. And inside that faux issue would be the letter exhorting donors to give in order to distribute newsletters for people to read—much like the sample they were holding in their hands.

We had a great time putting this mailing together. It sure seemed creative. But when donors received it, they apparently didn't appreciate our creativity as much as we did. The response was underwhelming. Either the donors were completely baffled by what they were looking at, or they thought that the whole thing was too cute by half. In the end, the idea was just too convoluted to really connect.

Lesson learned: Cleverness is often mistaken for creativity. The best creative concepts—the ones that work—usually aren't flashy. They're often simple, direct ideas donors grasp immediately and see real value in. The real power is in simplicity.

MISTAKE NO. 2: TOO MUCH OF A GOOD THING

The client was a well-known social services charity. One of its local chapters wanted a mailing to send to a specific audience—one they had tried to reach before without much success.

The purpose of the mailing was to persuade donors to give in order to provide the charity's social services to people in need in their community. In that way, it was similar to many other appeals for this client that we'd done previously.

For this one, though, we wanted something different. We knew there'd be an appeal letter, naturally. But somehow that didn't seem like enough. So we got a meeting together to talk things over. In that discussion, somebody piped up and said, "What about putting in a notepad?" To which the group said, "Sure." Since that seemed to go over well, somebody else said, "What about a bookmark? People like to get those." Again, heads nodded. Then, the group-think took over, and the thing just started feeding on itself. By the time we were done, the mailing had ballooned to include not only those two items but also a calendar, a list of service locations, a prayer card, pictures of people helped, and probably even a few more things for good measure.

Naturally, when that appeal got to donors, they were less than enthusiastic. Not surprising. It was just a mishmash of things, not a focused communication.

Lesson learned: Every component of an appeal has to earn its place. If it doesn't relate directly to the offer and the core purpose of the appeal, it shouldn't be there, and you'll be better off without it.

MISTAKE NO. 3: GRAPHICS OVERLOAD

The client was an international relief charity, and the appeal they wanted seemed pretty straightforward. It involved a simple multiplier offer to persuade donors to give in order to ship medicine into developing countries.

With the offer and a story of someone who'd been helped, we were ready to go. Copy was written, reviewed, and approved. But when the project moved into layout, things went wrong.

As produced, the mailing was full color, with a virtual rainbow of hues employed throughout—a confusing extravagance. In addition, there was reverse type for the headlines and subheads, color behind some of the text, and san serif type for the body copy—all of which hampered readability.

There were handwritten margin notes on every page. And just about every other line of copy was boldface, italic, or underlined. Every visual element screamed “Look at me!” all at once, competing with the message instead of supporting it.

On the outside envelope, the graphic was a portion of an image that was enlarged to such an extent that it was difficult at a glance to make out what you were looking at. Donors, apparently, were unmoved, and the appeal sank.

Lesson learned: Piling on trendy graphic flourishes will hinder more than it helps. A fundraising appeal isn’t an ad, a brochure, an annual report, or even like most commercial direct mail. A fundraising appeal is about the donor’s beliefs, values, and aspirations, so it’s an intensely personal letter from one concerned individual to another. That’s what it should look like.

Sometimes mistakes in fundraising are the result of inexperience or lack of knowledge about the donors or just the enthusiasm that takes over, preventing people from creating a workable plan and keeping to it. Sometimes mistakes happen when there are too many people in charge of a project, or when there’s no one in charge. And sometimes mistakes happen simply because nobody stands up and says, “The direction we’re going in is wrong.” But we live and learn, knowing that even though mistakes are probably inevitable, at least we don’t have to keep making the same ones.



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Susan McIntyre

Excellent reminders. Thanks for sharing them.

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