Number 83 October 2006

Mal Warwick's Newsletter

Successful Direct Mail, Telephone & Online Fundraising™

SPOTLIGHT ON SUCCESS

Nothing to say? Tell stories!

BY TOM AHERN

YOU SAY you can't think of a thing to write in your upcoming newsletter? Well, here are 18 topics guaranteed to interest your donors—and help you raise more money.

1. PROGRAM STORIES.

Pick a program, any program. What has it accomplished lately? Is it growing, shrinking, updating, changing in any way? Do you have handy an anecdote that reveals how successful the program has been or can be? If it's a new program, what made you think it was worth doing in the first place? What are your hopes for the program? Talk about why the program *matters*, not so much about how it works.

"Talk about why the program *matters*, not so much about how it works."

2. TIPS.

As specialists in your field, you have a unique body of knowledge. Some of it might be helpful to others. "The 10 Warning Signs of Childhood Depression." "A Dozen Things You Can Do Today That Will Save the Environment Tomorrow." "Is a Charitable Remainder Trust Right For You? A Checklist from an Expert."

3. PREVIEWS AND REPORTS.

What's ahead? What are the latest findings from the authorities? "Looking at Next Year: Where We See Healthcare Headed." "New Urbanists Meet to Plan City of the Future: Will You Want to Live There?"

4. CLIENT CASE HISTORIES.

Show how your programs have changed individual lives for the better—and don't go all "happy face." Include conflict, tension, doubt, and obstacles, as well as triumph: It makes far more interesting reading.

5. "STAFF ARE PEOPLE, TOO" STORIES.

What are the people on the frontlines really like? Do their personal histories reinforce the credibility of your organization? "New Director of Projects Learned Her Business Building Bridges in Southeast Asian Jungles."

6. MILESTONES.

"How 46 Donors Celebrated Our 20th Anniversary: Making $20,000 Gifts in Their Wills." "What We've Accomplished (Thanks to You, Our Donors) In the Last Five Years: A Timeline."

7. RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT.

What's coming down your pipeline? The world is ever-changing: What programs are you planning to meet new demands?

8. PUBLICATIONS.

What do you have to offer? Guides, brochures, checklists, white papers, reports, talking points, PowerPoint presentations, downloadable PDF files readable by Adobe Acrobat, an e-newsletter, information on your Web site: Anything a donor, prospect, or client might consider useful is potential news.

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Inside . . .

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9. HOW-TO PIECES.

What do you know how to do that a reader might be interested in? "Listing Your Historic Home on the National Register: Easy To Do, If You Do It Right." "How to Lose 20 Pounds in Two Months the Safe and Sane Way, Without Feeling Hunger Pangs."

Due credit and thanks: The preceding checklist is partially based on one created by Robert W. Bly in his *Advertising Manager's Handbook.*

10. FINANCIAL NEWS.

People are surprisingly curious about your finances. If for no other reason, openly discussing your financial information signals donors that you have nothing to hide, that you've been wise stewards of their cash contributions. Skepticism about nonprofit business practices has never been higher, polls find. Fight back with transparency: Lift the veil on how you spend your money. A good practice: In every issue of your donor newsletter, run a pie chart that shows the breakdown of your expenses (assuming, of course, that your administration and fundraising costs are within reasonable standards).

11. PHOTOS WITH CAPTIONS.

And never without a caption. Because many "readers" only read easy, brief items of text, such as captions and headlines. Your captions are a major opportunity to slip in information.

12. COLUMNS.

I often disparage the "Letter from the Executive Director's desk" convention. But only because these letters usually land on the front page, a prime position they seldom merit. But letters from the ED do have their place. They can be a from-the-heart, me-to-you, behind-the-scenes look into the most pressing issues facing the organization, for instance. Other types of columns include "Frequently Asked Questions," "Q&A," "Myths & Facts," "A donor talks about why she gives," "Letters," "Heard on the blog," or guest columns.

13. THE "UPDATE" STORY.

Here's a perfect example of an update story from the [Ducks Unlimited Canada] member magazine: "The West Nile Virus: One Year Later." Ducks Unlimited Canada *owns* this story. Its mission: preserving the wetlands needed by migratory waterfowl. Yet now there's a complication: A fatal disease lurks in these very same wetlands. Stay tuned.

14. THE "DID YOU KNOW?" STORY.

These reveal surprising, relevant facts. This cover item from the newsletter of the [Conservation Law Foundation], for instance: "On August 15, 2003, as over 100 power plants remained shut down on the second day of the Northeast's massive blackout, visibility increased by as much as 20 miles because the concentration of light-scattering particles caused by sulfur dioxide emissions was reduced by 70 percent." In less than 50 words, the donor is reminded poignantly of what the fight's really about: healthier air.

15. PRESS RELEASES.

If you think it's news to the outside world, then it's likely to be news to your donors as well.

16. NEWS ABOUT YOU.

If you attract media coverage, draw attention to that in your own newsletter. It can help build your organization's image and reputation.

17. HISTORY.

A timeline, for instance, can be the best, fastest way to show a long record of steady growth and achievement, something that attracts many donors.

18. OFFERS.

Tours, special events, classes, invitations to sign up for an e-newsletter: The list of offers you can make is endless. Offers are important. If they're good offers, people respond to them, which in turn helps build relationships. Who wouldn't appreciate this offer made by the [San Antonio Area American Red Cross] in its newsletter: "Are your CDs paying you 1-2%? Would you like a 10% return?"

*This article is excerpted from Tom Ahern's forthcoming book from Emerson & Church, **How to Write So You'll Raise More Money**. Copyright 2006 by Tom Ahern. Tom is President, Ahern Communications, Ink., 10 Johnson Road, Foster RI 02825, phone (401) 397-8104, fax (401) 397-6793, Web [www.aherncomm.com], e-mail [A2Bmail@aol.com].*

Mapping out research objectives

BY DIRK RINKER

VENTURING into the realm of marketing research requires thoughtful planning and preparation. And as with any trip, you need a good road map—a clear idea of where you plan to start and expect to end. In the world of research, your research objectives are your road map.

The more clear and manageable the research objectives, the more rewarding and useful your project will be. Below are some tips to help you write effective research objectives, particularly for survey research.

1. CHART YOUR DESTINATION.

Before starting your trip, you want to know where you're going. You should be able to state clearly the overall objective in 2-3 sentences or less. For many organizations, there's a specific issue, event, or concept they would like to learn more about or test. For others, the main objective is more general—who are our donors, members, constituents; why do they support us; what do they want from us, etc. Either pathway is perfectly legitimate: Your organization just needs to have a clear notion in advance of why it's conducting the research.

2. DECIDE WHO'S ALONG FOR THE RIDE.

Aunt Bertha always wanted to join us when we went on vacation, but the rule was "immediate family only." Your organization can avoid problems on the road if there's clear advance direction about which staff members may provide input to the project.

3. PLAN FOR SIGHTSEEING.

This can get a bit messy. Remember when you were traveling cross-country and your parents wanted to see the Jackalope museum and you wanted to stop at the giant ball of string? Like families, many organizations begin to get lost at this step. Differing agendas come sharply into focus. Therefore, it's crucial to identify your secondary objectives. It's important to remember that too many side trips take time, cost more, and divert you from your final destination. Here are some helpful ways to stay on track.

- Brainstorm: Whether you want to gather information about a specific issue or just general knowledge about your constituents, get the team involved. Pull everyone together and have each person describe the information she feels is most useful and helpful. Two main purposes: First, this can open your eyes to relevant issues and ideas you hadn't considered. Second, it helps get others "on board" early on, helping ensure they're less likely to discount the results later.
- Breathe: Take a little pit stop to stretch your legs and get a Slurpee. Enjoy yourself . . . and prepare for the next step. It's probably the hardest.
- Set priorities: Rank all the items raised during the brainstorming. Determine what you need to know versus what you'd like to know. Some results may be interesting, but not very actionable. If you're not sure, ask, "What would we do if we knew the answer to this?" If the answer is foggy, it's probably a low priority item. But keep these on the list anyway—it may just turn out there's time and budget to take that little side trip after all.

4. MAP OUT THE ROUTE.

Write down your objectives. Now that you've created your road map, write down your primary and secondary goals. Pass it around so all your travel partners have a copy. Keep it handy as you move from stop to stop on the trip. This document not only helps you determine where you're going, but a whole host of related questions, as well, such as who you'll talk to, how you'll talk with them, what you'll ask them, and what you'll do with their answers.

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Where's Mal?

October 12-15, 2006 – Tucson AZ
Social Venture Network 2006 Fall Conference
- Plenary (Moderator): *The Responsible Employer*
- Workshop (Panelist): *Succession and Legacy Models for Socially Responsible Companies*
Westward Look Resort
More info.

October 17-20, 2006 — Noordwijkerhout, The Netherlands
Resource Alliance's 26th International Fundraising Congress
- Workshop: *Using the Power of Networking to Raise More Money*
Site: Leewenhorst Congresszentrum
More info.

November 2, 2006 – Cancun, Mexico
International Triathlon Union Corporate Challenge
- Keynote: *Values-Driven Business*
More info.

November 13-15, 2006 – Toronto, Canada
Association of Fundraising Professionals Canadian Fundraising Congress
- Workshop (Bachelor's Track): *Direct Response Fundraising 101*
- Workshop (Master's Track): *The Hands-On Guide to Raising $1,000 Gifts by Mail*
Site: Metro Toronto Convention Centre
More info.

Free!

Chances are you've heard of my friend Judy Nichols. She's written more books about the demographics of giving than you can shake a stick at (*Pinpointing Affluence*, *Changing Demographics*, *Growing from Good to Great*). She's also sought after worldwide as a trainer and speaker.

Well, Judy—ahem: that's Dr. Judith Nichols—now publishes a free online monthly newsletter called *Modern Donor*. Each month, she provides development professionals with citations on research and publications impacting fundraising, including trends from demographics to affluence to donor communications, and much more.

Sign up free at www.Moderndonor.com.

Your core mail universe (Part 1)

BY SUZIE MCGUIRE

ORGANIZATIONS often seek the new hidden list "gem" that will be the panacea to their mailing blues. But new lists don't come to the open market very often. It takes many years and consistent acquisition for a nonprofit to develop a list, and when one does come to the market, it's with great fanfare and promotion. Brokers and list managers quickly circulate this information.

Instead of solely focusing on "what's new out there," focus on how to improve the performance of your tried-and-true "core" or "continuation" lists. This month and next, I'll offer you eight tips about how you can get the most our of your core mailing universe.

DEFINING THE CORE

Over time, after much testing and many mailings, you'll determine a set of lists that shows more potential than others. These donors, subscribers, or buyers are individuals who tend to be responsive to a topic or offer that's similar to yours, and they'll in turn become part of your core mailing universe.

When you consistently use a portion of your mailing with the same lists, you can see trends of mailings, seasonality, or package performance. In many cases, these core lists will represent up to 80% of your overall mailing volume. While individual performance on lists will fluctuate depending upon their maintenance, if viewed as a whole, core lists can reveal important mailing trends.

Although you'll continue to explore new test lists and refine selects on those you've used before, these "core" lists by and large are the tried-and-true portion of every acquisition mailing.

So you need to be careful about how you use these valuable names. Here, then, are the first three of my eight tips for how you can maximize the potential of your core mailing universe.

1. LIST AUDIT

Ask your broker to perform a list audit. Through an audit, she can tell you how your core lists have performed in general, as well as by mailing, package, by season or month, and by list market. This information is critical if you're mailing in large quantities and using your core lists in quick succession.

If you're using different package types—premium-based offers as well as straight donation appeals, for example—you may find that particular lists or selections from lists work differently on different packages. You may also find that seasonality influences how well particular core lists perform. Or you may learn that certain offers work better in particular list markets.

2. STAGGERING OR SPLITTING LISTS

If you're mailing frequently, you may decide to divide your list between mailings by omitting previous use. Another option is to take small lists that have shown similar performance over time and stagger them across your annual plan, resting them every other mailing.

3. STAGGER PACKAGES AND LISTS

If you mail in large volume, and you have multiple control packages with unique mailing communities, you may alternate mailings and particular lists that perform well on them. For example, you might mail name labels in one mailing with lists that perform particularly well with that offer, and the next month mail a non-premium package with lists that have proven to perform better with that appeal. For each of those mailings, you would include your premium core lists so they can serve as a control factor between mailings.

Stay tuned!

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REALLY handwritten?!

BY MEGAN CLARK

AN ARTICLE in a recent issue of this newsletter celebrated an unusual thank-you package from Stanford University. According to the article:

"Not a computer-generated 'handwritten' font, mind you. But really written by a living, breathing person—using what looks to be your basic BIC black medium point Round Stic pen. (We're guessing the original draft was then printed offset for mass distribution. But then again, that doesn't explain the personal salutation . . .) The 'mistake' at the bottom of page one is also a nice touch, isn't it?

"What's more, the letter is penned by a real, live Stanford student: Dana Peralta, 'Class of 2007, Human Biology.'"

I laughed so hard when I read this because, as a former Stanford student, I actually wrote dozens, maybe hundreds, of those letters by hand! And no, not a single one was ever printed or photocopied—I had friends who tried it and did not get past the rigorous proofers and checkers in the Development Office. Here's how Stanford does this:

Student organizations get funding from "The Stanford Fund" essentially in proportion to how many handwritten thank-you letters they write. No letters, no money. And as this is one of the more popular sources of funding on campus, many, many organizations participate.

Each student in the group is given official Stanford Fund 1st and 2nd sheet letterhead, and assigned 8-24 donors for whom they only know the salutation.

There is an eight-page packet detailing the format each letter should take, certain information you must incorporate in specific paragraphs, and the number and nature of personal examples you must provide on how the funding has impacted your own life as a student.

They also include a very strict style guide, which includes one particular requirement that has become famous among students: The "T" in The Stanford Fund must be capitalized, or your letters—and your funding—will be rejected.

You may only write the same letter to eight different donors, after which you must change your copy and examples. Stories abound of students who tried to recycle their letter from a previous year, only to be caught by the evil Stanford Fund proofers.

You cannot write too close to the margins, or your letters will be rejected.

You can only make, I believe, two mistakes in your letter, which you must fix with ivory whiteout, or your letters will be rejected.

So you can see why I laughed when I read the article, imagining the editors trying to figure out how Stanford had mass-produced these handwritten letters with variable salutations. Writing these letters is the bane of every student organization's existence—creating many late-night TSF parties at which students huddle around a table and write and rewrite and rewrite their letters, trying not to make any mistakes or get mozzarella sticks and marinara sauce on them.

Like most students, I grumbled. I had no clue how meaningful it is for a donor to receive personal, handwritten correspondence from a real Stanford student, showing the real impact of their gift . . . until one day I received a letter in return, forwarded to me by the Development Office. It was from a donor who thanked me so warmly for my letter, and said how glad he was to hear all the interesting things I was doing as a student.

That's when I got it. And now, as a direct mail fundraising consultant at Daniller + Company, it's amazing to consider what a powerful stewardship program Stanford has, and how special it must be for a donor to receive such a letter. If only every organization could have a 7,000-strong army of letter writers!

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Percentage?

One of the questions I'm most frequently asked when I speak at conferences or workshops is whether it makes sense to accept (or grant) a percentage of funds raised as a fee to the fundraiser.

While I'm well aware that, in many parts of the world, there's sometimes no practical alternative to percentage-based compensation, I strongly believe based on my own personal experience that this approach is unprofessional and should be avoided whenever possible.

Here's what the Association of Fundraising Professionals has to say about the matter:

[I]ndividuals serving a charity for compensation must accept the principle that charitable purpose, not self-gain, is paramount. If this principle is violated and percentage-based compensation is accepted:

- charitable mission can become secondary to self-gain;
- donor trust can be unalterably damaged;
- there is incentive for self-dealing to prevail over donors' best interests.

In addition, percentage-based compensation, however administered, can produce reward without merit.

AFP holds that percentage–based compensation can encourage abuses, imperils the integrity of the voluntary sector, and undermines the very philanthropic values on which the voluntary sector is based. AFP stands firm with its Standards of Professional Practice which prohibits members from working for percentage-based compensation or accepting finder's fees.

M . W.

Un-spam!

A study by Mindshare Interactive Campaigns, as recounted in *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*, finds that during a two-month period, 24% of the almost 1,000 e-mail messages sent by 28 nonprofit and political organizations were never delivered to people who had requested them. The survey also reports that organizations sending e-mails on a regular basis had higher delivery rates than those that sent messages infrequently.

If you're wondering why sending e-mails at regular intervals increases the deliverability rate, Dan Solomon, Mindshare's CEO, explains that it makes sense. Solomon says, If what spam filters are supposed to be doing is keeping out people you don't have a relationship with, regularity is a sign of such a relationship.

Why open rates are dropping

BY KAREN MATHESON AND EVE FOX

OPEN RATES are dropping like flies. When we examined data from 15 national nonprofit groups for the eNonprofit Benchmarks Study earlier this year, we found a steady, striking decline in e-mail open rates across all the groups over the past two years. Average open rates for the groups fell by 6% (see the table below for more detail).

This decline may sound like terrible news for any organization that communicates with its members, constituents, activists, or donors online—but please don't commit hara-kiri yet! Happily, we did *not* find a corresponding decline in page completion or response rates.

At first glance, this discrepancy seems truly puzzling. Shouldn't fewer people be responding to these e-mails if fewer people are opening them in the first place?

("List fatigue" is what happens when formerly enthusiastic supporters become overwhelmed by the sheer volume of e-mail in their inboxes and no longer rush to open and respond to e-mail.) Although the fear of "list fatigue" may haunt online organizers, fundraisers, and marketers, it can't explain away the discrepancy between open rates and response rates. If people are too tired, overwhelmed, or unmotivated to open an e-mail message, they're certainly not going to take action, donate money, or reply to it. Clearly something else is to blame.

IS IMAGE BLOCKING THE CULPRIT?

Is it possible that just as many people are opening e-mails today as were opening them two years ago, but that not all of them are being counted? The most compelling explanation for both the decline in open rates and the discrepancy between open and response rates is that new image-blocking software is interfering with open rate tracking and causing open rates to be significantly under-reported.

In response to the rise of spam in recent years, many e-mail providers have implemented new systems that allow users to read the text of an e-mail while blocking all the images in the message. Image blocking is now used by Gmail, Microsoft Outlook 2003, and AOL 9.0. In fact, the default for both Outlook 2003 and Gmail is to block all images, automatically eliminating images for anyone who is not tech-savvy enough to change the default setting.

Open rates are tracked using a very small (one pixel) image embedded in the body of the e-mail message, which this new image-blocking technology prevents from loading and being counted by the tracking software. Therefore, image blocking is causing the number of e-mail messages actually opened to be under-reported. (For more information about the pros and cons of including images in your e-mail messages, click here.)

eNonprofit Benchmarks Study: Comparing Average Advocacy Message Open Rates

	2003-2004	2004-2005
Environmental Nonprofits Average	31%	26%
Rights Nonprofits Average	33%	25%
International Aid Nonprofits Average	30%	26%
All Partners Average	**32%**	**26%**

Open rate = # messages opened / # messages received

THE DETECTIVE WORK BEGINS

To determine the impact of image blocking on open rates and to gauge how accurately open rates currently represent the effectiveness of an organization's online communications, we conducted an in-depth analysis using messaging data from three major national nonprofit organizations: Human Rights First, Planned Parenthood Federation of America, and The Wilderness Society.

We examined three messages from each organization—two e-mail advocacy messages and one online fundraising appeal—that had been sent to the organization's full (or nearly full) e-mail list between April and June of 2006. Analyzing the data from each message enabled us to determine how many of the recipients who had clicked on a link in that specific message were actually tracked as having opened that specific message.

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MYSTERY SOLVED!

The data from these nine messages revealed that an astounding *20% of the people who had clicked on a link were not reported as having opened the message*.

If 20% of the members who clicked on a link in the e-mail weren't counted as having opened the message, what does that imply about the people who open and read an e-mail (without downloading any of the images), but who never click on a link?

On average, we estimate that open rates are being under-reported by at least 20% for these three organizations. This may not be true of all organizations and may vary depending on the percentage of e-mail providers specific to the make up of an organization's constituency base. For example, if a larger percentage of an organization's e-mail list uses Gmail, its open rates may be lower than an organization that's list members use primarily Yahoo and Hotmail.

To test out this theory, we examined the combined messaging data by e-mail provider. As you can see below, Gmail led the pack in the percentage of click-throughs that were *not* reported as having opened the e-mails. A whopping 37% of the clicks coming from Gmail users weren't reported as having opened the e-mail message. E-mails with the .edu extension also seemed to have an unusually high percentage of click-throughs that weren't reported as opens. Also note that only 2% of the clicks from AOL weren't reported in the number of messages opened. This may be because many AOL subscribers may be using older versions of AOL (anything earlier than 9.0) that don't automatically block images.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR YOU?

No matter how you cut the data, open rates are a flawed statistic. In addition to the significant under-reporting caused by image blocking, open rates have another much better-known limitation—the "plain text problem." Because opens are tracked through the loading of a one-pixel image in the body of a recipient's e-mail, open rates can track only the HTML versions of a message. The exclusion of the plain text versions of the message makes open rates inherently limited and incomplete.

While we're not suggesting that you stop looking at open rates altogether, there are more reliable statistics that can provide a more accurate picture of your online communications. For example, if the e-mail in question includes links, why not look at click-through rates? Click-through data tells us even more than an open rate can. When comparing messages A and B, for example, you may see that message A has a higher click-through rate, but a lower open rate, than message B.

Response rates are also far more telling than open rates. The ultimate goal of a fundraising or advocacy e-mail is to motivate the recipients to take action or make a donation, so the response rates will better reflect how effective the message was.

WHAT *ARE* OPEN RATES GOOD FOR?

Despite their limitations, open rates can be useful as a comparative statistic. For instance, open rates can help you determine which of two or more mailings sent in the same rough time period was more successful. Open rates are also very useful for determining which subject line will be the most effective—you can test several subject lines with identical copies of the message on small, randomly chosen segments of your audience to see which produces the best results prior to sending out the full mailing with the winning subject line.

However, in both cases, we'd still suggest you consider the click-through and response rates for each version of the message in making your decision about which subject line to use. It's possible that one subject line might provoke a higher open rate, but result in fewer click-throughs and, therefore, fewer actions or donations or sign ups.


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Open Rate and Click-Through Data for the Combined Nine Messages

Message Totals	# Members Reported as Clicking *and* Opening	# Members Reported as Clicking *but not* Opening	% Members Reported as Clicking *but not* Opening
Advocacy Message Totals	36,481	9,315	20%
Fundraising Message Totals	1,254	354	22%
Total Messages	37,735	9,669	20%

Messages by E-mail Provider

	Clicked but not Opened	Clicked and Opened
Gmail	37%	63%
AOL	2%	98%
Earthlink	13%	87%
Yahoo	7%	93%
SCB Gobal	9%	91%
Verizon	19%	81%
Comcast	15%	85%
MSN	14%	86%
Hotmail	3%	97%
.edu	34%	66%

Why?

With response rates in acquisition falling like leaves in autumn, printing and mailing costs inexorably rising, and new competition sprouting at every turn, why go on raising money by mail?

One of our clients had a pleasant reminder the other day why direct mail, for all its warts, remains attractive today. One of the organization's most loyal donors passed away recently. Her first gift on record was dated August 11, 1983 in response to a mailing, of course! Eventually, after years of small, repeat gifts, she joined the monthly giving club, with automatic gifts of $25, then $30 each month. All together, she made 279 small gifts totaling $6,250.

The last of her $30 gifts arrived July 20, 2005. A few days more than one year later, on July 31, 2006, our client received a check for $25,000 from her estate.

Are you still wondering why direct mail is worth the trouble?

M. W.

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To tell a friend click here.

In her own words

LOTS of direct mail packages include lift notes to re-emphasize an appeal's Marketing Concept. These inserts—typically shorter than the main letter—can come from a variety of signers other than the main signatory.

Such endorsements might be penned by a member of the nonprofit's staff, a board president, or a "celebrity" with instant name recognition. Another tried-and-true option is to use the words of a "satisfied customer." That is, someone who has benefited personally from an organization's good efforts.

This was the strategy taken by Father Flanagan's Girls and Boys Town (Boys Town NE) in its "2006 Annual Appeal"—which is actually an acquisition package—and it works like a charm.

The hand-printed lift note is written by a sweet-faced girl named Valery. In a poignant yet direct style, Valery admits she once had a "poor attitude." And who could blame her! She recalls that her mom took "us kids from my dad." Living in a tent and car, Valery remembers, "We often went without food and we didn't take showers."

Then she matter-of-factly explains, "One night I unzipped the tent and I walked in on my mom with a man. She told me, 'Now if you tell anybody about what you saw, I will kill you.'"

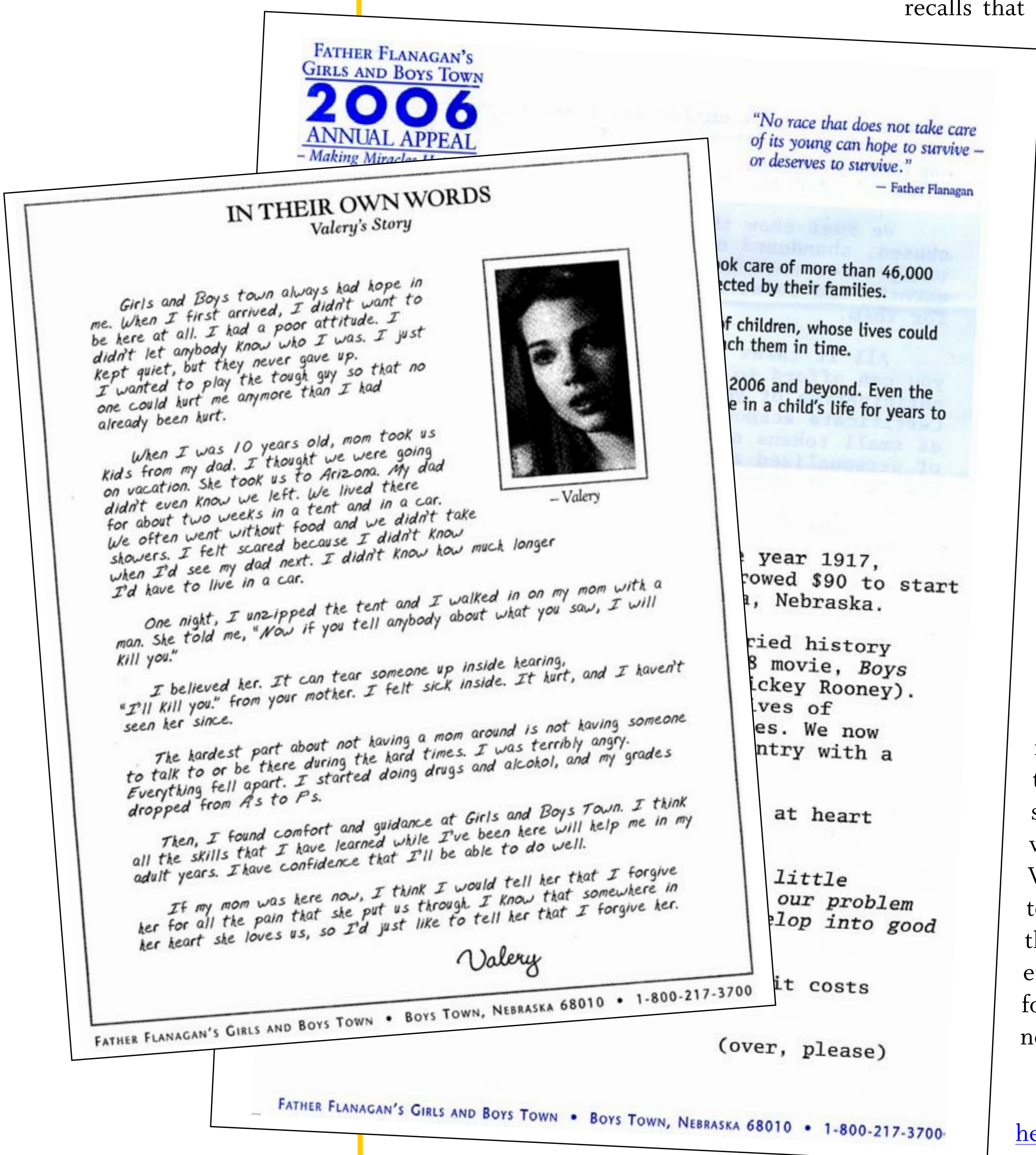
She goes on, "I believed her. It can tear someone up inside hearing 'I'll kill you.' from your mother."

And Valery's note is so sincere and authentic, we just have to believe *her* when she reports, "I found comfort and guidance at Girls and Boys Town."

Interestingly, the lift note commands even greater emotional punch because the rather short main letter pretty much sticks to the institutional basics. As the P.S. says, "I've enclosed a note from a wonderful young lady named Valery, who can tell you much better than I, the kind of childhood that most of our kids have experienced . . . and how she suddenly found hope where there had been none."

We most heartily agree!

To see this entire package, click here.



FATHER FLANAGAN'S GIRLS AND BOYS TOWN
2006 ANNUAL APPEAL

"No race that does not take care of its young can hope to survive – or deserves to survive."
– Father Flanagan

IN THEIR OWN WORDS
Valery's Story

Girls and Boys town always had hope in me. When I first arrived, I didn't want to be here at all. I had a poor attitude. I just didn't let anybody know who I was. I just kept quiet, but they never gave up. I wanted to play the tough guy so that no one could hurt me anymore than I had already been hurt.

When I was 10 years old, mom took us kids from my dad. I thought we were going on vacation. She took us to Arizona. My dad didn't even know we left. We lived there for about two weeks in a tent and in a car. We often went without food and we didn't take showers. I felt scared because I didn't know when I'd see my dad next. I didn't know how much longer I'd have to live in a car.

One night, I unzipped the tent and I walked in on my mom with a man. She told me, "Now if you tell anybody about what you saw, I will kill you."

I believed her. It can tear someone up inside hearing, "I'll kill you." from your mother. I felt sick inside. It hurt, and I haven't seen her since.

The hardest part about not having a mom around is not having someone to talk to or be there during the hard times. I was terribly angry. Everything fell apart. I started doing drugs and alcohol, and my grades dropped from A's to F's.

Then, I found comfort and guidance at Girls and Boys Town. I think all the skills that I have learned while I've been here will help me in my adult years. I have confidence that I'll be able to do well.

If my mom was here now, I think I would tell her that I forgive her for all the pain that she put us through. I know that somewhere in her heart she loves us, so I'd just like to tell her that I forgive her.

Valery

– Valery

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