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101 Terrific Opening Lines for Your Fundraising Letters.

Alan Sharpe

*Quotes, statistics,
anecdotes, witticisms,
questions and other
zingers to make your
letters irresistible.*



Handbook Number 8

H A N D S - O N F U N D R A I S I N G S E R I E S

Published by



Andrew
Spencer
Publishing

38 Wethered Street
London, Ontario, N5Y 1G9 Canada

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Sharpe, Alan.

101 Terrific Opening Lines for Your Fundraising Letters.

1. Direct-mail fund raising. 2. Nonprofit organizations—Finance. I. Title. II Series.

FIRST EDITION

FIRST PRINTING

Manufactured in Canada

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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How to Write Zinger Fundraising Letter Opening Lines

By Alan Sharpe

The first time I was shelled by enemy artillery, I learned a vital lesson that applies to the success of your fundraising letters.

I was lying in a slit trench on Mount Wall, about 35 kilometres west of the town of Stanley, in the Falkland Islands. The year was 1982, the Falklands War. The Argentines were lobbing 105mm Pack Howitzer shells around my position, trying to dislodge my Royal Marines Commando troop.

But their fire was ineffective.

You see, the soil in the Falkland Islands consists largely of peat bogs. The soil is dense and wet and soft underfoot. That means the enemy's artillery rounds penetrated the soil before detonating, sending most of their force and shrapnel upwards rather than horizontally, in my direction.

When you want to leave a lasting impression on your target audience, you must use the right ammunition. If the Argentines had used the kind of artillery shells that explode above the ground rather than in it, you would not be reading this article today.

So here is the principle applied in practice, in the battle for the mind of your target audience. You must open your fundraising letters in such a way that you compel your donors to read on right to the end, and take action. Your opening sentence is the most vital sentence in your letter. If you use the wrong ammunition here, your letter will misfire.

So start your letters with your largest cannon. Grab your prospect's attention so that he simply has to read on.

Here are some ideas:

- start with a gripping narrative
- ask a provocative question
- state a seeming contradiction or paradox
- open with a scintillating (and relevant) quote

- crack a joke
- start with the word “you”

Here are four ways to start your letters with a bang.

Question

One effective way to start your letter is to ask a provocative question. By provocative, I mean challenging. Your aim is not to enrage your readers, but to provoke them to think.

Ask a question that cannot be answered with a yes or a no. For example, instead of asking, “Would you like to reduce homelessness in your city by 30%?” ask “What is the easiest way to reduce homelessness in your city by 30%?”

The answer to the first question is obviously yes. And if it is no, then your reader may very well stop reading right there. The second question is more intriguing because the answer is not obvious, the question stimulates some curiosity, and the question implies a benefit to follow (you will answer the question in your letter).

Whenever possible, when you open with a question, ask something that raises curiosity and implies a benefit to follow. That way, you will encourage your readers to continue reading.

Anecdote

One way to get your readers’ attention and to draw them into your letters is to start with an interesting anecdote or story. People like to read about people. Just think of the popularity of People Magazine, the supermarket tabloids and reality TV shows like Survivor and The Apprentice. People are fascinated with the rich, the famous, the notorious and the bizarre.

If you decide to start your sales letter or fundraising letter with a story, make sure it is relevant to your target audience and to what you are promoting in your letter. In other words, make sure you can lead directly from your opening anecdote into your appeal for funds.

You have a number of goals when opening your letter with a story:

1. Grab your reader's attention
2. Arouse enough curiosity that your reader is motivated to read on
3. Establish rapport. This is especially vital with a letter that you send to "cold" prospects who may not know you, your organization or what you are promoting
4. Tie your opening with your reason for writing as quickly as possible

Quote

A zinger is a one-sentence saying that says a lot. It might be a quote. Or a proverbial saying with a unique twist. Or an observation about the human condition that raises curiosity about what is to follow in your letter.

The secret to using zingers well is to think of them as bait. You are fishing for donations. The zinger is the lure on the end of your line. You want supporters to take your lure so that you can reel them in. Here are some rules to keep in mind when crafting a zinger for your letter opening:

- keep it short
- if you are quoting someone, say who that someone is
- use a zinger that resonates with your target audience and what they care about
- match your zinger with the age and background of your prospects (young urban Chinese may not know who Henry David Thoreau is, for example)
- use a zinger that ties in with the ask and tone of your letter

The most useful reference books arrange quotes, aphorisms, proverbial wisdom and zingers by topic. Some of the better ones are:

The Complete Book of Zingers. Croft Pentz. Tyndale. Wheaton, 1990.

The Forbes Book of Business Quotations. Ted Goodman, ed. Black Dog & Leventhal. New York, 1997.

Words of Wisdom. William Safire and Leonard Safir, eds. Fireside. New York, 1989.

The MacMillan Dictionary of Quotations. MacMillan. New York, 1989.

Challenging Fact

Open your letter with a surprising fact or an outrageous statistic and you'll hook your readers.

Self-deprecation

One way to build immediate rapport with a donor is to open your letter with a little self-deprecation. Poke fun at yourself. Crack a joke at your expense. You'll put your readers at their ease. And help them see you as a peer, not a snob. See the samples that follow.

Here are some examples:

“If to err is human, then no one is more human than I am.”

“Okay, I'll admit it. I leave the radio on when I go out because my three cats find classical music soothing.”

See how all of these opening lines work? They disarm you because they are so honest, so open. Write opening lines like these and your donors and prospective donors will continue reading.

101 Terrific Opening Lines for Your Fundraising Letters.

By Alan Sharpe

Pose a Question

1. How much of your life savings would you like to leave in the hands of the federal government?
2. What do you suppose is the easiest way to reduce homelessness in our city by 30%?
3. What would you do if I asked you to walk over to your neighbour's house with a bundle of roof shingles under your arm? [Habitat for Humanity]
4. How many honors students do you know who's parents were once involved in organized crime? Let me introduce you to one. His name is Kerry.
5. Does your pastor lead a band of guerrilla fighters in his spare time? Or collect bribes while on visitation? Because you live in San Diego, I know your answer to these two questions is no. But what if you lived in Chitungwiza, Zimbabwe? What if your church was located in Sekhukhune, South Africa? Well, then you'd have a problem. And your church leaders would have a problem. Here's why.
6. [An appeal letter from Habitat for Humanity.] Can you measure contentment with a ruler? My mom could. Your mom probably could, too. If your home was anything like ours, birthdays were the time when mom walked you over to the kitchen door, made you stand as tall as you could (no going on tiptoes allowed!), and marked your increased stature on the door jamb behind you. That's one of the beauties of home ownership, I suppose—you can mark your family milestones wherever you want.

But many parents in Canada don't yet enjoy that simple pleasure of measuring their children's growth from birthday to birthday. That's because they don't own their home

7. How many groceries can you carry home on your head? A strange question perhaps! But all around the world—in

developing countries—the amount of food and medicine that a mother can buy for her family depends on how much she can carry home on her head.

8. Can you imagine a hospital without nurses? Of course not! Even in our technological age, nothing has been, or likely will be, invented to replace the competent, personal care of a highly trained nurse.
9. If you are susceptible to mail appeals that tug at your heart with carefully selected photographs of physically handicapped children, you'll understand why we at Mary Bartelme often ask ourselves: "How do you show a handicapped spirit?"
10. Have you ever wondered what would have happened if Jesus had been born in Blantyre instead of Bethlehem? I'm talking about Blantyre, Malawi. A miracle of Biblical proportions happened there recently that affects the eternal destiny of that entire nation. You play a vital role in the unfolding drama.
11. A chain a thousand miles long? Yes. If all the friends and neighbors who have been generous to the Hospital joined hands, they would make a chain that long—maybe longer!
12. What happens when a snow leopard catches a cold, a walrus has a toothache or a 3,000-pound rhino comes down with an intestinal disorder? If the animal happens to be one of the 3,500 mammals, reptiles, amphibians and birds at the Bronx Zoo, the chances are good for a speedy recovery.
13. How faithful would your church attendance be if you could be arrested for attending?
14. "Mommy, why is this happening to me?" How do you explain to your little girl that she is going blind, and there is no treatment or cure?
15. May I ask you a personal question? Truly personal? Have you ever had your vacation spoiled by painful attacks of dysentery due to unsanitary food or impure water?
16. Have you ever wanted to buy someone a three-bedroom house as a Christmas present? Now you can, through a simple gift to Habitat for Humanity.

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