
Dissecting

A FUNDRAISING APPEAL

BY NICOLE HSIANG & KAREN TOPAKIAN

Writing a fund appeal can be a daunting task, especially if you are a relative newcomer to the trade. It needn't be as difficult as you think, however. Before you start to write there are two things to consider so you can tailor your message: First, who is your audience, and second, why do they give? Even though fund appeal letters are sent to hundreds, if not thousands of people, they are read one person at a time. It is to that one person that you must write.

WHO IS THE READER?

In order to answer these two questions, ask yourself, Who is the reader? Is it a current donor, a lapsed donor (someone who hasn't given in more than 12 to 18 months), or is this an acquisition mailing to someone whom you are asking to become a donor? Each one of these readers would require a different message.

If you are writing to a lapsed donor, you will want to remind her or him of how valuable their past gifts have been to your organization, the progress you've made since their last gift, and how much work lies ahead that can't be accomplished without their financial help. An acquisition letter has a bigger job to do: it must introduce the organization and its mission to the reader as well as present a compelling reason for the reader to give.

The letter annotated here was written to the current donors of the Agape Foundation — Fund for Nonviolent Social Change. The letter was directed to people who have given more than once and in many cases for many years. These are donors that Agape knows well.

WHY DO THEY GIVE?

Once you have decided on your audience, the next step is to determine why they give. If they are already or have been donors are they interested in a particular program or in the organization in general? Do they give because of a particular staff person or board member? You may not know the answers to these questions about the bulk of your donors, but if you do, a personal note on the letter from that staff person or board member will go miles toward ensuring that next gift. If they give because of a particular program, make sure you highlight or

mention all your programs in your letter, so each donor sees the ones that are meaningful to them. The reader wants to see their own beliefs, interests, philosophies, and perspectives reflected in the appeal.

Fundraising letters often revolve around a theme. The one here has peace as the theme because Agape historically has funded anti-war efforts. We know that our donors care deeply about this issue and want us to continue providing resources to end the current war. Drafting a letter around a theme can give you a new way to talk about the same issues you have been addressing for a long time. It's a packaging and marketing technique that works.

WHAT TO SAY

The beauty of writing a fund appeal is that it need not be great literature. It had best not be fiction, yet it's not journalism either. It is conversational, repetitive, informative, and emotionally moving. The letter doesn't need to follow all of the rules of good writing. You can use phrases as sentences. Start a sentence with *But* or *And*. Repeat phrases for rhythm or emphasis. Use contractions. Most important, use the word "you" early and often. The word "you" should appear more often than "I," "me," or the name of the organization, program, or project that you are writing about. Why? Because people like to read about themselves, and writing "you" accomplishes that task.

The letter needs to include a few basic points: a thank you for their past gift; the impact or results of that gift; exciting, critical, timely activities that you are planning to do next; and an ask for another gift to accomplish those goals along with anything else you may want them to do.

How you frame the letter can vary widely. You can lead with the thank you or build it into the text. In order to engage the reader's heart, start with a compelling story about someone or some issue that benefited from your organization's work. Then work in the thank you to let the reader know how their gift played a role in this success. You can also lead with a challenge or a dilemma that only the reader's gift can resolve.

People give to your organization because they care about the work that it does. So tell them what you have done and what you plan on doing next. Everyone wants to

be part of a winning team. Help the reader see and feel that they are part of your victories. Because they are.

THE END MAY BE FIRST

Donors have learned that fund appeals aren't mysterious, so nothing is ruined when they read the last paragraph first. And they often do. Make it worth their while. Give your most compelling reason to give in that last paragraph. Kim Klein (founder of the *Grassroots Fundraising Journal*) tells us that donors often only read the first paragraph, the last paragraph, and the P.S. — and maybe nothing else. They will skim the letter looking for anything bolded, highlighted, bulleted, or in italics. That doesn't give you license to fill the page with these eye-catching elements. A little can go a long way. Two per page is a good rule of thumb. But do use them to break up the page.

If you get stuck starting or ending or just writing in general, pick up a copy of Mal Warwick's excellent book, *How to Write Successful Fundraising Letters*. He too saves the best for last. Chapter 19 is titled, "How to Overcome Writer's Block." Warwick provides examples of strong leads, outstanding ways to use the word "you," powerful ways to end a letter, and ways to start a P.S. The best of writers needs a jumpstart every once in a while.

The annotations on the letter here will show you how we put these ideas into practice. By incorporating these suggestions, your next fund appeal letter may flow a little easier and, we hope, raise more money. **GF**

NICOLE HSIANG WAS AN INTERN AT GIFT IN 2005, AND CURRENTLY WORKS AS DEVELOPMENT ASSOCIATE AT THE AGAPE FOUNDATION AND AT SAN FRANCISCO WOMEN AGAINST RAPE.

KAREN TOPAKIAN HAS BEEN THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE AGAPE FOUNDATION — FUND FOR NONVIOLENT SOCIAL CHANGE SINCE 1993.

Agape Foundation
Fund for Nonviolent Social Change

Autumn 2007

Dear Friend,

Think about it for a minute. To be for or against the war, we all have a choice.

But what if military recruiters showed up in your high school every day, offering you and your family money for enlisting in the army? Or citizenship if you are an immigrant? What if you were harassed, detained and imprisoned for refusing to go to war?

The truth is, **choosing peace isn't easy** in today's society. It takes incredible strength and determination to do what you feel is right when our government thinks you're wrong.

When activists and World War II conscientious objectors opposed to the Vietnam War started the Agape Foundation in 1969, they understood the critical need to strengthen the anti-war movement with funds and resources. **In fact, we were founded in order to fund anti-war activism.** It's unfortunate that we are still doing that today.

For more than 38 years, our support has amplified the voices of those in our community who say "NO!" to war and violence, **providing more than \$12.5 million to grassroots organizations in California. With your financial assistance, the Agape Foundation has funded more than 30 organizations specifically working for demilitarization** since the onset of the war in Iraq.

Let me show you just some of the many ways that your generosity is helping the Agape Foundation to create peaceful change in a time of war by funding the organizations that seek that change:

- **Empowering students to resist military recruitment on their school campuses**
 - Coalition Against Militarism in Our Schools, South Pasadena (Spring 2007)
 - Military Out of Our Schools (MOOS) — Bay Area, San Francisco (Spring 2006)
 - Monterey Peace and Justice Center, Counter Recruitment Campaign, Monterey (Fall 2007)
- **Distributing progressive art and media to inspire and educate the public about the truth behind military violence.**
 - Art and Revolution, San Francisco (Spring 2002)
 - Dancers Without Borders, San Francisco (Spring 2003)
 - The Freedom Archives, San Francisco (Spring 2003)
 - War Times, San Francisco (Spring 2002)
 - Whispered Media, San Francisco (Fall 2003)

(Continued...)

• **Strengthening the organizing work of youth, women and people of color affected by militarism in their communities.**

- Asian Pacific Islander Coalition Against War, Oakland (Spring 2002)
- East Asia – U.S. – P.R. Women’s Network Against Militarism, San Francisco (Spring 2002)
- Guerrero Azteca Peace Project, Escondido (Fall 2005)
- Next Generation, San Anselmo (Spring 2006)

In appeal letters, it’s okay to start a sentence with “And” or “But” because they are devices that make the letter flow, as if it were a conversation.

And right now, as you are reading this, the Agape Foundation’s Board of Trustees is reviewing Fall ‘07 grant proposals, one-third of which are specifically focused on anti-war work. Your continued support could help us to fund: a book about nuclear arms and foreign policy, a film about Iraqi soldiers who have died in the war, and grassroots anti-war organizing in Nevada County.

After stating your organization’s accomplishments, follow with what you are doing right now that needs your donor’s continued support.

But wait, there’s more!

Just recently, on September 20th, the eve of the UN-declared International Day of Peace at our 3rd annual Agape Foundation Peace Prize Ceremony, we awarded the **Rising Peacemaker Prize** to Pablo Paredes, a former Navy soldier who in 2004 was court-martialed and sent to jail for refusing to go to Iraq. Since his release, Pablo has worked tirelessly to end the war, to defend the rights of GIs, and to educate thousands of young people about the myths and realities of military recruitment before they enlist. **Paredes received a standing ovation in a room of more than 200 people who supported his belief that the war in Iraq is illegal and unjust.** And thanks to donors like you, he also received a check for \$1,000 to further his work for peace.

Mal Warwick would call this a “transition sentence” that recaptures attention as it transitions to another topic.

If you were there, I’m sure you’d agree that it was an inspirational and moving event that motivated us all to not only stand by our beliefs, but to act on them as well, **no matter how difficult it may be.**

End the letter with a message of hope and a reason to give.

Let’s end the war now. Please send a generous donation to the Agape Foundation now so that we can continue to recognize and support the people who are paving the path towards peace and liberation for all.

The “ask” should be as direct as possible. It is often put in bold font or underlined. It is not necessarily the last sentence of the letter.

Sincerely,
Karen Topakian
Executive Director

P.S. Hot off the press! Take a look at our enclosed annual report to read more about the 90+ nonviolent, social change organizations that the Foundation supported in 2006. A 43% increase from 2005! And take a look at the numbers from our audited financial statement!

Research shows that people will always read the P.S. You can use it to announce any last-minute news, remind people to send their gift right away, or emphasize how much their donation matters.