

Quick Tips on Using Your Database

by Priscilla Hung

HERE ARE SOME SIMPLE WAYS that you can use your donor database not just to store data, but to actually help you raise more money. Most organizations with even a basic donor database should be able to do these things. If you have a more complex fundraising program and sophisticated database you will be able to do much more.

Personalizing Donor Appeals

When doing a print or electronic appeal, use information in your database to personalize your communication and maximize your returns. Your database should be able to export all of this information for you to merge into your appeals:

- **Contact information.** The donor's name, preferred salutation, and email or mailing address. People will be more responsive to an appeal that has their name on it than one that begins, "Dear Friend."
- **Gift information.** The donor's most recent gift, the date it was given, and the specific amount you are requesting. Many of us use the phrase, "Thank you for being a donor. We hope you can give \$50, \$100, or whatever you can afford." But consider how much more effective it is when you can say, "Thank you for being a donor. Your last gift of \$50 that you sent last September really made a difference. We are hoping you can renew your gift of \$50 this year."
- **Solicitor name.** If you had a friend-to-friend fundraising campaign and you are now asking those new donors to renew their gift, mentioning the name of the friend who solicited them is also important for reminding them of why they gave.

Contact information, recent gift information, and solicitor name are also useful when phone banking, and should be included on the list of people you are calling, in addition to phone numbers, giving history, and any other notes on the donor.

Evaluation and Planning

Your database should be able to generate key reports for evaluation, including how much you raised and how many donors gave per fundraising activity. If you can print reports according to gift size, you can also use them to determine the median gift size and how many donors are giving at each level. For example, if you know that \$50 is your median gift size, you can better estimate future fundraising goals. If you know that the vast majority of your donors are giving less than \$50, then you may want to increase your efforts to upgrade your donors.

Also look at how many new donors you brought in and how many you lost – donors who gave the last year but not this year (LYBUNTS for short). If you are losing more than one-third of your donors from year to year, you may want to look more closely at your retention efforts. If fewer than one-third of your donor base are new donors, it may mean that you're not bringing in enough new donors each year.

If you are working with a fundraising team, you will also want to see how much money and how many donors each member of the team brought in. This will help you know who to recruit for next time and who might need more support or training. It can also be used to reward those who meet certain goals.

Another way to use your database is to see when gifts came in response to your email appeal series. At GIFT, we send a se-

ries of five emails at the end of the year to people on our listserv who have never given before, and we use the data to see which specific email generated the most response. Seeing this level of data is easy if your database can print reports according to the gift date.

In addition to what your donor database can tell you, use your accounting database to figure out fundraising expenses and include qualitative evaluation, such as donor surveys or feedback from staff and volunteers, to help round out the evaluation of your fundraising program.

Segmenting Donor Lists

Segmenting your donor list is key to more personal and effective fundraising. Rather than sending the same fundraising letter to everyone in your database, segmenting allows you to tailor fundraising activities and messaging to different audiences. The most typical ways to divide up your donor list—or segments—are by gift size, recency of giving, longevity of giving, and connection to the organization. More sophisticated organizations may combine segments for more personal strategies. You will find this information in the giving history and in the codes and groupings you create in your database.

Here's an example of how GIFT makes this work.

Gift amount. Let's say a major donor is someone who gives \$500 or more. We create a list of everyone who gave \$500 and up in 2009. These major donors will get a special letter, a phone call, and a visit to renew their gift. Those giving \$100-499 will get a different letter and a phone call asking them to upgrade their gift. Those giving less than \$100 are divided into two groups by longevity. Those who have been donors for at least two years will get a letter and an email follow-up asking them to become monthly sustainers at \$10/month. First-time donors giving less than \$100 will get a different letter simply asking them to renew their gift.

Recency of gift. Another way to segment is by recency of gift. People giving less than \$100 who gave in 2008 but not in 2009 will get a friendly letter early in 2010 letting them know that we didn't hear from them last year and we hope they can give now. People giving more than \$100 who didn't give last year will get a personal phone call. Current monthly sustainers will not get a letter until their pledge is fulfilled. Finally, prospects in our database who have never given will get an invitation to an upcoming event.

Connection. Yet another way to segment is based on the donor's connection to the organization or what prompted their giving. This is also a way to help integrate your fundraising with your program work. For example, our interns raise \$500 each

for GIFT through their own contacts. Many of these donors are not likely to give again to a general pitch for the organization, so as part of the interns' training, they do phone banking to people who gave to interns the previous year.

You can use fewer than the multiple segments I've just described to keep things more manageable. Or you may want to plan out your fundraising calendar according to segment (for example, January and February are focused on LYBUNTS, March is for new prospects, and so on), which saves you from doing a number of different mailings to different segments at one time.

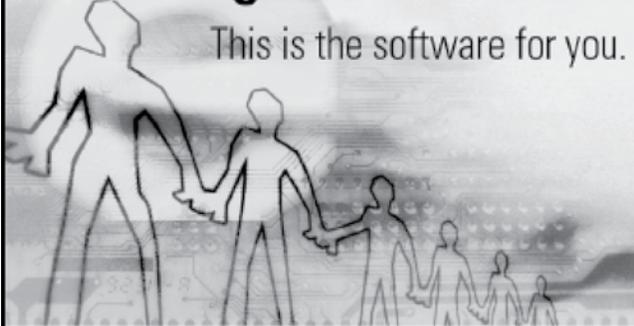
Conclusion

The data in your donor database can be a treasure trove of information. Once you have a database and processes to consistently enter gifts, take this next step of using your data to boost fundraising efforts. ■

Priscilla Hung is the executive director of GIFT and interim editor of the *Grassroots Fundraising Journal*.

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