

# HOW TO BUILD A DONOR-CENTERED GIFT ACKNOWLEDGEMENT PROGRAM

YOUR ROADMAP TO INCREASING  
DONOR RETENTION AND UPGRADING MORE GIFTS



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*(INCLUDES TEMPLATES, EXAMPLES AND RESOURCE LINKS)*

# Introduction

A strong donor acknowledgment and recognition program is a pre-condition to sustainable annual giving from individuals. If you don't thank people properly, they won't stick with you. It's that simple. And that complex. Because a really good stewardship program takes thought. And practice. And total organizational buy-in to making it a priority. There are multiple steps involved. But it's not rocket science. If you follow the steps outlined in this guide, you can easily achieve blast off!

As with everything else worth doing, let these two little words be your mantra:

PLAN. AHEAD.

**It's smart to know how you'll thank and steward your donors before you ask them to give.** Because that's the way to assure your ask isn't squandered.

## What do you spend more time on? Asking or thanking?

The lion's share of nonprofits spend more time asking. It's a BIG mistake. Don't get me wrong. I'm not here to shame or blame you. Of course you have to ask. The No. 1 reason people don't give is they aren't asked. But ... **the number one reason donors don't give again is they aren't properly thanked.**

## In this guide, you'll be reminded to:

- Make donor retention a priority.
- Develop a stand-out written donor acknowledgment and recognition plan.
- Meet donor expectations by (1) infusing acknowledgments with donor-centered benefits, and (2) predisposing donors to trust you.
- Make gratitude an ongoing practice.
- Make gratitude a multi-channel practice.
- Set up your 'next gift' strategy with terrific donor service and recognition.

Thanking donors is the one thing most nonprofits do not spend enough time thinking about.

## Want to stand out from the crowd? Let's get started!



# YOUR ROADMAP TO INCREASING DONOR RETENTION AND UPGRADING MORE GIFTS

## I. MAKE DONOR RETENTION A PRIORITY

Research shows most asks are being squandered. According to the [Fundraising Effectiveness Project](#), 77% of first-time donors never give again. Only 46% of all donors renew. Having less than half of your supporters stick with you puts you on a fundraising treadmill. Three steps forward; two steps back. It's not a sustainable proposition.

But if you can secure a second gift, 60% of all repeat donors will renew. That's nearly three times more retention than with first gift donors! So it's supremely important you secure this second gift.

Why? Usually it's because the second gift is not an impulse purchase. Or a quid pro quo done for a friend. It's a thoughtful decision, based on how you've treated the donor's first gift. It's a personal decision, based on the fact that now they know you better. And they trust you. At least somewhat. Your goal with your donor acknowledgment program is to help your donor continue to trust you. To build on that trust. So that in the years ahead they continue to give - more often and at higher levels of investment.

**Sadly, most nonprofits have their priorities backwards.**

It's the Pareto 80/20 rule in reverse:

- **80% of the time is spent in acquisition mode** — crafting the fundraising appeal, getting embroiled in design, layout, printing, postage, and project management.
- **Only 20% of the time goes towards a focus on rewarding the donor and building the relationship** that will cause that donor to give again.



Appeals are duly sent. Gifts arrive. **But then what?!**

This lack of planning and focus is why donor retention has been abysmal for well over the decade since the Fundraising Effectiveness Project has been monitoring results. If you're putting acquisition ahead of retention, it may be time for a make-over.

The best way to answer this question for yourself is to look at your own donor retention rates. Look not only at your overall rate, but also your rates for first-time and ongoing donors. Because this will likely reveal to you the [consequences of not securing a second gift](#). Do you detect a pattern of "churn and burn?"

Those organizations and fundraisers who pay close attention to securing as many second gifts as possible from first time donors will enjoy funding their missions at higher levels for years to come.

Organizations who pay lip service to thanking donors will suffer the consequences. Because talk is cheap. Or, as folks are wont to say, the proof is in the pudding. And most nonprofits are sitting in some pretty bland gratitude tapioca. They have no donor acknowledgement program to speak of. No plan. No written policies and procedures. No one who is assigned responsibility for donor service. Any recognition of their donor's gift is a "checklist." A one-time transactional receipt is provided, rather than a [transformational, ongoing donor experience](#).

This type of checklist acknowledgment program focuses on the gift, not the giver. That's where you go wrong, because it practically screams at the donor: All you care about is my money; you don't care about me.

# Grandma's Blue Hat



Dear Grandma,

Here's a photo of me wearing the hat you sent. Blue is my favorite color!

Thank you.

I LOVE it! It's exactly what I wanted - perfect for our upcoming trip.

P.S. You are the very best Grandma in the whole world!

## Where is your focus?

Gift or giver?

**Transaction** (money) or **transformation** (donor's feeling of being appreciated... doing good... saving the day... making a truly meaningful gift)?

One trick is to imagine you're writing to Grandma to thank her for the gift she specially selected just for you. Hopefully, you won't simply write "Thanks for the birthday gift." You'll include some details that show Grandma how much her thoughtfulness really meant to you. And you'll help Grandma picture you joyfully putting the gift to good use. This will make Grandma feel really good, and it's likely to incline her to send you another gift for the next upcoming special occasion. Win/win.

## II. DEVELOP A STAND-OUT WRITTEN DONOR ACKNOWLEDGMENT AND RECOGNITION PLAN

**After you've sent out your appeal it's too late to start thinking about what your thank you letter or email will say.** Or who will sign it. Or whether you'll make a thank you call. Or who will make the call. Or whether someone who donates online will also receive an actual letter. Or any of the details that should be included in a thoughtful, comprehensive donor acknowledgment and recognition program.

If you make thanking an afterthought ... or relegate writing thank you copy to someone without demonstrated copywriting skills ... or ignore the importance of creating donation thank you landing pages ... or fail to prepare attentive, caring online acknowledgements ... or neglect to make quick turn-around a priority ... then you're essentially bidding your hard-won donors farewell.

**Thanking to stand out must be well conceived in advance.** How are you doing? Do you send a thank you guaranteed to stand out? To warm your donor's heart? To make them feel like a hero? To show them the gift meant more to you than they even imagined it would?

**If you have no plan in place to woo your supporters, you simply won't do it.** As a consequence, they'll feel ignored. Out of sight means out of mind. When it comes to charities and their donors, absence most decidedly does not make the heart grow fonder. Neglected donors move on to other suitors who pay them greater attention and bestow more compliments.

### **Want to stand out from your competitors?**

Use the following donor acknowledgment outline as the basis for developing your own written Donor Acknowledgment Policies and Procedures. Note that there is no one right way to structure your personal framework for gift acknowledgment. If you heed the tips you find here, you'll be on the right path. And at the end of the eGuide you'll find links to other resources that can help you.

**Meet donor expectations to (1) infuse acknowledgments with donor-centered benefits, and (2) predispose donors to trust you.**

#### **5 Things Donors Need from You**

1. A Prompt Thank You
2. A Personal Thank You
3. A Reason to Trust You
4. Proof of Their Gift's Impact
5. Ongoing Gratitude - So Your Nonprofit Stays Top of Mind



# 1. A Prompt Thank You

**The first thank you kick starts your donor's journey with you.** It's the essential first step to building a relationship you hope will last for many, many years. If you don't execute this thank you properly, your donor won't feel emotionally satisfied with their giving. They'll be left hanging.

When a donor makes a first gift, they have a lot of questions. Your thank you letter must answer all these questions to your donor's satisfaction.

- Did they make a good decision?
- Did you receive the gift?
- Did it mean something to you?
- Did you put it to work as the donor intended?
- Can you be trusted to follow through?
- What happens next?

**You must be ready to go, with different letters, email templates, thank you landing pages and other communications strategies** for different target audiences, well before you've asked for your first donation. I always tell people to craft their thank you letter at the same time they craft their fundraising appeal. Imagine two things: (1) how you'll feel when your donor says "yes," and (2) how your donor will feel when they hear from you. Craft thank you copy thoughtfully, putting yourself in your donors' shoes. Put your thoughts in writing now!

- What would donors appreciate hearing from you?

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- What do you think prompted them to give?

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- What would make them feel rewarded?

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- What can you say to make them feel like a hero?

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## 2. A Personal Thank You

### Prioritize first-time donor retention

A first gift is a toe in the water. A test. Will you prove to your donor the water's just fine? Will you pass?

**Remember:** Average donor retention for first-timers is just 23%. If you can get them to make a second gift, average retention ratchets all the way up to 60%! So it's well worth your effort to make first-time donor retention a priority. Here are two ways to stand out.

### Phone calls

A pure, warm thank you call within **48 hours of receipt** of the gift can work wonders. I like to call all first-time donors if possible. If your list is too large, I recommend calling donors of \$100+. This is a significant amount for a first-time donor, and generally an indication the gift is more than just a token. There's something about your mission the donor really likes. Your goal is to make them feel they made a good decision – and to do so right away, before they begin to wonder! It's OK if the call comes from a staff member, so incorporate these calls into someone's job description. This is not a long call. Generally it's not even a conversation. It's simply:



*Hi, this is Claire from XYZ Charity. I'm calling just to let you know we received your recent gift, and we're super appreciative. Thank you SO much! You'll also get a letter in the mail from us, but I just wanted to reach out to tell you how much your support means. That's the ONLY reason I called. But, if you have any questions, I'm happy to answer them.*

If you get a message machine, just leave a warm message and include your contact information should they ever want to reach someone at your organization. It's nice to make folks feel special by giving them a real person with whom they can connect, rather than having to dial in to the main phone line. (You can learn more about thank you calls below under 'Donor-Centered Phone Call').





## Welcome package

Let your first-time donors know in your first acknowledgment letter or email you'll be following up with a Welcome Package. This gives them something to which to look forward. It also gives you an opportunity to show you can be trusted! Then, a week or two after the initial thank you, follow through! Your welcome package can be delivered via mail, email or a combination of both. The goal is say thank you again, and also offer up a slew of other donor-centered benefits. Think from your donor's perspective. This is not about you. It's about how the donor can become a welcomed, integral member of your community.

## Here are some things you can include:

- Invitation to a free event and/or tour
- Volunteer opportunities
- Other engagement opportunities (e.g., how to receive your newsletter; how to join you on social media; how to engage in online town hall meetings)
- Contact information
- Client testimonials
- Video to show impact
- Brief donor survey (shows you're interested in feedback)
- Fact sheet
- **Token** gift (e.g., bookmark; refrigerator magnet; discount coupon)

## Use the donor's name

This seems so obvious it should go without saying. You're trying to develop a personal relationship. Sadly, I receive too many thank you's that don't seem to understand that critical point and end up getting off to a very poor start.

# Personalize the Salutation

NO	YES
<i>Dear Mrs. Axelrad</i>	<i>Dear Claire</i>
<i>Dear Barack</i>	<i>Dear President Obama</i>
<i>Dear Ms. R. Ellen</i>	<i>Dear Ellen</i>
<i>Dear Beatrice</i>	<i>Dear Bitty</i>
<i>Dear Friend</i>	<i>Dear Claire</i>

71% OF DONORS FEEL MORE ENGAGED WITH A NONPROFIT WHEN THEY RECEIVE CONTENT THAT'S PERSONALIZED. --ABILA DONOR LOYALTY STUDY

"It has to be personal.  
If it's not personal, it's not  
philanthropy, it's a transaction."  
Martin Shell, VP for Development  
Stanford University

Endeavor as much as possible to show donors you know them. In today's world, it's best to err on the side of the informal. That means first names, unless your donor is a member of the military or clergy or a government official. If you call Beatrice 'Bitty' when she shows up to volunteer, be sure you enter her nickname into the salutation field in your database. And never, ever use "Dear Friend." Donors today know you have access to databases, and they now expect you to use their name.

### **Reference the campaign to which the donor gave**

This reassures the donor you'll use their gift as they intended. Yes, this means you can't use the same generic thank you letter throughout the entire year. Take the effort to change things up. Donors appreciate your efforts to meaningfully connect with them.

### **Reference the purpose of the gift**

Again, this reassures the donor their gift will be used properly. If they gave to help rescue cats and the thank you letter talks about all the dogs you rescue, this creates a big disconnect. Your job is to connect - and show you can be trusted.

### **Refer back to anything the donor told you**

Acknowledge everything your donor tells you. Reassure them you'll comply with their wishes and follow through. For example, they may indicate:

- Would like gift to remain anonymous
- Would like gift to be made in honor/memory
- Would like to receive pledge reminders
- Would like to receive information about leaving a legacy
- Left a legacy (say thank you!)
- Increased their level of giving (say thank you!)

### **Incorporate what the donor showed you**

Some of what you'll learn from donors is overt. Some comes from observation. Be alert to anything they may reveal on the remit form or even the carrier envelope. Did they cross out a name? Did someone die? Did they possibly get a divorce? Call to find out. Did contact information change? Did you have their name misspelled? Be sure to incorporate anything you learn into your database so you can use it for future correspondence.

### **Acknowledge repeat giving**

This reminds donors they've included you among their priorities. Donors like to be consistent, so this makes them feel good.

- Thank for ongoing support
- Thank for increased support
- Thank for additional gift in the course of the year
- Thank for cumulative years of giving (I like to send anniversary cards to recognize significant milestones)

# HAPPY ANNIVERSARY!



**Hi Mike,**

Happy one-year anniversary to your last donation! This time last year, you became a larger movement that is helping change the narrative in North Korea.

We want to thank you again, and celebrate your support of our mission and the North Korean People. Your donation helped us fund important programs, including resettlement support for refugees and the development of media pieces to connect with people globally on this issue.

## **Gush!**

Fill your thank you message with emotion – even if it makes you feel a bit awkward. Remember, the point of this letter is to make your donor feel really good! Here are some real examples:

- Words cannot express how much your gift at this time means.
- We're absolutely thrilled to have your support again this year.
- OK. So I understand this might seem a bit over the top. Or even silly. But I think what you did was exceptional.
- Did you know you're really our hero?
- My heart is full to overflowing with gratitude for your giving.



# 3. A Reason to Trust You



## Follow through exactly as promised

**EXAMPLE:** If your donation landing page and/or thank you email said you'd follow up with a mailed receipt within a week, make sure this happens.

**EXAMPLE:** If you promise a new donor you'll send a welcome packet within the next two weeks ... or a list of volunteer opportunities ... or an invitation to a tour ... make sure this happens.

## Set up new opportunities to follow through

**EXAMPLE:** If you promise in your thank you letter to send quarterly pledge reminders ... or to list their name as they've indicated in print ... or to send them information about leaving a legacy ... make sure this happens.

# 4. Proof of Philanthropic Impact

In 2003, Penelope Burk's groundbreaking [Donor-Centered Fundraising research](#) found - in addition to wanting a prompt and personal thank you - the one thing donors needed in order to continue giving was some sort of report on the impact of their giving. Her subsequent research studies have continued to repeat these results. If donors don't hear back from you on the specific outcomes from their philanthropy, they're highly unlikely to repeat their generosity.

Make this your mantra: Impact! Impact! Impact! You're not just providing 'proof.' You're also offering a little 'gift' of content. Here are a number of ways to demonstrate impact and gratitude throughout the year:

- **Tell Stories**  
Human beings love stories. We're wired to enjoy them. So why not take advantage of this when reporting back to donors on the impact of their giving? [Stories are a great way to connect the dots](#) – from the donor's gift ... to the outcome their gift made possible.
- **Showcase Client Testimonials**  
Often those you help can say more authentically how much the donor's gift means. Here are some ways to use testimonials:
  - As an insert note in a thank you letter
  - Snippets included on the reverse side of your thank you letter
  - On a donation landing page
  - Periodically, on your home page
  - Hand-made cards from people (animals can paint too!)
  - Snippets scattered throughout your annual report
  - As a regular feature of your newsletter, e-news or blog
  - Brief thank you notes via social media
  - Thank you videos
  - Thank you postcards or letters from service recipients

- **Share On-the-Ground or Behind-the-Scenes Videos**

Check out some examples on my Pinterest Board:

[Gratitude: Nonprofits Say Thanks](#). Some of the ways you can say thank you with a video include:

- A video on your thank you landing page
- A thank you video sent via email
- A thank you video on your blog
- A brief (15-second) video via social media
- A Pinterest board filled with thank you videos from different people who've been helped
- Live 'thank you from the field' via email or social media

- **Invite Donors to Tours or Open Houses**

Nothing deepens a donor's relationship to you and your mission quite like a tour or social event. It's a great way to get to know folks. Even if they don't attend, they feel great just receiving the invitation. And then you can thank them again for coming!

- **Send Snapshots**

One of my favorite things to do is to snap photos of donors when they attend events. I'll then write a little note on the back (e.g., "Thanks for coming; looks like you had a great time!") and send it to them for their personal collection.

- **Share White Papers or Research Studies**

If you have a donor with an interest in a particular area, they'll appreciate any research or in-depth paper you have to share with them. It helps them feel like an 'insider' – and enables them to look smart to their friends!



- **Write/Send Articles Highlighting Programs of Interest to the Donor**

This works particularly well with steward major donors. You have to write something in your newsletter or blog, right? Why not pick a program of great interest to some of your major donors? Or pick a program you know appeals to a broad swath of donors. Take the time to call your major donors' attention to any articles of particular interest – they'll love knowing you thought of them!

## 5. Ongoing Gratitude Stay Top of Mind



**Don't let your donor's warm glow evaporate!** Make gratitude an ongoing practice. Gratitude repeated frequently, and in different ways, packs a much bigger punch and drives greater loyalty than a one-time thank-you.

In fact, part of the science of donor retention is based on [psychological research on gratitude](#) that shows the impact of a grateful act is diminished over time. So, if you thank your donor in December, and then don't thank them again until next October when you ask them to renew their gift, they'll no longer be feeling the warm glow of gratitude. As a result, they'll be less inclined to repeat their gift than would be the case if you'd been thanking them repeatedly over the course of the year.

Similar research on emotion shows positive emotions wear off quickly. Our [emotional systems](#) like newness. If your donor feels good once, that's nice. They made a gift. They got a thank you. All is hunky dory. But ... if they don't hear back from you until next time you ask, they'll likely have forgotten all about you. They won't be in a warm, receptive mood when you ask. Maybe they'll repeat their gift. Maybe not. They're certainly unlikely to give more.

When it comes to figuring out how to keep the gratitude coming after the first thank you has been received, begin by asking and answering one simple question:

What else can be in this relationship for this donor?



You really can't thank donors too many times. Nor can you report back to them too often on the amazing outcome of their philanthropic investment. Don't worry that you're "bothering" them. Donors want to hear from you – as long as you make your communications all about them.

### Gratitude Brainstorm

How can you show gratitude throughout the year? You want your donor to embrace you as a member of their family, don't you? Begin by sending a bunch of hugs their way. This means brainstorming all the different ways you can hug folks – both real (in person), by proxy (sending flowers; having something hand-delivered) and virtual (online, by phone, via Skype or video and through the mail). You absolutely don't have to break the bank. In fact, you shouldn't. This is truly a case where it's the thought that counts. **Get creative!** It's always a good idea to **surprise and delight donors**. Here are some examples, with room for your own ideas.

1. Send an un-birthday email using a free e-card service.
2. Send a handwritten thank you postcard.
3. Send a thank you from someone unexpected (e.g., from a tree or a painting).
4. Hold a thank-a-thon and ask volunteers to make calls.
5. Send the gift of a recipe (e.g., from a staff member or someone you've helped).
6. \_\_\_\_\_
7. \_\_\_\_\_
8. \_\_\_\_\_
9. \_\_\_\_\_
10. \_\_\_\_\_

## III. Make gratitude a multi-channel practice.

Incorporate as many gratitude touches as possible into your organization's overall content marketing calendar (sometimes called an editorial or communications calendar) to help you plan to stay in touch throughout the year. In other words, don't waste a single communication without saying thank you somewhere.

### 9 Ways to Give Donors What They Need

1. Donor-Centered Thank You Letter
2. Donor-Centered Phone Call
3. Donor-Centered Thank You Landing Page
4. Donor-Centered Email
5. Donor-Centered Social Media
6. Donor Token Thank You Gift
7. Donor Appreciation Event
8. Donor Recognition
9. Donor-Centered Impact Report

# 1. Donor-Centered Thank You Letter

## Thank You Letter Template

Today's date

First Name Last Name

Street Address

City, State Zip

Always personalized. Never “Dear Friend” Err on the side of informal, unless the donor is clergy, military or a government official.

Dear [First Name],

Avoid “Thank you on behalf of the board, staff and...” In fact, avoid beginning the first sentence with the words ‘Thank You.’ Lead with a vivid image of what the donor made possible.

### Opening

First Sentence. Make your donor feel your **excitement and love!**

Samples: “What you’ve just done is exceptional.”

- “Wow! You just made a real difference.”
- “Jenny will go to bed tonight with a full tummy – because you cared.”
- “You’re the reason the glass of water he drinks today won’t make him sick.”

Say thank ‘YOU.’ Avoid ‘I, our, organization’s name, we, me, and mine.’ Give your donor – the HERO! – credit for the specific amount they gave and the specific outcome they made possible.



**Thank you!** Do you need to thank your donor for a response to a specific campaign? Did they designate their gift to a specific program? Have they made a tribute gift in honor or memory? Reference the amount. Acknowledge any special instructions or previous gifts.

**Samples:**

- Your gift of \$100 in loving memory of your Dad means so much.
- Your renewed \$100 gift is truly appreciated, and will remain anonymous.
- Your increased gift of \$150 made our day!
- We'll gladly send you quarterly pledge reminders for your caring \$1,000 gift.

**Show Impact.** Be sure to tie the impact back to the appeal to which the donor responded.

**Samples:**

- Joe won't feel his son died in vain, because you're finding a cure.
- Thanks to you, Alicia will be the first in her family to graduate from college.
- Your kind response to our matching grant enabled us to double your impact!
- Because you cared, five families will have roofs over their heads this winter.

**How will you be in touch in the future?**

Donors want to know what will happen next.

**Samples:**

- You will receive a welcome package within the next two weeks.
- You will receive our monthly e-newsletter beginning the 15th of this month!
- Someone will call you in the next week to see how else you'd like to participate.

Making a promise gives you an opportunity to follow through and show you can be trusted. Giving personal contact info makes reaching you easy – and helps the donor feel special!





**Include a contact.**

**Sample:**

- Please contact Ken Development at 555.555.5555 or [ken@us.org](mailto:ken@us.org) if you'd like a behind-the-scenes tour. We'd love to see you any time!

**Say thank you again.**

**Closing and Signature.** Hand written. In [blue ink](#).

Warm regards,  
With sincere gratitude,  
With an overflowing heart,

Patricia Love  
Patricia Love, Executive Director

**PS: Thank again...** or use your P.S. for further engagement.

**Samples:**

- There's a new video online with a message just for you. [Click here!](#)
- The words of some of those who've been helped by your generosity say thank you more eloquently than we can (Please see reverse).

**Include language on tax deductibility.** It's OK to include this in slightly smaller print, at the footer of your letter.

Your donation is fully tax deductible as provided by law, and no goods or services were given in exchange for your donation.

Handwritten notes — from the person who signs the letter or another staff member of volunteer — add a welcome personal touch.

## A few more words on the thank you letter...

**Remember, not every segment of your donor base is the same.** Don't send everyone the same letter. Personalize as much as possible.

- Repeat donors get a different letter than first-time donors.
- Thank you for renewing your caring support.
- Those who increase their gift deserve to have this recognized by you.
- Your increased commitment this year means so much!
- Those who designate their gift for a specific program need to be reassured you're using it as per their intent.
- As requested, your gift will be applied directly to ...
- Those who checked off a box (make this anonymous; notify someone this was made in their honor; let you know they've included a gift in their estate plans, etc.) need to know you noticed and you'll comply with their wishes.
- We are happy to notify your parents of this caring gift in their honor.
- It is so generous of you to leave a caring legacy gift. Thank you, and we'd like to include you in our Legacy Society.
- Those who are affiliated with you in a special way deserve to have this recognized by you.

As a board member, you understand better than most the meaning of your generous gift.

## 2. Donor-Centered Phone Call

There's nothing quite like a thank you call to make you stand out. What's more, they really work! [Penelope Burk's research](#) revealed that [donors called by a board member within 48 hours](#) of giving gave 39% more than donors who were not called. And they gave 42% more when asked again 14 months later!

You can assign calls out to staff and/or volunteers. Or you can bring folks together for a fun thank-a-thon.

Who should you call? What should you say? Who should make the calls? Get all the details in the Clairification Donor Thank You Calls Ebook + Script ([click here](#) to get it).

## 3. Donor-Centered Thank You Landing Page

Your Thank You page is the first thing donors see after giving online. It sets the tone for their evolving and fulfilling relationship with you. It's no place for boring and generic and transactional. Rather, fill it with inspiration!

At the least include a photo of someone (or something) helped. A video is even better, as it generates greater excitement and authenticity. [Charity: water](#) does a great job with videos, and keeps them under five minutes. It's a great place to go for inspiration.

Note that you need not spend a fortune on a professional video. Even something made on a smart phone will serve the purpose. You're going for heartwarming, not slick.



#### 4. Donor-Centered Email

Your Thank You email is the second thing donors see after giving online. It should also give them a warm and fuzzy feeling. This means that all the best practices that apply to thank you letters also apply to thank you emails. Except they're shorter.

This means not sending something that looks like a generic receipt. Even though it's auto-generated, it can still look like something you would send through the mail. And note that unless a donor indicates they do not want to receive a mailed letter, it's good practice to also send a follow-up letter in the mail.

Avoid the trap of treating your online donors like second-class citizens. If you send goodies in the mail (e.g., a handwritten note, a token gift, a list of volunteer opportunities) to your offline donors, your online donors should receive them too.

So make sure you let folks know in the email that they'll receive an "official" letter in the mail next week, but that you just wanted to let them know right away how much their support means to you.

The following example from One Justice in San Francisco knocks it out of the ballpark.



## You are the heart and hands of justice!

Dear claire,

**Wow! Thank you!**

You just made a wonderful investment in bringing life-changing legal help to those in need.

**Thank you so much for your generous donation of [REDACTED] on 11/23/2017 to OneJustice in support of legal services for veterans.** Your support will bring help, hope and justice to over 1,000 people over the next year. You stand at the heart of our mission, and we couldn't do our work without your support!

This email serves to confirm that we received your generous online donation. In addition, our team will mail you a hard copy thank you letter shortly. If for some reason you don't receive your acknowledgment by mail, or if you have any questions about our work or programs, please just let me know.

**You have lots of opportunities to create change in the world, and I am so honored by your donation to OneJustice.** I take your investment in our work very seriously, and I look forward to keeping you informed. I will send you updates throughout 2018 so that you know the details about how your contribution results in legal help for those facing pressing legal problems.

**I would also welcome an opportunity to connect with you,** learn more about your interest in legal services, and hear your feedback. If you ever have any questions at all, or would just like to chat about access to justice issues, please don't hesitate to give me a ring at [\(415\) 834-0100 x 306](tel:4158340100x306) or email me at [jwilson@one-justice.org](mailto:jwilson@one-justice.org).

Thank you again for your support for OneJustice, and I wish you all the very best.

Many thanks,



Julita R. Wilson  
Executive Director

## 5. Donor-Centered Social Media

If you know your donor uses one or more social media platforms, this can be a great way to express gratitude. A simple “Wow! You’re so awesome. Got your gift today and we’re super grateful” sent via Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn or even Snapchat can really delight your donor. It’s a surprise, and they won’t get this from every nonprofit. You can even make a simple video on your smartphone - just you or other staff, volunteers or clients - saying thanks. Point, shoot and send.

## 6. Donor Token Thank You Gifts

Any thank you is a gift, as long as it’s warm and genuine and not just a transactional receipt. But sometimes it’s nice to go the extra mile and send something tangible. It needn’t be expensive. I’ve asked local cafés to donate coupons for coffee or a free pastry, for example. You just add a note that says: “Our friend, Cup o’ Java, wants to thank you for your support and perk up your day – just as your generosity has perked up the lives of those who rely on our communal caring!”

## 7. Donor Appreciation Event

Gather supporters together for no reason other than to say thanks. This is not a fundraising event (although folks who attend will be inclined to say “yes” next time you ask). The easiest thing is to simply bring folks together in your own space, and just provide simple refreshments. Or ask a local café to dedicate an evening to your charity – a time when drinks for your supporters are on the house. Or maybe an art gallery is willing to host your group for a private viewing? Even if not a lot of people show up, just receiving the invitation makes your supporters feel special.

## 8. Donor Recognition

There are many ways, large and small, public and private, to recognize donors and show them the way that you feel. Consider:

- **Website appreciation**

Include a “thanks to our donors” stewardship section to which folks can easily navigate from your home page. You can include a donor honor roll here and/or include a donor profile of the month.

- **Donor profiles in publications**

Include a “Why I helped/Why I care” interview with a donor every month in your e-news or blog. Or sprinkle donor profiles into your annual report. This public acknowledgement not only makes your donor feel special, it also inspires others to follow their lead. In fact, I tell donors they’re doing a double good deed by letting us share their story!

- **Honor at events**

If you host an annual event, like a gala, it’s nice to honor special supporters. You can also do this at a volunteer appreciation event or donor thank you event.



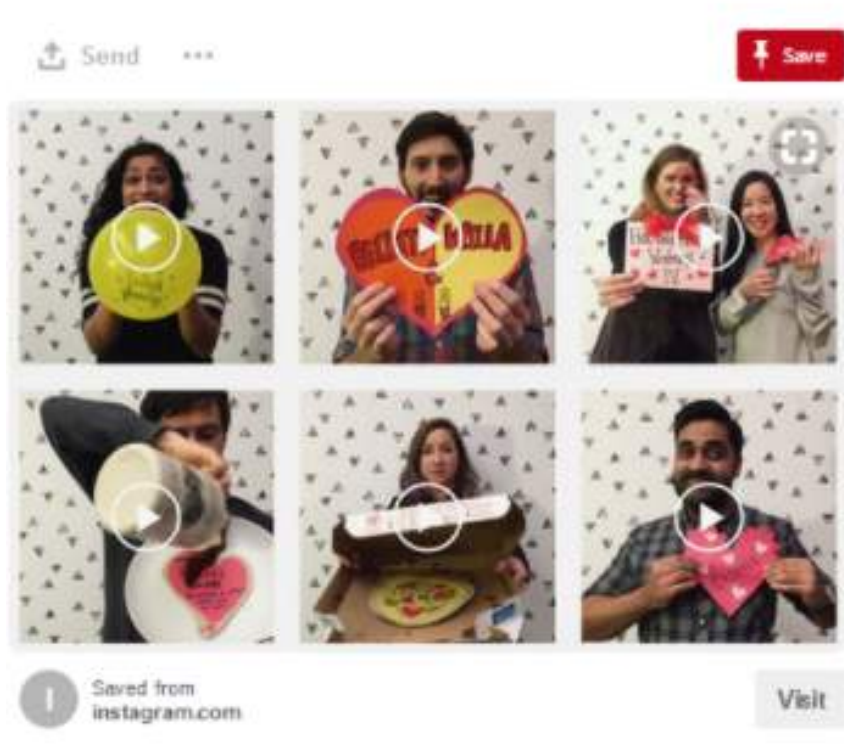
- **Honor at board and committee meetings**

Sometime just remembering to give a shout out to a volunteer can go a long way. It's nice to get a personal pat on the back, and sometimes it's even nicer when this is done publicly (e.g., "I'd really like to take a moment to remind everyone that, without Cheri, this project would never have come to fruition!")

- **Honor via social media**

Here's a place to get creative. You can say thank using any channel your donor frequents (don't list the amount of their gift, of course). To facilitate, add a place on your remit form where they can add their Twitter handle. Or send a brief survey using a free resource like Survey Monkey to ask what platforms they use. Fun ideas include creating a Pinterest board where you regularly profile donor stories. Or posting thank you photos to Instagram.

## Charity: Water thanks donors via Instagram



### Tried this Pin?

Be the first to share how it went

Add photo or note

St. Anthony's Foundation recognizes a volunteer via Pinterest

Send Save



Saved by St. Anthony's Open

**Tried this Pin?**  
Be the first to share how it went Add photo or note

You saved to **Pinterest** Fundraising  
Our wonderful volunteer recognized for her many years of service - Touching photo of volunteer from S.F. St. Anthony's Foundation

## 9. Donor-Centered Impact Reports

Don't let too much time pass between the donor's gift and your 'gift' of an impact report. Donors need to know the outcome of their philanthropy. And if you want gifts, you must give them.

**Set up your 'next gift' strategy with terrific donor service, grateful stewardship and recognition.**

**As a guiding principle, keep in mind it all begins with the thank you letter.** This kick starts your donor's journey. **You then go through a series of grateful actions ...** points along the way to your donor's destination. A place where they feel like part of your family and community. Where they feel secure, supported and appreciated.

**This leads to the second gift.** And the third, fourth, fifth ... and so on. I recommend creating some sort of stewardship matrix, which you'll then incorporate into your Donor Acknowledgement Policies and Procedures. This is a place to list out all the gratitude strategies you've come up with and put them along one axis of a grid. Then list different segments of donors, and put them along the other axis. Then tick off what you'll do for donors in the various segments.

There are many different ways to slice and dice this. Here's a sample. The matrix you create will likely have more columns along both axes, based on the ways you segment your donors and the different creative acknowledgement and stewardship strategies you've brainstormed and determined to implement. It's fine to start small, and build over time.

# Donor Gratitude Stewardship Matrix

	Donor \$1- \$99	First-time donor \$100+	Donor \$500 - \$999	Donor \$1,000+ (includes cumulative monthly)	Legacy commitment
Mail TY letter	X	X	X	X	X
Include personal note from DOD			X	X	X
Phone call w/in 48 hours from staff		X			
Phone call w/in 72 hours from E.D. or Board			X		
Additional thank you from program director		X	X If gift designated		
Invitation to attend Legacy Society event					X
Year-end outcome video via email	X	X	X	X	X
Year-end outcome report email			X		



## IV. Recognize Rewarding Your Donor May Be Your Most Important Work

The title of this guide is “How to Build a Gift Acknowledgement Program.” It should have been called “How to Build a Donor Happiness Delivery System.”

Because if you’ve read this far, you understand that for those organizations who succeed in renewing and upgrading gifts - and retaining donors over the long term - the process of donor gratitude never stops.

### **Ask. Thank. Report. Repeat.**

It’s not just about a single gift receipt. Or even a single thank you letter. It’s about a robust donor communications plan that works hand-in-hand with your fundraising operations.

**Do your utmost to persuade your “powers that be” of the importance of your communications program to your fundraising program.** Donor-centered fundraising requires donor-centered communications. This is why I continually plead with organizations to [integrate marketing and fundraising](#). They must work together. Please don’t silo these functions.

The key to effective, rewarding donor communications is making them about the donor. Saying “you did this;” not “we did this.” Or “our organization did this.”

### **Convey the donor’s awesomeness, rather than your own.**

Good fundraising and communications is not bragging. Good fundraising and communications is sharing results, and attributing them to the giver.

Start channeling your attitude of gratitude now, and begin to incorporate this attitude into every communication you have. Donor-centered communications work wonders because you’re:

- Constantly reminding your donor of the good thing they did (people will tend to repeat good behaviors, because they want to be consistent ([see Influence](#), by Robert Cialdini)).
- Patting your donor on the back, over and over again; saying “nice job” (flattery will, indeed, get you everywhere; when you help people feel loved, you help them attain the highest goal to which most people aspire in their [search for meaning](#)).
- Reminding your donor of the issue that’s dear to their heart, so they stay connected and inspired (this sets up your next gift strategy).
- Helping your donor to [continue feeling the warm glow](#) they felt when the first rush of dopamine hit them after making their gift.



**Everyone deserves a hug.** Research reveals most of us don't hug donors enough. That's why retention is abysmal. Consider your 'thank you' a hug in an envelope. Or a hug via email. Or a hug via social media.

I'm guessing you put ton of effort into asking. You think about (1) **Who** you're writing to. (2) **What** to say. (3) **When** and **Where** to say it. All oriented to have an impact and stand out. Why not be that exacting about the who/what/when/where/how of your thanks?

You can keep sending what you consider "good enough" or "polite" transactional acknowledgments, or you can choose to stand out.

If you make a "stand out" plan, you're likely to be perceived as "outstanding." It's really that simple. You just have to make a commitment.

No more bland tapioca. Go whip up some outstanding pudding to serve to your donors. Right after the donor gives they want to feel good. It's your job to facilitate this feeling. Then, to facilitate their ongoing philanthropy journey.

**Thank you lays the foundation for building the donor relationship by establishing trust.** You can't take donors on the journey unless they trust you to be their guide. This might matter even more than all that technique you put into asking. If you ask well, you get one donation. If you thank well, you may get a lifetime of donations.

# RESOURCES:



- [Association of Donor Relations Professionals \(ADRP\) Best Practices: Gift Acknowledgement](#)
- [Association of Fundraising Professionals \(AFP\): Developing Fundraising Policies and Procedures](#)
- [IRS Charitable Organizations - Substantiation and Disclosure Requirements](#)
- [Gratitude: Nonprofits Say Thanks -- Claire Axelrad on Pinterest](#)
- [Clairification Creative Thank You's Resource Guide](#)

## Includes:

- Links to Sample Donor Acknowledgment Policies and Procedures
- Inspiring thank you videos to kick-start your brainstorming
- A great selection of super helpful books

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Claire Axelrad



**Claire Axelrad, J.D., CFRE** is a fundraising visionary with 30 years of frontline development work helping organizations raise millions in support. Her award-winning blog showcases her practical approach, which earned her the AFP “Outstanding Fundraising Professional of the Year” award.

Claire, who teaches the CFRE course that certifies professional fundraisers, is a presenter for 4GOOD Nonprofit Webinars, and is a regular contributor on nonprofit social media to Maximize Social Business and on fundraising to NonProfit PRO. Her passion is coaching nonprofits to address 21st century challenges and overcome barriers to sustainable funding.





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