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How to Recover Your Lapsed Direct Mail Donors.

Alan Sharpe

Discover the financial rewards, savings and long-term benefits of wooing and winning your donors all over again using direct mail.



Handbook Number 22

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How to Recover Your Lapsed Direct Mail Donors.

By Alan Sharpe

A lapsed donor is someone who used to support your organization but has not mailed you a gift for 12 months, or 36 months, or somewhere in between. Non-profit organizations usually put their lapsed donors into categories like this:

- hasn't given for 12 months
- hasn't given for 24 months
- hasn't given for 36 months

A donor or member who has not given you gift in over 36 months (three years) is not a lapsed donor anymore, but a former donor. This Handbook deals only with donors who have lapsed in their giving for up to 36 months.

Why donors lapse

The best solution to lapsed donors, of course, is to prevent them from lapsing in the first place. A successful direct mail fundraising program keeps current donors engaged and motivated. But some donors will lapse and there is nothing you can do about it. Donors stop responding to your fundraising letter appeals for many reasons, some of which you can control, but many of which you cannot. Here are some of them.

1. They forget

I suppose you could call this a case of “poor institutional memory.” Donors simply forget your institution. They read your letter, decide to give, put your letter down somewhere, and then forget to mail you their gift. Some even think they have made a gift during the last 12 months when they haven't.

2. They get distracted

Some stop sending gifts because they get sidetracked by other priorities, such as the arrival of children, or grandchildren. Or a hurricane hits their home. Or mum gets diagnosed with breast cancer.

3. They lose interest

Perhaps through a fault of yours (you've strayed from your mission, perhaps), but also perhaps because their interests change, some donors stop their support because your mission no longer excites them.

4. They suffer financially

In some families, the breadwinner loses his job, and the first thing to be cut is discretionary spending, such as take out food, movies and charitable gifts.

5. They die

You have no control over this one, or shouldn't have. A percentage of your donors will pass away each year, and their gifts in the mail will cease the same day they do. That's why you are wise to invite your older donors to include you in their wills.

6. You mail them too often

Some donors grow weary if they receive too many solicitations in any year. A letter each month might be too many for some. One a quarter might be too many for others. Either way, they stop giving because they feel you are hounding them for their money.

7. You don't mail often enough

Other donors fall away because you are never on their radar screen. Your letters arrive so infrequently, or so unpredictably, that you never make a lasting impression in their minds—or wallets.

8. You don't listen

The donor makes a complaint or a suggestion, and then decides that your organization did not respond properly. So they take their gifts elsewhere.

9. You treat them like a stranger

How many times would you need to receive a letter addressing you as “Dear Friend” before concluding that the organization doesn't know you by name and is interested in your money but not in you?

10. They feel unappreciated

Donors like to feel appreciated, and like to know that their donations are being used to good ends. If your thank-you letters arrive late, or never at all, some donors will start giving to other organizations that show their appreciation.

11. They lose trust in you

Have you experienced some bad publicity in recent years (earned or not)? You will likely lose some donors because of it. Donors continue giving to organizations they trust, and stop as soon as that trust is broken.

12. They move

Sometimes a lapsed donor hasn't lapsed at all. They've simply moved and forgotten to give you their new address. You mail repeated appeals to the old address, receive no response, and assume that the donor has stopped giving. Other times, they do not give you their new address because they have moved out of the area that your organization services.

Avoid adding these donors to your lapsed donor list by printing “Address Service Requested” on the mailing envelope so that the post office (in the United States, that is) will return any undeliverable mail. That way, you'll know the difference between donors who have lapsed and those who have simply moved and not given you their new address.

it was a special appeal for a piece of capital equipment. Or a Christmas appeal that resonated with the religious sensibilities of your donor.

Whatever won your donor in the first place, use that same theme to try and win them back. I am assuming that your organization has not drifted away from that original theme, and that your lapsed donor's interests and motivations have also remained constant from their first gift until now.

Stress this original theme in your reactivation letter. Let the donor know that you are still very much involved with—and concerned about—the same cause that concerns them. Describe how the donor's renewed support will help you to address the very concerns that they supported with their first gift.

Re-inspire them

Lapsed donors need to be re-sold on the merits of your organization. They stopped giving for a reason. Since you don't know what that reason is, assume that it must be a lack of interest in your mission or the cause that you address. You need to win back the hearts and minds of donors who have fallen off in their giving, and the safest way to do that is to present all the compelling reasons you can for deserving their support.

Show the need that you address. Show how you meet that need. Describe recent successes, particularly those made possible with your lapsed donor's previous gifts. Think of the common objections that people give for not supporting your cause, assume that some of these reasons apply in this case, and address them in your letter.

Your goal is to re-inspire your lapsed donors, lighting a fire under them that ignites their passion for supporting your organization, making a difference in the world through you.

Segmentation B, mailed to donors who had not given a gift in over 24 months

Highlighted copy shows how this letter differs from the base letter.

Dear Friend,

I wish that peace alone could solve some of the world's problems. But it cannot.

Peace brings an end to the warfare or ethnic conflict. But it does not end the dying, or the suffering. That's why I'm writing you this holiday season. Your financial support in recent years was a great help to us. Now I'd like you to renew your support by joining with me and the volunteers at Médecins Sans Frontières in restoring health, hope and humanity to populations in distress around the world. We need your help now more than ever before. Here's why.

Consider Afghanistan. Yes, the guns have fallen silent and the Taliban regime has been replaced. But the humanitarian situation remains dire for hundred of thousands of Afghans whose daily lives are plagued by insecurity, lack of food and poor access to basic health services.

Our medical work in Afghanistan is unique. We've been present in the country for over 20 years. We are opening many health clinics in isolated areas where no health care was available until MSF resumed work after the war ended.

Dr. Maureen Mayhew, one of our Canadian volunteers in Afghanistan, says your renewed support right now is vital to our operations there. She states that:

"The peace in Afghanistan is tenuous. MSF is still needed to finish the medical work we started. If peace is not maintained, then most NGOs [non-governmental organizations] will flee and, once again, MSF will be one of the few organisations left in the country to help those affected by the conflict."

In another part of the world, MSF was also one of the only organizations working in areas where people had received no medical care for years, Sierra Leone. Peace has arrived after a decade of civil war, but the situation is fragile. The surrounding countries are still at war. Large numbers of people are still displaced from their homes. Armed factions still roam the country.

Richard Zereik, our field coordinator in Sierra Leone, described the situation this way:

"Before MSF arrived in many parts of the country, there was no functioning health care system. Sierra Leone had

one of the highest mother and child mortality rates in the world. The country was at the bottom of just about every UN indicator."

Despite these challenges, we are seeing signs of health restored and hope renewed, thanks to our generous supporters. MSF is now working in 11 out of the 12 provinces of the country, supporting hospitals and primary health clinics. Since the peace agreement, we have witnessed higher admission numbers and improved quality of services in emergency and non-emergency surgeries, paediatric and obstetric care. That's encouraging - in spite of the country's delicate state - and all thanks to our supporters, people like you, who use generosity as a force for good in the world.

Then there's Sri Lanka, where peace negotiations are underway. Adrienne Carter, a mental health professional and MSF volunteer, was there this year when she saw the need for support in that country, despite the ceasefire:

"I wish you could see the glowing, eager faces of the 24 counsellors that we trained, who themselves have all been traumatized by displacement and torture. We witnessed their ability to deter adolescents from killing themselves, and to do play therapy with severely traumatised children who were then able to return to school and function within the family. Without support from Canadians, MSF would have to pull out of Sri Lanka."

As you can see, we need your continued support in times of peace as well as in times of war and natural disaster. So please be as generous as you can this holiday season. This is your last opportunity to renew your support this year. Your humanitarian gift today will help MSF continue its mission of providing emergency medical relief wherever needed, worldwide. Your gift will have a positive impact on the people, which in turn will lead to better health, hope and confidence for humanity.

Yours sincerely,

Leslie Shanks

Leslie Shanks, M.D., CCFP, President
Médecins Sans Frontières - Canada

P.S. Send your best wishes to our volunteers on the field this holiday season, using the enclosed card. Please consider joining our *Partners Without Borders* monthly giving program, as a New Year's resolution to help us provide medical assistance to populations in distress everyday.