



Can This Letter Be Saved?

Strengthening a Fundraising Appeal

By Karen Topakian

WRITING SUCCESSFUL FUNDRAISING LETTERS requires keeping two different perspectives in mind: the organization's and the donor-reader's. The writer needs to know enough about the organization's mission, values, and activities to present them persuasively on the page. The reader needs to be interested enough in the letter to give it their time and to follow through with another donation.

It is from both of these perspectives—as a professional fundraiser and donor—that I offer suggestions and comments on the fundraising letter by generationFIVE presented here.

I assume that your appeal letter-writer is sufficiently steeped in the organization to present it accurately, so I offer a few points here about how fundraising letters are read that will help guide that presentation.

First, keep in mind that people have short attention spans when reading a fundraising letter. They do not sit down to absorb its contents; more likely, they glance at it while standing next to their recycle bin. Second, although it may disappoint you to hear this, they don't treat your words as great literature. Not only that, they don't even read every word of the letter.

Instead, according to our fundraising guru, Kim Klein, your donors will read your letter in sections, starting with the greeting and the first paragraph, then jumping to the last paragraph and the P.S. If your reader is sufficiently intrigued, they may go back and check out other parts of the letter.

Readers also respond to visual cues on the page, scanning the letter for anything presented in bold type, highlighted, or underlined. They also appreciate short sentences that are quickly understood. They can easily become overwhelmed by a letter that is too long or that contains complex sentences with multiple clauses; ultimately, that is a letter they will discard.

Another point to keep in mind is your audience. A mediocre letter sent to a list of loyal supporters will always garner a higher response rate than a perfect letter sent to a list of people who do not support your cause or share your organization's vision.

Always write the best letter that you can, but make sure you're sending it to the right people.

generationFIVE is an organization that addresses child sexual abuse. Their letter—sent to generationFIVE's current donors asking for them to renew their support—represents many positive attributes as well as common mistakes.

What Works

1. **Personalizing.** Because an individual will be reading your fundraising letter, personalize it as much as possible to let the reader know that s/he matters to the organization. generationFIVE personalized their fundraising letter in two ways: by placing the donor's name and address on the page and by including a personalized salutation, "Dear Priscilla." Each personalization reinforces the organization's connection to the donor.
2. **Thanking.** When writing to previous donors, it's easy to forget to thank them for their prior gifts because you are looking forward to their next donation. But the donor may see things differently. Receiving your letter may remind them of their past gift—why they gave, when they gave, and what they may have heard from you since. generationFIVE keeps this important principle in mind in the first line of the first paragraph, which starts with two beautiful words that can never be said enough to anyone who gives your organization a gift: "Thank you."
3. **Using "you."** Perhaps the most important single word in a fundraising letter is *you* or its variant, *your*. generationFIVE gets a prize for incorporating the words *you* and *your* 10 times in the body of this 10-paragraph letter. Readers like to read about themselves as well as feel a part of the organization, and including the word *you* accomplishes both tasks. Donors aren't counting, but subconsciously they are looking for that connection.
4. **Bulleting.** Including bullet points gives the reader an



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Squeezing the letter onto one page makes readers work harder to read the letter—leading to a decrease in response rates.

Dear Priscilla,

Thank you for your support of generationFIVE! Your contributions helped generationFIVE take the next bold steps toward responding to and preventing childhood sexual abuse in transformative ways. As you know, we rely on people who are willing and able to take on this complex social issue, people like you, for our primary funding.

Please consider renewing your support of generationFIVE as we get on the ground and launch a model for implementing Transformative Justice through local networks in the Bay Area and Atlanta while supporting similar efforts in Chicago, Los Angeles & New York City. Transformative Justice Collaboratives bring together community based organizations and leaders from diverse networks to begin the hard work of ending the cycle of sexual violence against children while building healthy, empowered communities.

Transformative Justice is a liberatory approach to responding to and preventing child sexual abuse. It is a community-based model that supports survivor safety and healing, offender accountability and transformation, and wider community involvement in the ongoing prevention of violence. Transformative Justice links individual justice with collective liberation and personal and social transformation for long-term change.

Enclosed is an End-of-the-Year Report highlighting the accomplishments that contributions like yours made possible. Here is some of what you'll see:

- generationFIVE launched the **Transformative Justice Initiative, our largest and boldest project to date!** And organized a nine month study into action process bringing together 40 community, organization and movement leaders from 11 diverse networks. -
- generationFIVE conducted three 3-day training sessions building the capacity of over 75 leaders, organizers and activists to integrate a transformative justice framework into their work. We are now engaged in a training of trainers process with the Atlanta Transformative Justice Collaborative to build their capacity to use the 3-day training in their organizing.
- The **Men's TJ Collective** is building a national mutual accountability and support network of men committed to ending gender based violence including child sexual abuse. Beginning Winter 2009 they will launch a Study into Action process that will begin developing replicable models for support and accountability for men who have abused.
- generationFIVE provided a half day workshop in Los Angeles for those interested in building TJ work there and is following up early next year with a 3-day training.
- generationFIVE is collaborating with Mujeres Unidas y Activas (MUA), an immigrant women's organization in the Bay Area, to evolve TJ work for more relevant use in immigrant communities and community organizing more broadly.

We hope you will support us again this year. Together, we can continue moving toward ending child sexual abuse in five generations. Enjoy the enclosed year-end report and what you have made possible. Thank you for your partnership and support of our future work.

Warmly,

Sara Kershner
Director

Staci Haines
gen5 Board

Micah Frazier
Development Associate

p.s. One great way to support generationFIVE is to become a monthly donor – and if you become a monthly donor of \$25 or more, or make a one-time contribution of \$300 or more before December 31, 2008, we have a special thank-you gift. Please visit our website at www.generationFIVE.org and click the "GIVE!" button!

ENDING CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE WITHIN 5 GENERATIONS

Academic and jargony language is confusing—leading readers to feel less engaged in your message.

Having more than one signer makes the letter feel less personal, adding another barrier to your goal of making a connection with the reader.

indication of where the writer wants them to focus. In this case, generationFIVE focused on how past donations were spent—a very important feature if you want another gift. Bullet points also help to break up the text and provide some relief to the eye. Reading a fundraising letter should not require every ounce of the reader's concentration. Kudos to generationFIVE for including these breaks.

5. **Acknowledging.** Just as the first line of the letter started with a thank you, so did the last. Once again, generationFIVE is acknowledging the relationship with, and generosity of, the donor, which goes a long way toward increasing the chances of a future gift. In addition they added the word *partnership*, which lets the donor know that generationFIVE sees them not just as a source of funds but

as working with the organization toward success.

6. **Including a P.S.** When writing a formal business letter, you would generally not include a P.S. because it can look as though you left something out of the body of the letter. In a fundraising letter, however, a P.S. is essential because it adds an air of informality and excitement on the part of the writer. As in, "Wait, I forgot to tell you one more important piece of information." generationFIVE not only included a P.S. but added *you* twice in its three-line text.
7. **Including the URL.** Creating and updating a website borders on a requirement for nonprofits. Donors, colleagues, and interested parties will look to a group's website for information about the organization when they need it. But the work you do to launch and maintain your

website doesn't do any good if you don't remind your donors of the address. generationFIVE did so in the P.S. Another gold star.

Suggested Improvements

As good as the generationFIVE letter is, there is room for improvement.

- 1. Layout.** generationFIVE took the “less is more” approach to heart by fitting their letter onto one side of one piece of paper, an admirable move in the age of overconsumption and responsible resource usage. In order to make the letter fit, however, they had to use a smaller-than-normal type size and reduce the margins around the page. The P.S. squeezed onto the bottom of the page uses an even smaller font, rendering it almost unreadable. Decreasing the margins and the font size and not indenting the paragraphs all reduce the amount of white space on the page, contributing to a reader's sense of claustrophobia. Furthermore, donors over 40 may have to search for their reading glasses to actually read text this small. All of these factors make the reader work harder to read the letter—an instant barrier to their gift giving. A solution would have been to stretch out the layout and print the letter on both sides of the paper.
- 2. Excessive bullet points.** Although generationFIVE did a good job of including bullet points to help direct the reader to the most important information, the number of bulleted points here may dilute those objectives. The letter would have benefited from one or two fewer examples.
- 3. Capitalization.** generationFIVE did well to personalize the letter by including the recipient's address, but squeezing the entire letter on one side of the paper means the address sits awkwardly on the page, butted up against the group's logo, which muddies both. Moreover, the fact that the address is in capital letters directs the reader's attention to it, which is not where you want their attention to go.
- 4. Story-telling.** All fundraising letters must speak to the donor's heart as well as mind. The letter must tell a story of how the donor's gift will improve people's lives or well-being or rectify a bad situation. Because generationFIVE addresses issues of child sexual abuse, the donor might expect to see a personal perspective, a human voice or emotion included in the letter. This letter would have been much more effective if the message incorporated language or an example like the following that moves the donor emotionally.

When 13-year-old Tammy Jones acknowledged the five-year history of abuse she had received at the

hands of her 14-year-old male cousin, she knew it would tear the youth organization they both belonged to and her family apart. The organization, concerned for both young people, searched for an alternative response that would honor their commitment to health and well-being of young people. Thankfully, generationFIVE knew the answer. They worked to reduce Tammy's shame and boost her confidence, supported her mother, and advocated for the cousin to receive treatment and not incarceration. The youth organization developed protocols to move forward. Through thoughtful and skillful action, generationFIVE helps stop the cycle of abuse and develops loving families, organizations and communities.

- 5. Jargon.** Not only did this letter lack the human touch, the third paragraph, which describes the group's philosophical approach of Transformative Justice, includes academic and jargony language that may cause a reader to read no further and not to donate.

Here's the original paragraph:

Transformative Justice is a liberatory approach to responding to and preventing child sexual abuse. It is a community-based model that supports survivor safety and healing, offender accountability and transformation, and wider community involvement in the ongoing prevention of violence. Transformative Justice links individual justice with collective liberation and personal and social transformation for long-term change.

Here's how I'd rewrite it:

generationFIVE's Transformative Justice (TJ) model ushers in a new approach to responding to and preventing child sexual abuse. When replicated by organizations around the country, TJ produces exciting results.

We believe that child sexual abuse is not just about individual incidents of rape or molestation. It's about gender roles, gender training, and the imbalance of power relationships between adults and children. We believe in dealing with power and talking about the use of domination and force. We believe that the long-term solutions to child sexual abuse have to involve the wider community. Punishing the perpetrator has not led to less abuse or change on their part. That is why we look for resolutions that don't involve incarceration and an increase in policing of communities.

6. **Outcomes.** The text of the bullet points highlights examples of generationFIVE's activities but fails to describe how the completion of the tasks moved the organization closer to achieving its mission. Such "outcomes" reporting is more powerful than merely stating what has taken place.
7. **The ask.** Given that the main reason for writing a fundraising letter is to solicit another gift from the donor, the entire letter should be building to the "ask" moment. All of the facts about your work, your successes, your plans for solving the problem, and the emotional content should render the donor breathlessly ready to write a check. generationFIVE's request for a donation, "We hope you will support us again this year," could be much more persuasive. In addition, their request shouldn't equivocate their role in solving the problem. Simple editing can strengthen the "ask" on both fronts. For example, a re-write could state, "We know you believe that all families and communities deserve to live free from child sexual abuse. With your partnership, we can end this abuse in five generations. Because all of the other Tammy Jones families and friends

need generationFIVE's help, please make a generous tax-deductible investment today in our children's future."

8. **Signers.** And finally, the signature. Since fundraising letters are written from one person to another, having three authors doesn't allow the writer to use the word *I*. Unless the donor really needs to know that all three people played a role in writing this letter, stick to one—preferably the one whose inclusion will garner the most gifts. Others may add a handwritten note to show their connection to the letter.

Strengthening Your Letters

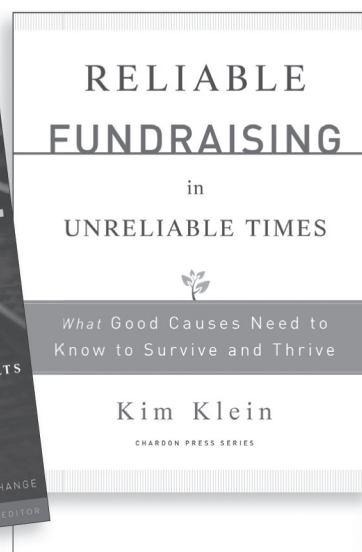
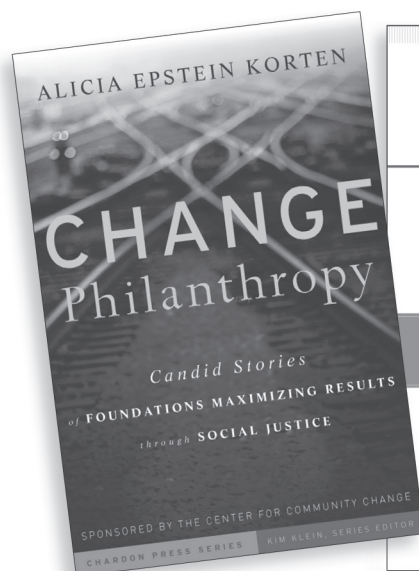
As you can see, writing a successful fundraising letter requires thought, strategy, creativity, and heart. Hitting all of the notes at the right moment takes practice and ruthless editing. If you pay attention to the principles and examples here, your letters will be stronger vehicles for future gifts. Just remember, be fearless, be honest, keep writing, and keep asking. ■

Karen Topakian was the Executive Director of the Agape Foundation—Fund for Nonviolent Social Change for 15 years.

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