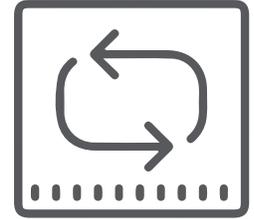


Help Center

**STEWARD YOUR
DONORS**

6





Keeping Donor Relationships Strong

When it comes to keeping your donors involved, communication and stewardship should never be a one-and-done affair. Donor retention means cultivating those relationships, actively communicating with your donor, volunteer, and ambassador base to show your thanks and progress. Stewardship is one of the most important things you can do for your organization. Don't believe us? Take a look at your donor acquisition costs. These will vary between organizations, but the cost to acquire a new donor almost always outpaces the cost to retain a previous donor.

Donor retention doesn't happen on its own, and attrition could be your Achilles' heel. [The Fundraising Effectiveness Project](#), which assesses growth, retention, and attrition across 13,601 nonprofits, highlights this danger zone. 2017 saw an overall growth in donors of 0.75%. That doesn't sound too bad, does it? Growth is growth, after all, and at least it's positive.

But what that 0.75% doesn't immediately tell you is that donor retention was only 45.5% on average. For every 100 new donors that were acquired, 99 previous donors were lost. From 2010 to 2014, there was actually a net negative in donor growth, with nonprofits losing between 102 and 107 on average for every 100 new donors acquired. Think of how hard you work to attract new donors, all the time, energy and funds. You don't want that to go to waste.

Stewardship is a mandatory part of any long-term plan, whether or not your numbers look as dramatic as these. If you don't yet have a stewardship schedule in place, now is the perfect time to start. If you do have a stewardship program, think about how it can be improved moving forward.

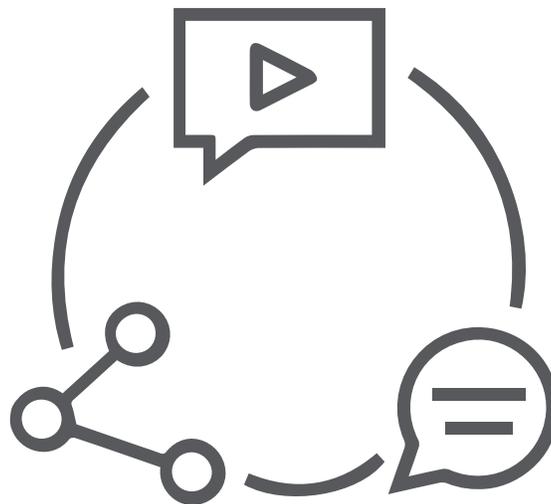
Stewardship Plan Basics

At its core, stewardship is about showing people they're appreciated and keeping them updated. While stewardship communication should happen immediately after a donation or initiative's end, that first message is really just the first crucial step in playing the long-game.

To start with, make sure you have a team in place to issue that first thanks. You should have selected a Stewardship Lead when you first assembled your team; make sure that person has plenty of support now. Partner them with your social media team to thank donors online as their contributions come in. If you're writing more personalized emails as donations are received, ensure that you have the people necessary to write them quickly as well as basics to include in the content of the message. This may, and should, look slightly different for one-time and repeat donors or for different tiers. If you plan on mailing handwritten thank-you notes, you may want to start writing them now. Personalization is key when it comes to keeping individuals involved; though it does take a bit more time than mass mailings or form letters, you will see more positive results.

Keep in mind that you should be thanking your volunteers and ambassadors in addition to your donors. These people have done so much to help you, whether they've hyped your campaign, broadened your reach, or helped make an event happen. Show your appreciation for these contributors, as well as your formal team, through the day and after.

All of these communications should extend well beyond the end of this initiative. Your thanks shouldn't be a "the end" kind of statement, but a "to be continued" message that will keep people engaged. Your stewardship plan should include updates on this particular project as well as the work your organization does moving forward.





What To Say

Your stewardship communication should be a formula built on three basic components: appreciation, impact, and action.

Appreciation

Say thank you and say it often. The first time should come immediately after their donation in a confirmation letter, but a public thanks is often also appreciated.

Impact

Appeal to the values and mission of this project and what the donor is helping you do. Bring it back to the goals you've portrayed in terms of impact. Contextualize the work as empowering and specific.

Action

In immediate communication, "action" may be included through mentions of planned use or allocation. In later messages, be sure to share what has actually been done, the actions you have already taken or are still planning to take. Show your donors that their action is fueling your action and that the initiative is making change possible.

These important factors should be framed through donor-first language. Phrases like "You made this possible" and "Because of your contribution we can..." highlight your donor as an essential piece of your initiative. By centering them as a key component of your project, you make them feel important and vital, increasing the probability that they will continue to be invested and to invest in your future projects. Make the communication both tangible and personal.

Sharing shout-outs in real time on your social media and tagging donors in your posts is one way to personalize your thanks, and does double duty by connecting them to a network of other donors. Phone calls and handwritten notes are also impactful options; they show additional time, effort, and personalization and are a reminder that there is real person on the other side of their donation. These can still be based around templates, but be sure to adjust them for factors like repeat donations and different tiers. You can have a several people working on writing thank-you notes, but provide notes regarding different scenarios to help the process move quickly and smoothly. For more major donors, though, consider sending a note from a person higher up in your organization.

Following your initiative, share updates regarding the progress of the project and the work that is being done to make your successful goals into real action and impact. This should come as a series of communications, particularly if a project takes more time to implement. You can also share updates regarding other work being done by your organization. While you don't want to make another ask too soon after a donation is received, particularly in a major campaign like your Giving Day, you can share other facets of your efforts and eventually build back up to asks.

Include visuals where you can for both thanks and updates. Hero shots and action shots are compelling and can gain attention just like the imagery during your campaign. Consider also a video to say thanks or share an update. This can be shared on your website, on social media, or in emails and will capitalize on the storytelling benefits as well as the general popularity of the medium.



When To Say It

We recommend a minimum of three updates following your updates. Note that this is just for updates and not for the initial thanks, which should be issued immediately after the donation is received.

The first update should come at the end of the initiative. While you won't have had time to necessarily start implementing the project, you do have new information to share. Some donors will follow your day-of updates closely, but others may not. By the end of your event, you'll be able to update everyone on the exciting news of your grand total, all of the goals you have met, and what that means for your impact. Due to the 24-hour nature of most Giving Days, if you're running this type of event then you don't need to send this update exactly when the initiative ends—how many people will be monitoring their inbox at midnight?—but it should go out the morning or the early afternoon afterward and can be mostly prepared and close to finalized toward the end of your day.

The second update should come a week after the close of the campaign. By this point you should have started to implement your plans, even if everything isn't fully enacted yet. Action can take longer for some projects than others, and if your only update is that you're working with distribution channels, finalizing a schedule, or gathering necessary resources, then that's still progress. Let your donors and network know that something is happening, even if they won't be able to see the full effects immediately.

The third update should come somewhere in the range of 1-3 months post-event. If you have not finished or mostly finished the actionable goals you set for your initiative after three months, get on it! The updates are largely about keeping the lines of communication open with your network, but they are also about accountability. People want to see you doing what you said you would, with their contributions making a difference in a problem they care about.

Keep in mind that three updates are a minimum. If you aren't done by January, you may want to reach out for the new year anyway. If your project impact extends beyond the three-month suggestion, share an additional later update to wrap it up. If there are any significant changes, or even notes or testimonials from those you've helped, pass them on to your network. It can't hurt to keep people in the loop!

To help retain donors for future projects, maintain communication even beyond the scope of this initiative. Promote any upcoming events you have planned (including a donor appreciation event if you choose to host one) as well as any major changes or projects with your organization. [A 2014 Software Advice study](#) on preferred nonprofit communication found that 60% of donors primarily want impact and success stories, but 17% of donors are also interested in hearing news about your nonprofit and an additional 15% want to hear specifically about events.

Asking for additional donations, they found, becomes a bit trickier. While a second ask is necessary to avoid attrition, asking too soon or too often can irritate donors, causing you to lose them for a different reason. The biggest takeaway is that you need to let things lie for a bit, rather making an immediate move by asking donors to contribute to your next project. Generally, you don't want to make multiple asks within the same six-month period. Regarding when nonprofits should make another ask, the Software Advice study found that 16% of donors wanted organizations to wait up to 3 months, 21% wanted 3-6 months, and 35% wanted

7-12 months. By waiting seven months but sharing updates and information in the meantime, you hit the sweet spot of staying in touch while still waiting long enough to make the next ask.

While 28% wanted more than 12 months, such a long length of time is a bit unreasonable when it comes to maintaining strong relationships and continued growth. Likely those 28% who want the longest wait time also fall into the 41% who never want to be contacted again. In that case, you may not be able to convert those one-time donors into repeat contributors. However, you shouldn't make assumptions about who would or wouldn't like to be contacted again. If a donor really wants to leave, you can't force them to stay, but if you drop all communication from your side, then the loss is on you. Keep the lines of communication open with non-ask messaging, and, when the timing is right, appeal to the 59% of donors who are willing to hear at least one or two additional asks.

Think of your donors as friends and consider how you maintain communication in other relationships. Wish them happy holidays for various events around the year, and a happy birthday if you have that data. You may also wish them a happy anniversary for their first donation or volunteer experience. The longer you maintain a relationship, the more momentum it builds.



[Check Out Our Pocket Guide to Stewardship](#)

Creative Ways to Appreciate and Update

With all of the avenues available to you, it's always good to take an [omnichannel approach](#). Mix and match methods to use all of the resources at your disposal, but take note of your donors' preferred methods of communication. Particularly for more personalized communication, try to reach people through the method with which they are most comfortable, whether that is by mail, email, phone, or on social media.

Here are some options for communication in terms of channel and content. Adjust them as needed to fit your resources and donor base, and maybe try something new!

Email

Email is an easy and common option, so be sure you're maximizing what you can do with it. Confirmations, thanks, and updates should definitely be sent by email, but you can also send videos, impact stories, personal accounts, and invitations. It's harder to miss a message in your email inbox than on a busy social media feed, so crucial pieces like your first three important updates should be sent directly to donors. If you feel comfortable committing to a more detailed newsletter with updates on projects and stories from



recipients, go for it! Email is also a great place to note and appreciate a particular donor's history with your organization. Segmented lists make large communications simple, so stay organized and start drafting.

Social Media

Being more public, social media is great for more general updates. It's a way for you to reach people who might be in your network but not on a mailing list. Since you're generally not directing the communication to any one person, you can promote fundraisers beyond the seven-month-spaced recommendations for personalized asks. You don't want your whole feed to be asks, though. Add stories, statistics, pictures, graphics, and videos to the mix, as well as updates on any projects or events. Plan for [at least three of every four posts to be content other than asks](#).

On your launch, those three-out-of-four will mostly be updates and thank-yous. Social media reaches everyone, but it's also really impactful to tag specific people. Thank donors, advocates, ambassadors, and your formal team by name at various points through the day. If possible, use a picture in the post to thank them as well. You may be able to reshare a post from them, such as an #UNselfie, if they've shared one, or you can get more creative with a little extra prep. For example, College Mentors photoshopped donors' names onto [blank whiteboards](#) held by some of their student participants; they had the pictures taken in advance and were ready to edit, tag, and share quickly. You can easily take this idea and give it your own spin.

Video

As we've noted in several sections, video is a huge asset and draw when it comes to internet interactions. A video for thanks or updates will go a long way, as you can share it on numerous platforms. If you have an event on your giving day, or just before or after, record footage for a thank you video and get attendees involved, either by saying thanks or sharing why they chose to get involved. If your project involves a group working together in person, take pictures or brief video segments to use later in an update video. You may be able to use some of these elements twice—now and for a future project or spotlight.

Mail

Handwritten notes are an important way to show appreciation, but mail is useful for other aspects of your fundraising as well. It doesn't need to be a main method of communication, but one key benefit is that mail gives the donor a physical reminder of your communication. This can be particularly useful for asks and events. Even if you don't want to send mass mailings to your entire network, sending to a select population can benefit you. As we noted in [Section 4](#), Baby Boomers and the Silent Generation use mail more than younger generations, and the Silent Generation in particular prefers it. Additionally, you may want to send direct mailings to more major donors as well as physical invitations for any important events you may host, as they lend an extra air of formality to the occasion.

Phone

As with direct mailings, not everyone necessarily needs a call, but those who prefer it will appreciate it. If you ask your donors for their preferred means of communication, you may opt to make phone an option. If you don't ask for their preferences, but collect phone numbers, consider hosting a thank-you phonathon in the days after your giving day. Phonathons may not need to be a regular occurrence depending on your organization, but they can make a big difference when the timing is right.

Events

Events are a great way to bring your fundraising community together in a very tangible way. They have the benefit of physically showing support for your organization and providing photo opportunities for your future media communications, but they can also be great mixers and community builders. People tend to also be invested in their friends' projects, so if an event you host leads to a friendship between several individuals, they all become more invested as you have turned your fundraisers and events into a group activity. They're also a reliable way to boost community involvement. Events may be fundraisers in and of themselves, but they can also be appreciation events or meet and greets with your team. Doing so humanizes your organization as well as your donors. Anything from a relay or race to a happy hour or picnic in the park can qualify, and may feel like a fun breather.

Website

With all of the options available to share information, don't forget to keep your website up to date! Thank donors somewhere on your permanent page and make note of all updates or upcoming events. Your website should be dynamic, up to date, and easily accessible.

There is no one right way for communicating with your network, as long as you are, in fact, communicating. Stewardship and donor retention can be hugely influential for your fundraising, so it's worth investing some time to make sure that you do it well. Find a balance between being present and overly persistent, and remember that it's important to make your fundraising fun, as well. Try a new way of reaching out—you might be surprised by how much it can impact your growth and your future initiatives!

