



# Win Them Back



## The Fundraiser's Guide to Re-Engaging Lapsed Donors

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# Executive summary



Bringing back lapsed donors is about more than just making up for lost funds. It's about creating lasting relationships that drive your organization's future growth. When donors walk away, you feel the ripple effect far beyond your finances. It can impact your programs, your community connections, and the overall health of your organization. This paper outlines practical steps to reconnect with these donors and turn them into loyal, long-term supporters.

Recently lapsed donors are those whose last gift was less than two years ago. Many, if not most, may believe they are indeed current donors. However, the longer they stay away, the harder it gets to bring them back. But if you can figure out why they stopped giving and take a targeted approach, you'll find many donors are open to re-engaging.

Donors stop giving for all sorts of reasons. Some may feel unappreciated, didn't feel the impact of their gifts, or simply forgot to give. Life happens, too—people move, change jobs, and experience major life events like illness, divorce, taking care of an older parent or sick child—even death. Any one of these events or changing priorities can push giving down the list. When you understand why they've stopped, you're in a better position to welcome them back.

Successful re-engagement happens through personalized outreach, storytelling that tugs on their heartstrings, and flexible giving options like micro-donations or monthly giving programs with ask amounts equal to or less than their last gift. The key is genuinely showing these donors that you care about them.

Technology makes this easier. CRM systems track donor preferences, behavior, and giving patterns so you can personalize your outreach. AI tools can even help you create different messages that you can test to improve fundraising outcomes.

Nonprofits like The Audubon Society of Rhode Island and Habitat for Humanity Martin County have won back lapsed donors by personalizing their outreach. These efforts helped increase donations, build stronger relationships, and avoid future lapses.

Let's not underestimate the value of feedback. Donor engagement surveys that measure satisfaction, trust, and commitment give you valuable insights. Acting on that feedback shows donors that their opinions matter, building stronger connections to your mission.

Ultimately, you want to turn donors into lifetime supporters. When people see how their giving reflects their values and helps create a legacy, they'll likely stick around. Regular recognition, open communication, and involving donors beyond their donations help build relationships that stand the test of time.

Re-engaging lapsed donors means more than focusing on that next gift. Your goal is to build and sustain relationships that help your mission thrive. Read on to learn more.

# Why they leave: comparing customer and donor churn

## Customers

Death

1%

Relocation

3%

Lured by a competitor

5%

Lower price

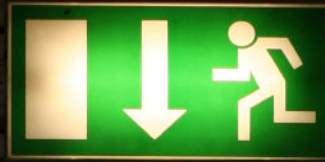
9%

Poor customer service

14%

Indifference to supplier

68%



## Donors

5%

Thought charity did not need them

8%

No info on how monies were used

9%

No memory of supporting

13%

Never got thanked for donating

16%

Death

18%

Poor service or communication

36%

Others more deserving

54%

Could no longer afford

A universal truth for nonprofits and for-profits: customers and donors walk away when they feel unseen. Retention starts with making them feel valued.



# 1 Why lapsed donors matter

Re-engaging lapsed donors is about more than getting that next gift—it's about building relationships that drive long-term support. Losing a donor affects more than just your bottom line. It creates a ripple effect, disrupting your funding, weakening community connections, and even threatening your organization's sustainability. According to the [Fundraising Effectiveness Project](#), donor retention rates have remained around 45% for the last decade. That's a staggering amount of supporters drifting away, and the longer they stay away, the harder it becomes to bring them back. For donors who haven't given in two years, the likelihood of re-engagement plummets to around 2.2%.

But not all is lost. As fundraising expert [Roger Craver](#) notes, it's significantly more cost-effective to re-engage lapsed donors than to acquire new ones. The expense of attracting a new donor can be up to five times higher than retaining someone familiar with your mission. And with thoughtful, targeted outreach, even modest increases in donor retention can result in significant financial benefits.

## The cost of letting donors lapse

Beyond financial loss, when donors step away, you miss out on more than just their gifts. Long-term supporters contribute in other invaluable ways—volunteering, advocating, and spreading the word about your cause. They're not just part of your financial backbone; they're community builders. When they leave, it's harder to tap into essential networks and rally support for new initiatives.

According to the [Association of Fundraising Professionals](#), donor retention isn't just about the numbers; it's about securing the future of your mission. By focusing on why donors leave and addressing those reasons head-on, you can turn a potential loss into an opportunity to foster even stronger connections.

## Building a re-engagement strategy

Understanding why donors lapse is crucial. They stop giving for a variety of reasons: financial constraints, feeling unappreciated, or not seeing the impact of their contributions. As fundraising thought leader Claire Axelrod puts it, “Long-lapsed givers are not lapsed; they’re former donors,” suggesting that we should treat these individuals as prospects for renewed relationships, not as past opportunities.

The [Fundraising Effectiveness Project](#) underscores that focusing on re-engagement can yield high returns—if done strategically. Value alignment plays a key role here. Lapsed donors often remain committed to your mission even if they’ve stopped contributing. When this alignment exists, it’s not just about getting them back—it’s about rekindling a shared commitment to your cause.

No need to limit re-engagement to financial support; it can take many forms. If a donor’s circumstances have changed, consider inviting them to participate in peer-to-peer fundraising, where they can share their passion for your mission with their networks. You might also encourage them to volunteer, attend events, or even offer their professional skills to support your organization in other ways. These diverse engagement opportunities show that you value their involvement in whatever form they’re able to give, deepening their connection to your mission.



“Long-lapsed givers are not lapsed; they’re former donors.”

CLAIRE AXELROD, J.D., CFRE

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# Who are lapsed donors?

## Identifying lapsed donors

Lapsed donors are those who've stopped giving to your organization for one reason or another. They're supporters who may have once been active but haven't made a contribution in a while. Each nonprofit may define "lapsed" a little differently. Typically, "recently lapsed" refers to donors who haven't given in the past year or two, while "deeply lapsed" often means two or more years without a gift.

But here's the thing: donors don't think of themselves as "lapsed." As fundraising expert Claire Axelrad, J.D., CFRE, puts it: ["Long-lapsed givers are not lapsed; they're former donors."](#) Many of those recently lapsed likely still feel connected to your mission and may not realize they're no longer giving. So, when it comes to bringing them back, how you frame your approach matters just as much as the approach itself.

Why focus on these donors? They're often more cost-effective to re-engage than acquiring new ones. According to [Roger Craver](#), there's a 20-40% chance of receiving another gift from a recently lapsed donor; but less than a 2% likelihood of getting a gift from a prospect. You're reigniting a relationship with someone who's already shown an interest in your cause rather than starting from scratch.

And while your focus might be on recently lapsed donors, don't overlook older supporters. These donors may have stopped giving because of life transitions, but often stay connected to your mission in spirit and can later transition into legacy givers. We'll explore their significance in detail in the upcoming section on [Legacy Donors: Unlocking Long-Term Commitment](#).



[See how the Audobon Society of Rhode Island brought back 50% of its lapsed donors.](#)

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# Why donors walk away



Donor retention is a challenge for every nonprofit, and understanding why supporters stop giving is key to winning them back. The reasons vary, but once you know why, you can tailor your engagement strategies to address these issues before they escalate. The most common reason? Donors no longer feel connected to or valued by your organization.

## Controllable factors

Some reasons for donor lapse are within your control. Even minor improvements in communication, appreciation, or clarity can make a big difference in keeping donors engaged and feeling valued.

- **Feeling underappreciated:** Donors want to feel valued. Skipping a thank-you note or leaving someone out of your newsletter could mean losing their support. Simple gestures like personalized thank-you cards or special updates remind donors that they matter.
- **Not seeing the impact:** Donors aren't just ATMs; they want to see their dollars at work. Regularly sharing stories, stats, or testimonials about the impact of their donations can make them feel connected and invested in your mission.
- **Communication breakdowns:** Finding the right balance in communication frequency is crucial. Too much can overwhelm donors, while too little may leave them feeling forgotten. Use donor data to hit that sweet spot—keeping them informed without overloading them.
- **Unrealistic asks:** No one likes being asked for the wrong amount or at the wrong time. Tailor your asks based on past giving, and show appreciation for every gift, whatever the size.

## Uncontrollable factors

Life happens, and sometimes donors need to step back for reasons beyond your control. Here's what you can't fix but still need to acknowledge:

- **Tighter wallets:** Financial constraints are real and may lead donors to scale back or pause their giving. Open communication and flexible payment options let them know they can return when ready.
- **Life's curveballs:** Major life changes can affect even your most loyal supporters. Regular updates and personalized messages help maintain the connection without pressure.
- **New directions:** As interests evolve, some donors may shift focus to other causes. Keep them engaged with updates and stories that resonate with their values, even if they're not donating right now.
- **One-and-done:** Some donors only ever intended to give once, perhaps for a specific campaign. Acknowledging their support without pressuring them keeps the door open for future engagement.



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# Understanding long-term potential: the value of donors



## Why LTV Matters

[Donor Lifetime Value \(LTV\)](#) measures the total contribution a donor might make over their entire relationship with your organization. This metric tracks past donations and forecasts long-term potential, which is critical for strategic planning and resource allocation.

How to Calculate LTV:

$$\text{LTV} = \text{Average gift size} \times \text{Donations per year} \times \text{Estimated years of giving}$$

Calculating LTV helps you see beyond single donations. Knowing each donor's potential lifetime value helps you prioritize your re-engagement efforts and spot those who might have an even greater long-term impact than you'd expect.

## The true cost of losing donors

Losing a donor isn't just a line item on this year's budget. According to Dr. Adrian Sargeant, [boosting donor retention by just 10% can increase Lifetime Value \(LTV\) by up to 200%](#). Retaining and re-engaging donors should be at the heart of your strategy, not just an afterthought.

### Immediate hit to the budget

Replacing a donor can cost up to [five times more](#) than keeping one. Every new donor you bring in comes with marketing, outreach, and event costs. While bringing in fresh supporters is essential, keeping the ones you have is less expensive. All they need is consistent, meaningful communication to stay connected.

### Long-term loss

When a long-term donor leaves, you're losing more than just this year's gift. Donors who stay with you tend to give more over time as they build a deeper connection with your cause. Losing one of these donors cuts off a potential stream of future support, disrupting your financial projections and making it harder to plan.

### Operational and community setbacks

Long-term donors do more than give—they volunteer, share your mission, and help rally others. Losing their support means losing the influence they bring. They're your champions, and when they go, your presence in the community also takes a hit.



## Re-engagement vs reactivation

Donors who've been with you for years are more than just funders; they're part of the team. They offer feedback, advocate for your cause, and provide stability. Losing them weakens your strategic position. It's a missed opportunity to deepen relationships and tap into their networks for new connections.

Re-engaging lapsed donors isn't just about making up for lost donations. It's about reinforcing the foundation of your organization. While **re-engagement** generally involves maintaining or increasing involvement from existing or lapsed donors, **reactivation** specifically refers to reawakening interest from those who have stopped giving entirely. Both strategies are key to building a resilient, sustainable future.

Reactivation goes beyond simple outreach. It often requires a more personalized and targeted approach, as it involves understanding why these donors initially stepped back and addressing any barriers or concerns that might have contributed. Reactivating donors isn't just about renewing gifts—it's about reminding them of the impact they once had and inviting them back in a meaningful way. By focusing on reactivation, alongside re-engagement, you're not just filling in the gaps; you're building a more resilient network of supporters who feel valued and connected to your mission.

## Illustrating the lifetime value of lapsed donors

Calculating a [donor's lifetime value \(LTV\)](#) shows why it's important for your organization's long-term financial health to re-engage lapsed donors.

To highlight the long-term impact of re-engaging lapsed donors, let's consider a national nonprofit with a \$450,000 annual budget. After cleaning up their database, they found that 6,400 of their 7,000 donors had lapsed. Through targeted surveys, they identified why these donors stopped giving:

- **Unaware their donation had stopped:** 12%
- **Bank errors:** 5%
- **Relocation or unavailable contact info:** 14%
- **Financial constraints:** 42%
- **Changed priorities:** 27%

They projected that about 17% of these lapsed donors—1,088 people—might return with

the right outreach. Wealth screening helped categorize these donors into three giving groups:

- **15%** with a capacity of \$365/year (\$59,568 total)
- **25%** with a capacity of \$300/year (\$81,600 total)
- **60%** with a capacity of \$65/year (\$42,445 total)

This added up to a potential annual impact of **\$183,613**. Given the average age of these donors, they estimated a **17-year giving span**, yielding a **lifetime value of \$3.1 million** if these donors re-engaged. Based on this group, they also estimated a conservative annual increase of **\$91,606.50** for the next three years.

[Most nonprofits see a 2.2% return rate among lapsed donors after two years](#), but these donors' strong mission alignment led to a 17% projected return rate—proving that value-aligned donors aren't a lost cause—they can be key players in your long-term strategy.

Understanding the nuances of lapsed donor segments like LYBUNT and SYBUNT will help you tailor your re-engagement strategies for different types of supporters.



## Breaking down key donor segments: LYBUNT and SYBUNT

Not all lapsed donors are the same, which is why segmenting them can make your outreach more effective. [Two common categories](#) are LYBUNT (Last Year But Unfortunately Not This Year) and SYBUNT (Some Year But Unfortunately Not This Year). LYBUNT donors gave last year but haven't yet this year, while SYBUNT donors gave in the past but not this year.

LYBUNT donors often need just a small reminder—like a simple update on the difference they made last year. SYBUNT donors might need a more personalized approach, for example, updates about what's changed and why their support matters now more than ever.

## The long game: courting legacy donors

While the LTV calculation can give insight into a donor's projected impact during their lifetime, legacy donors extend that impact even further. These supporters, often in their later years, may choose to include your organization in their wills. By staying connected with older donors, you increase the likelihood of being included in their estate planning, a decision that can provide significant long-term support. To learn more about how to inspire these deep, lasting commitments, head over to the section, [Legacy donors: Unlocking long-term commitment](#).



**To learn more about how to inspire these deep, lasting commitments, head over to the section, [Legacy donors: unlocking long-term commitment](#).**



**Dramatic increases in an organization's revenue may be achieved through comparatively modest increases in donor loyalty. To achieve such increases, it is necessary to move away from [‘a focus on transactions’ to a focus on relationships to minimize donor defection](#).**

**ADRIAN SARGEANT, PH.D.**

## 5

# Strategic responses to donor lapse



## Tackling donor lapses head-on

Knowing why donors leave is just the start—bringing them back is where the real work begins. Your goal isn't just to recover a gift; it's to rebuild a meaningful, lasting connection that strengthens their commitment to your mission.

### Bringing back the spark with personalized re-engagement campaigns

To re-engage a donor, you've got to connect in a way that resonates with what first drew them to your cause. It's about reminding them of the good they've done and why their support still matters.

- **Personalized outreach:** Break down your lapsed donors by when they last gave, why they might have drifted away, and what first caught their interest. Make it feel like a continued conversation, not a cold call. If someone left because they felt overlooked, a genuine thank-you note and a story about the impact of their gift could be just the thing to bring them back.
- **Crafting the right message:** It's not just about what you say—it's how you say it. If a donor stopped giving because they didn't see where their money was going, share updates on projects they helped fund. If they felt unappreciated, start with a heartfelt thank you and share a story that highlights the difference they made.

- **Offering something special:** Sometimes, a little extra incentive can reignite the connection. Think matching gift opportunities, sneak peeks behind the scenes, or exclusive event invitations—these can make donors feel they're coming back to something exciting.

### Acknowledging donors: making them feel like VIPs

Saying thank you isn't just polite; it's an art. It's about making donors feel seen, valued, and recognized as essential to your mission.

- **Prompt, personal touches:** Every donation, big or small, deserves a quick, personal thank you. It could be a thoughtful email, a handwritten note, or even a call. Donors who feel like they matter are more likely to stick around.
- **Next-level gratitude:** Establish recognition tiers that celebrate ongoing support. This could mean listing their name in your annual report, giving them shout-outs in newsletters, or inviting them to special events. It's all about making each donor feel special.



## Listening to your donors: feedback that matters

To keep donors engaged, you've got to listen. Understanding how they feel about your organization can guide you to make the needed improvements before they consider walking away.

- **Surveys that dig deeper:** Regular surveys give you insights into what's working and what's not. Adrian Sargeant's research underscores [the importance of satisfaction, trust, and commitment in keeping donors engaged](#). Use this feedback to adjust and keep donors connected.
- **Encouraging dialogue:** Setting up [focus groups or advisory panels](#) with donors gives them a voice in your mission. When they feel their opinions matter, they're more likely to stay involved and committed to your cause.

## Think of re-soliciting as last-stage retention

When it comes to long-term lapsed donors—those who've been inactive for 24 months or more—it might be time to shift gears. With these donors, you need something stronger than regular donor retention; you need re-education. At this stage, these names might fit better in your prospecting stream, where you can reintroduce your cause, mission, and impact. Prospective mail emphasizing your unique role can resonate with dormant donors who respond well to renewed engagement. This way, re-soliciting becomes the final touchpoint that draws them back into the fold.

## Donor CRM's role in donor connections

Technology helps keep donor relationships responsive and personalized, providing insights into behavior, preferences, and engagement.

### A quick look at CRM's potential

A good Donor CRM does more than just store data; it provides the insights you need to personalize outreach and anticipate donors' needs. These capabilities help you engage with your supporters on a deeper level.

By blending high-level CRM strategies with targeted re-engagement efforts, you're doing more than asking for another donation—you're laying the groundwork for more effective re-engagement.

### What is donor feedback?

- Listening closely to what donors think and feel at key moments.
- Gaining valuable insights by asking for feedback directly.
- Using that feedback to guide your next steps, whether fixing an issue or building on a positive interaction.
- Strengthening donor relationships with actionable insights that improve their experience.



To learn more about how Donor CRMs, predictive modeling, and AI-assisted personalization can strengthen your re-engagement efforts, explore the section, [Using technology to strengthen connections](#).

## 6

# Using technology to strengthen connections



## Streamlining re-engagement with modern tech tools

Re-engaging lapsed donors shouldn't be a guessing game. It's about working smarter and using technology to help you build meaningful, long-lasting relationships. Today's CRMs don't just collect data—they help you make sense of it by giving you a clear understanding of donor behavior, enabling personalized outreach that resonates.

- **Advanced donor management with CRMs:** Think of a CRM as the ultimate toolkit for donor engagement. They track every interaction, preference, and donation, for a comprehensive view of each donor's journey. By analyzing behaviors, preferences, and giving patterns, CRMs turn data into insights that help you develop strategies to keep donors engaged. Personalized outreach becomes easier when you know what makes your donors tick.
- **Intelligent automation meets personal touch:** Automation and AI don't have to feel robotic. With the right CRM, you can automate routine tasks—like thank-you emails, and birthday or donorversary messages—while keeping things personal. Intelligent automation streamlines these processes, freeing your team to focus on higher-value work without losing that sense of genuine connection.

## Technology as a catalyst for real-world impact

When [\*Habitat for Humanity of Martin County\*](#) began its re-engagement journey, they had a long list of lapsed donors—some inactive since 2018 or earlier. The development director reached out with simple thank-you calls, not to ask for more money but to express genuine gratitude. They acknowledged any missed connections along the way, apologizing if any supporters felt overlooked. This was more than just a call—it was a way to remind former donors that their past support mattered.

And the response? Many donors appreciated the gesture, even if they didn't immediately re-engage. It showed how a little empathy and sincerity can go a long way.

Using their CRM data, they pinpointed [\*lapsed donors who still cared about the mission but had fallen off the radar over the years\*](#). By reaching out with a thoughtful follow-up, they rekindled those connections, transforming these past supporters into renewed champions for the cause.



## Using predictive modeling to pinpoint at-risk donors

Before a donor even thinks about walking away, you can use predictive modeling tools in advanced CRMs to give you a heads-up. These tools review past behaviors and engagement levels, giving you a heads-up about donors who might be at risk. This way, you can reach out with targeted campaigns to rekindle their interest before they disengage.

### AI-powered email personalization

AI isn't just a buzzword—it's a powerful ally in creating emails that get noticed.

- **Tailored content suggestions:** AI helps you craft content that speaks directly to each donor's interests, making your outreach feel more relevant.
- **Saving time, keeping it personal:** AI tools help you draft emails faster. And you can refine AI-generated suggestions to match your nonprofit's voice, saving time without losing that personal touch.
- **Finding the right timing:** It's not just what you say—it's when you say it. You can use AI to find the right times to send email so you can reach donors when they're most likely to respond—without overwhelming their inboxes.

### Assessing generosity and potential

It's not just about tracking what donors have already given—it's about seeing the big picture of each donor's potential. With [modern CRMs, you can gain insights into donors' overall generosity](#), which helps you tailor your outreach to their capacity and interests. Spotting these patterns helps you focus your efforts where they'll have the most impact, making every ask more thoughtful and strategic.

### Using donor feedback to re-engage

Donor feedback is a valuable, though often underused, tactic. By learning why donors give, why they stop, and how they feel about your organization, you can gain actionable insights to refine your approach. Acting on their feedback shows donors you're listening—which builds trust and deepens connections.

This kind of feedback taps into the [four key drivers](#) of donor loyalty: **satisfaction, commitment, trust, and emotional connection**. Regularly assessing these areas helps you see where donors feel connected and where to make improvements to keep them engaged.

CRMs streamline this process with tools like engagement surveys and donor advisory panels, which move beyond simply tracking donations to capture the emotional factors that drive donor behavior.

### Sample surveys to gauge donor sentiment

Inspired by Adrian Sargeant's work, here are sample surveys you can use to assess donor sentiment and strengthen relationships:

- [Lapsed Donor Survey Template](#)
- [Donor Satisfaction Survey Template](#)
- [Donor Commitment Survey Template](#)
- [Donor Trust Survey Template](#)
- [Donor Intimacy Survey Template](#)

Incorporating donor feedback into your strategy strengthens relationships and makes your re-engagement efforts more targeted and meaningful. This deepens loyalty and strengthens the connection donors feel toward your mission.

## 7

# Putting it all into action with re-engagement strategies that connect



Winning back lapsed donors isn't just about using the latest tech or perfecting your strategy; it's about making a personal connection. This is where empathy, storytelling, and tailored outreach come into play.

## Leading with empathy: Share stories that resonate

You need empathy for effective re-engagement; people respond when they feel understood.

Remember, most donors don't see themselves as "lapsed." They may not even realize when they last gave.

Life happens. Whether it's financial issues, family matters, or just losing touch. But when you reach out with empathy rather than pressure, you remind them they're still a valued part of your community.

Consider this: limited time and resources are a fact of life for virtually every nonprofit, so it's important to focus on those most likely to provide the greatest return. Donors who've given sporadically, and in very low-amounts may not be the best investment for your re-activation efforts. Instead, consider focusing on donors who've shown long term commitment—like those who've given consistently over 10 or more years, or those whose last gift was \$100 or more—even if they've been lapsed for several years. By targeting these more valuable segments, you can maximize the impact of your re-engagement strategy.

[The Audubon Society of Rhode Island](#) is an excellent example of this. They had a lot of deeply loyal lapsed donors who'd been giving annually for 20 years. The solution? They gave them a free one-year membership.

They thanked each loyal member for so many years of dedicated support using handwritten notes (written on one of their beautifully photographed bird cards). They gently suggested that the membership renewal might have slipped their notice, but not to worry. Audubon understood how important it was to this member to protect birds, wildlife, and their habitat.

And because Audubon didn't want this long-time member to miss out on exciting programs, they extended the membership for another year at no charge—including a current membership card in the envelope with the handwritten card.

How'd it do? Since its launch, 50% of those who lapsed renewed their memberships, and 25% upgraded their giving.

Stop for a moment and consider: in your regular appeals to current donors, are you seeing 25% upgrading their donations?

This is a genius example of showing not just deep care for donors but also connecting with them around their passion for Audubon's mission.





Wondering how to put this into action at your nonprofit? Instead of diving straight into a donation request, you might say: “We know life can get busy, but we want to thank you for your past support. Here’s how your gift made a difference.” This [opens the door to re-engagement](#) without making the donor feel pressured or guilty.

Here’s where a well-crafted email makes all the difference. You can see an example of an empathetic Lapsed Donor email below.

## Example email

Subject: We’ve missed you, Julie!

Dear Julie,

I’ve been thinking about you and wondering how you are.

It’s been a while since we heard from you, and I just wanted to check in.

I’m not coming to you today to ask for a gift.

(Of course, if you wanted to help us, we would greatly appreciate it and put your gift to immediate work helping [insert target beneficiary here]).

I only want to tell you that I’m thinking about you, Julie.

I know how much you care about your (insert mission here).

As you go about your day, today and every day, I hope you feel joy in your heart. Joy in knowing that you matter. That your compassion saves lives and supports (insert mission here). That you, Julie, inspire me and our team at the (name of org) to keep fighting the good fight advocating for (target beneficiaries).

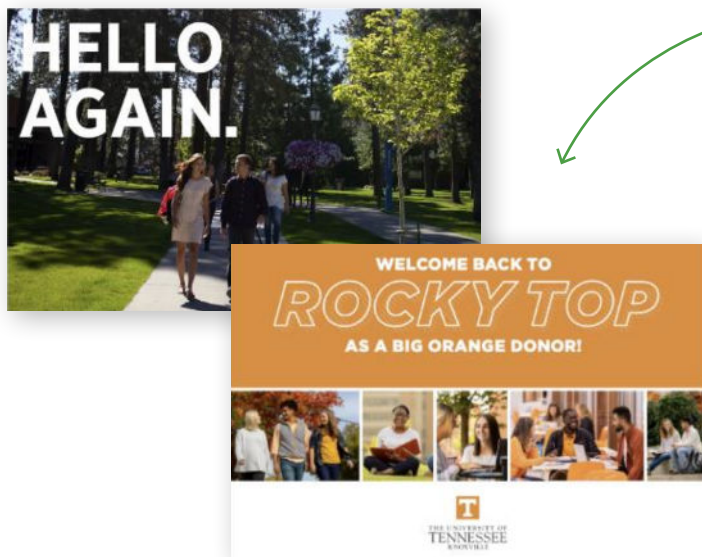
Thank you for being a part of our family, Julie.

Your fan,

XXXXXXX

P.S. I’m always here for you. You can find me at (insert email address) or [insert phone here] (when I’m not (description of some awesome mission activity), of course!

This email sets the tone for a re-engagement strategy that’s grounded in empathy and understanding. Instead of pushing for an immediate gift, it acknowledges the donor’s unique journey and offers an invitation to reconnect on their own terms.



The University of Tennessee sends a personal thank you postcard recognizing they're back with a personal touch.

Source: [The Donor Relations Group sample library](#)

## Putting empathy into action

Empathy is more than a feeling—it's a core principle for re-engaging donors. When you reach out with genuine care and understanding, you're not only inviting them to reconnect, you're acknowledging the impact they've already had.

Here's how this looks in practice:

- **Acknowledging their journey:** Show your gratitude for past contributions so they feel recognized and appreciated. Let them know they're missed.
- **Inviting feedback:** This isn't a one-way street. Asking for their thoughts and perspectives creates space for meaningful dialogue beyond just making an appeal.
- **Personalizing with intention:** Make each interaction count by tailoring your communication to reflect each donor's values and interests.

## Prioritizing lapsed donors based on potential

Focus on donors with the highest potential to return, using CRM data to highlight their giving history and connection to your cause, so you can focus your efforts where they'll make the greatest impact.

## Crafting personalized re-engagement campaigns

Build campaigns that reflect your shared values and mission. Like the Audubon example, use stories that resonate with donors' passions, inviting them back into the narrative of your organization.

### Using multi-channel communication

Meet your donors where they are by reaching out through email, social media, direct mail, and phone calls. Track responses to refine your approach.

### Engaging with donor feedback in real time

Feedback gives you insight into why donors may have stepped back and what could bring them back. Use a donor CRM to gather these insights and show donors you're listening and evolving.

### Setting measurable goals and tracking progress

Set clear re-engagement targets, like reaching a specific percentage of lapsed donors within a specific timeframe. Keep an eye on your progress using a donor CRM and be ready to adjust as you go.

### Building a sustainable re-engagement cycle

Re-engagement is ongoing. Establish regular touchpoints, and for long-time donors, include legacy giving as a natural extension of their ongoing commitment to your mission.

## 8

# Encouraging smaller gifts for lasting impact

## Every donation makes a difference

Donors don't need deep pockets to make an impact. Smaller gifts still keep donors connected—especially when times are tight. Encouraging contributions of any size shows that every bit counts and all donors are valued.

## How can you encourage smaller gifts?

- Engaging in personal outreach: A personal message—a quick call, email, or handwritten note—can remind donors that their support matters. Acknowledge their contributions genuinely and sincerely to help reinforce their importance to your cause.
- Telling impact stories: Even small gifts have a story. Show donors exactly how \$5 or \$15 can fund a specific need—like feeding a family for a day or funding supplies for a local project. Making these impacts tangible turns small donations into something meaningful.
- Offering flexible giving options: Providing easy ways to give, like rounding up purchases or setting up micro-donations, lets donors support your cause at price points they're comfortable with. These low-pressure options help them stay engaged, even when they can't commit to larger amounts.
- Encouraging monthly giving: Recurring donations are a win-win. Make it easy for donors to give in small, manageable amounts. A few dollars a month keeps them connected to your cause and provides your organization with steady support they feel good about.





# 9 Turning one-time donors into lifetime givers

Every lifetime supporter starts with a single gift. [Turning a one-time donation into a lasting commitment](#) goes beyond that first gift. It's about building a connection, showing how their support makes a real impact, and offering them ways to stay involved over time.

## Building on the first gift

The first donation is an opportunity to start a dialogue. First-time donors who receive a [personal thank you within 48 hours](#) are four times more likely to give a second gift. And a [thank-you call from a board member within 24 hours](#) can increase the next gift by 39% (Penelope Burk). Thanking donors right away and how their gift makes and reinforces their choice to support you. It's a simple step that helps build a lasting connection.

## Creating a sense of belonging

Donors need to feel part of something larger before becoming lifetime supporters. Regular updates, personal messages, and a little recognition go a long way to making donors feel they're part of the team. When they feel valued and connected, they're more likely to stay involved.

## Engaging through meaningful stories

Stories can be one of your best tools for building strong donor relationships. When you share examples of how their support is making a difference, you're creating an emotional connection. Bringing one-time donors to events or sharing testimonials from people they've helped can help strengthen their bond with your mission.

## Offering diverse ways to stay involved

One-time donors may not see themselves as regular supporters. Make it easy to volunteer, work on special projects, or get involved in other ways. It's a great way to turn occasional supporters into active champions of your cause.

## Building meaningful connections

Keep lifetime supporters in the loop all year, with thoughtful notes letting them know how their support makes a difference. By aligning your updates with their interests, you make them feel like true partners in the work you're doing together.

By nurturing one-time donors and creating pathways for ongoing engagement, you can transform their initial interest into a lasting commitment. When donors feel like their contributions matter, they're more likely to evolve into lifetime supporters, fully invested in your organization's success.

For some donors, a lifetime isn't long enough—they want their impact to last even longer by creating a legacy that will support your mission for years to come.

# Legacy donors: unlocking long-term commitment



Legacy giving is the ultimate way for donors to [make a lasting impact](#). It lets them support the mission they care about, even beyond their lifetime. For your organization, building these legacy relationships means understanding what matters to each donor and aligning with their personal values and vision for the future.

## Aligning personal values with the mission

Legacy donors often feel a deep connection to your organization's purpose. Talking with them about what matters most to them—and how it fits with your mission—[helps them picture the lasting impact they can have](#). It's this alignment of values that makes legacy giving feel like a natural next step for these committed supporters.

## Highlighting the transformative potential of legacy gifts

Legacy donors take pride in shaping your organization's future. Emphasizing how their gifts can truly make a difference shows them the value of their commitment. Consider sharing a story or example that highlights: "Legacy donors don't just make donations—they secure the future of the causes they love."

## Offering flexible legacy giving options

A strong legacy program offers various ways for donors to make a lasting impact. From bequests to charitable trusts and named funds, there's an option for everyone. Flexibility makes it easy for donors to choose the type of legacy that feels right for them and aligns with their financial situation.

## Celebrating legacy donors and their impact

Acknowledging legacy donors honors their choices and strengthens their bond with your organization. Whether with recognition events, special features, or named endowments, celebrating their contributions helps them feel valued. It also inspires others to consider the lasting difference they could make.

When you bake in legacy giving as part of your engagement strategy, it creates a path for long-term support. Recognizing your donors' legacies and showing how they shape the future will help you build relationships that go beyond the here and now, and secure the long-term success of your mission.



# 11 Moving forward together

Re-engaging lapsed donors isn't just about securing that next gift—it's about reigniting their connection to your mission and fostering lasting relationships. Each renewed donation is a chance to turn donors' passion for your cause into ongoing support. The goal is to transform interest into action and action into lasting commitment.

## Donors as partners

Donors aren't just funders; they're partners in everything you do. When you focus on building genuine connections and showing how every contribution matters, you're creating a resilient, engaged community of supporters. This goes beyond financial sustainability; it's about creating a network of people who will stand with you through thick and thin. When donors feel valued, informed, and connected, they become the foundation of your organization's future.

## Looking ahead

As you continue to reach out to donors, remember that building these relationships takes time. Staying connected takes consistency, openness, and genuine appreciation. Stick with this approach, and you'll see donor retention grow while strengthening the community around your mission—ensuring a bright future for your organization and the people who support it.



# About the authors



## **Rachel Muir, CFRE**

Rachel has worked every side of the Rubik's cube that is the nonprofit sector. When she was 26 Rachel Muir launched Girlstart, a non-profit empowering girls in math, science, engineering and technology in the living room of her apartment with \$500 and a credit card. Several years later she had raised over 10 million and was featured on Oprah, CNN, and the Today show. Today Rachel delivers workshops and offers a monthly membership, [League of Extraordinary Fundraisers](#), transforming people into confident, successful fundraisers. Learn more about Rachel at [www.rachelmuir.com](http://www.rachelmuir.com).



## **Janis Weiss**

Janis Weiss is a content strategy leader at Bloomerang, developing thought leadership to help nonprofits strengthen donor relationships and drive meaningful impact. Her background in B2B SaaS content and brand strategy shaped her ability to align messaging with organizational goals and address unique audience needs. At Bloomerang, she applies this expertise to connect solutions with the unique challenges nonprofits face, helping organizations build stronger community connections and achieve lasting growth.

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