

Annual Appeal

A STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE

What is an Annual Appeal?

An annual appeal is yearly fundraising campaign, typically conducted via direct mail and frequently supplemented by telephone calls to all your known supporters, asking for a contribution.

For many nonprofits, the annual appeal is the cornerstone of fundraising activity. These funds are especially valuable because most often, the gifts are unrestricted so they can be used wherever the nonprofit most needs them. Also, many donors who go on to become major donors started off as steady and long-time contributors to the annual appeal.

Get Started with an Annual Appeal

Step 1: Build Your List

The first step in starting an annual appeal is developing a constituent list.

- Collect contact information including name, address, phone number and email address from as many potential supporters as possible.
- Consider current patrons, alumni, those who have benefited from your services, supporters of your mission, and anyone who has expressed an interest in the work of your nonprofit.
- Ask for business cards when meeting with new people.

Step 2: Decide on Time of Year

Many organizations conduct their annual appeal just prior to Thanksgiving to coincide with the holiday giving and year-end tax deduction season. Others tie their campaign to a significant event such as an anniversary, school year or performance season. You can also consider running your annual appeal on an ongoing basis throughout the year, asking for renewals on the annual anniversary of a donation.

Step 3: Write the Letter

Your letter creates the case for your campaign. It should present a convincing answer to the question “Why should I give to your organization?” State your case early in your letter, explain why you are writing and be sure to ask for a donation. Letter styles vary, from a first-person story explaining how the person was helped by your organization to startling figures, to a straightforward, heartfelt request. Find the voice that works best for your organization. Identify who will sign the letter – typically the executive director or board chair.

Step 4: Include the Amount of Your Ask

If you can, include the amount of your donor’s gift from the previous year and suggest an amount equal to or slightly above that amount. Alternatively, provide a range of giving levels on the donation form from which your donor can select. Request a donation more than once in your letter: early on, and in the postscript.

Step 5: Create the Direct Response Package

A typical package includes a personalized letter, a #10 envelope, a tear-off donation form and a return envelope. The more “matches” you have, (personalized envelope, personalized letter, personalized form), the more complicated the mailing. On the other hand, the more personalized the package, the more the recipient feels you are communicating directly with him or her.

Step 6: Mail Again

If you receive no response, mail the recipient again about 6 to 8 weeks later and then again, another 6 weeks later if necessary and if resources allow.

Step 7: Thank Your Donors

Thank your donors promptly for their contributions. Send a thank you note expressing your appreciation, perhaps reinforcing a point in your letter that the contribution will enable. Some organizations publish an annual report or newsletter listing contributors to the annual appeal.

Note: there are IRS requirements for acknowledging gifts in some circumstances.



Step 8: Stay in Touch

Once donors become part of your fold, cultivate the relationships. Over the course of the year update them - via email if possible - about developments and successes in your organization. Ask board members to write a personal note to special donors, thanking them for their contribution and updating them on the latest happenings in your organization. Don't let the only time they hear from you be when you are asking for money.

Step 9: Make Your Annual Appeal Annual

Conduct your annual appeal at a consistent time every year, once a year. It's OK to run an additional campaign during the year but be careful and clear in your communication that it's a special campaign, so as not to be confused with your annual appeal. Once you get into a consistent pattern of conducting your annual campaign, you'll be able to count on a percentage of it as a fairly predictable source of unrestricted revenue.

