



**37 copywriting power secrets  
to reach donors' hearts  
through your direct mail**

**From a real-world example  
that QUADRUPLED income**

**Discover the 22 donation boosters  
and 15 response killers!**

## Table of Contents

<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>You CAN produce revenue-raising direct mail!</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>15 response killers in the pack that failed</b> .....	<b>7</b>
<b>Offer</b> .....	<b>7</b>
Response Killer 1 – Burying the matching offer.....	8
Response Killer 2 – The ask is weak.....	8
Response Killer 3 – Using program language in the offer.....	9
Response Killer 4 – Using multiple causes in your offer.....	10
Response Killer 5 – No urgency.....	11
<b>Copywriting</b> .....	<b>11</b>
Response Killer 6 – No headline.....	11
Response Killer 7 – “We” do not write letters.....	12
Response Killer 8 – Poor use of story.....	13
Response Killer 9 – Using language that makes the donor feel guilty.....	15
Response Killer 10 – Sentences are too long.....	16
Response Killer 11 – Does not show why the donor should give.....	17
Response Killer 12 – Poor use of the PS.....	18
Response Killer 13 – Coupon is confusing.....	18
<b>Design</b> .....	<b>20</b>
Response Killer 14 – Poor use of photographs.....	20
Response Killer 15 – Poor use of graphic elements.....	20
<b>The 22 donation boosters that inspired 4 times the cash</b> .....	<b>21</b>
<b>Offer</b> .....	<b>21</b>
Donation Booster 1 – The headline clearly defines the match.....	22
Donation Booster 2 – The headline clearly defines the cause component.....	22
Donation Booster 3 – The headline is very specific.....	23
Donation Booster 4 – Use of a specific deadline.....	24
Donation Booster 5 – The headline shows the need.....	24
Donation Booster 6 – The headline shows the true benefit of the donor’s gift.....	24
Donation Booster 7 – This headline/ Johnson box is not clever.....	25



<b>Copywriting</b> .....	<b>27</b>
Donation Booster 8 – The copy highlights the true benefits of the donor’s gift.....	27
Donation Booster 9 – The letter copy focuses on one specific story.....	28
Donation Booster 10 – The copy avoids internal jargon and program language.....	30
Donation Booster 11 – Thanking the donor for past support.....	32
Donation Booster 12 – The copy is all about “you” the donor.....	32
Donation Booster 13 – Using repeated asks.....	35
Donation Booster 14 – Clear instructions on how to give.....	36
Donation Booster 15 – Using short sentences and paragraphs.....	37
Donation Booster 16 – Writing informally.....	38
Donation Booster 17 – Use of the PS.....	39
Donation Booster 18 – A donor-focused brochure that supports the letter.....	40
Donation Booster 19 – Coupon reinforces the offer.....	42
<b>Design</b> .....	<b>44</b>
Donation Booster 20 – Using the right photos and captions.....	44
Donation Booster 21 – The offer is supported visually with appeal graphics.....	45
Donation Booster 22 – Design highlights the offer and ask.....	46
<b>Where to next?</b> .....	<b>46</b>
<b>Need more help?</b> .....	<b>47</b>
<b>A bit about June</b> .....	<b>47</b>
<b>What other fundraisers like you are saying...</b> .....	<b>47</b>



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- The field staff in Uganda who had to actually fulfil my requests for extra information and photographs.
- The marketing staff and volunteers who worked so hard to make this appeal a success.

It was great to work with an international aid and development organisation so committed to helping people out of poverty.



## You CAN produce revenue-raising direct mail!

If you're a fundraiser struggling to write appeal letters that bring in the cash...

Or you know your letters could do so much better but you can't quite articulate what's wrong with the existing ones...

Or you want to start mailing your existing donors more regularly but don't know how to go about writing a cracking letter...

Or you come from a marketing/ comms background and you're trying to get your head around this direct mail fundraising beast...

Then don't worry, you're not alone.

In fact, I've been there too. I've written copy for previous jobs in journalism, PR, communications and marketing for 15 years before I fell into fundraising.

And then discovered that **direct mail writing was completely different.**

And that **fundraising** direct mail writing was different again.

However, it IS possible to learn the principles. I learned by studying fundraising books and direct mail from different charities. I signed up for a very good (and very expensive) direct mail writing course. And I read lots of David Ogilvy, John Caples, Clayton Makepeace, Bob Bly and Dan Kennedy.

And in this ebook, I've outlined 22 donation boosters taken from a real-life fundraising letter... that QUADRUPLED appeal income for one of my clients. I've also included 15 response killers from the appeal that failed.

Many of the "tricks of the trade" highlighted in this ebook, I gleaned or adapted from my own study of the craft.

*You're learning from the mistakes of others – cut out trial and error!*

The client was International Needs Australia, a small overseas aid and development agency.

It sends several direct mail appeals each year to its small donor base. Traditionally, in-house staff wrote and designed these appeals.

One year, International Needs sent a matching gift appeal to about 2000 donors. In this case, the Australian Government would match every dollar a donor gave by \$5. In Australia, this kind of matching appeal is very popular in overseas aid non-profits.



Surprisingly, the appeal performed very poorly given the generous matching opportunity. International Needs projected income of \$40,000. It received about \$13,000. Below, I'll outline why in the list of **15 Response Killers in the Pack that Failed**.

So what did they do next? To make up the shortfall, the charity ran another matching gift appeal 6 months later to make up the shortfall. This time, I was engaged me to write the copy. International Needs had employed a new in-house designer who designed the pack.

The result was \$55,000 in income. Again, I'll outline exactly what we did differently that contributed to this result. It's in the list of **22 Donation Boosters that Inspired 4 Times the Cash**.

I deliberately say "we" because the appeal was a collaborative effort.

International Needs was very open to suggestions and responsive in providing extra data, information and stories. They also made changes to their processes to get this great result. Without such cooperation, this outcome would not be possible.

Also, without their cooperation, this ebook would not be possible. It requires honesty to learn from your own mistakes. But it requires courage to allow others to learn from your mistakes too. That's what this ebook is all about. Learning.

One final note. Some people may say such a big increase in income is only possible because the income base was small.

That it's easier to double \$10,000 to \$20,000 or \$100,000 to \$200,000 than it is to double \$1 million to \$2 million or \$10 million or \$20 million.

That's certainly true to some extent.

However, I see many of the response killers outlined below in the direct mail packs of non-profits and charities of all sizes, large and small.

While you may not quadruple your income, I can almost certainly guarantee you will improve it if you apply the ideas and techniques in this case study.

Note it's probably best to have the samples from both the failed and successful packs handy for easy reference while you're going through this case study.

So let's get to it!



## 15 response killers in the pack that failed

Take a look at the copy and design for the low-performing pack. See what you think.

Before I talk about what's wrong with this pack, I'd like to highlight the things it got right.

- The offer incorporates Ethiopia, a country synonymous with poverty and great need. This is attractive to donors.
- The letter was personalised with the donor's name and address.
- The letter attempted to use a story.
- The copy attempted to outline the matching gift offer.
- It is signed by the CEO not a generic "the team at International Needs Australia".
- There is a PS designed into the letter.
- The coupon attempts to reiterate the offer with the "Yes, I want to help multiply critical funds to support the people in Ethiopia!"

Next, I've divided up the response killers into three categories: offer, copywriting and design.

### Offer

Any appeal that uses a matching gift offer comprises two components.

One is the **match** itself, that is, every dollar you give will be matched by another dollar or \$2 or \$5.

The other is the **cause or program** itself. For example, feeding the hungry or helping poor children go to school.

Typically, a matching gift offer is framed as a **dollar match** or **multiplier**:

#### DOLLAR MATCH

Every \$1 you give to feed a child in poverty will be matched by another \$5.

#### MULTIPLIER

Your gift multiplies 6 times to feed a child in poverty.



(A note on matching or multiply gift appeals. In recent years, the Australian Government has restricted the language that can be used for matching gift offers. You may not be able to use exactly the type of language outlined in this ebook. But the principles still apply – you'll just have to comply with the restrictions in execution.)

## **Response Killer 1 - Burying the matching offer**

The matching gift component of the offer is buried in the sixth paragraph of the letter.

...for every \$1000 our supporters donate, they will multiply it by five, making a total of \$6000...

When glancing at the page, you can't immediately tell this is a special opportunity to get 6 times the value out of your donation. It is not trumpeted in a headline nor is it incorporated into the letter's design.

*Lesson: State the offer clearly upfront at the top of the letter.*

## **Response Killer 2 - The ask is weak**

Let's consider the ask in the offer:

... for every \$1000 our supporters donate, they will multiply it by five, making a total of \$6000 going towards our programmes.

This ask has several problems.

First, this copy confuses the concept of a dollar match with a multiplier. \$1000 multiplied by 5 is \$5000, not \$6000.

Either you match every \$1000 with \$5000, making a total of \$6000. Or you multiply every \$1000 by 6, making a total of \$6000. Just pick one concept and stick with it throughout the letter.

Next, the phrase "our supporters" sounds like you're talking about everyone else except the donor. Do you want \$1000 from this particular donor? Or do you want donations from several supporters that would make up \$1000? A minor tweak would fix this.

for every \$1000 **that you** donate, they will multiply it by six, making a total of \$6000 going towards our programmes





But this text is clumsy with too much focus on the organisation. (See Response Killer 7 for why you should avoid phrases like "our programmes".

Instead, try something like:

Please, will you give \$1000? When you donate this amount, your gift multiplies six times! Your generosity means \$6000 will go towards helping the poor in Ethiopia.

Here you've got a very clear ask and put more focus on the donor with the text "When you donate", "your gift multiplies", "Your generosity".

A word on how much to ask for. You must ask the donor specifically how much you want them to give, preferably based on their donation history. Ideally, if you can segment your database, you ask for a gift that's in line with their previous donations. If you can't personalise in this way, you'll have to pick a figure that is representative of the average gift of all your donors.

*Lesson: Ask the donor directly for a specific dollar figure.*

### **Response Killer 3 - Using program language in the offer**

The cause component of the offer is unclear. In the lead paragraphs, the offer is framed as:

International Needs is bringing holistic development programmes to Ethiopia.

What does this mean to the average donor? Unless you have a background in international development, this makes no sense and gives donors very little idea of what they are being asked to support.

Instead try these:

bringing dignity to poor women

OR

bringing education to the next generation of children

Those are still too generic for my liking and would need further work. But the donor can at least draw the conclusion that your appeal is about helping women in poverty or getting poor children into schools. That's not communicated through the phrase "holistic development". (See Donation Booster 10)



*Lesson: Translate program language into common, every day words your reader can understand.*

### Response Killer 4 - Using multiple causes in your offer

If you haven't lost the donors who can't make sense out of "holistic development programmes", then they keep reading to find out more.

But the following paragraph refers to multiple initiatives to combat poverty. As the donor skims this section, this is what's happening:

Letter talks about	Donor thinks
Ethiopians who can't read and write.	Oh, it's about literacy!
Children who are malnourished.	Oh, hang on... it's about stopping hunger.
A woman walking miles for water.	Are we building wells?
She goes through a terrible labour and childbirth.	Maternal health perhaps?

That's four different types of projects, all of which can stand alone as a single appeal. In fact, many overseas aid agencies do build single appeals around literacy, stopping hunger, water projects and maternal health. No wonder the donor is confused!

Or the donor may conclude all of these are included under "holistic development programmes". But then the paragraph after mentions child sponsorship!

Huh?

Sponsoring a child is a very well-known type of program upon which not just single appeals but entire agencies have been built. Yet it's thrown into the mix of an already unclear offer.

Then the paragraph outlining the matching component says donations can be used either for programs in Ethiopia or for child sponsorship. Now you're muddying the waters around the match as well!



Exactly what do you want the donor to do? Give a one-off gift to programs to be matched? Or sponsor a child? But does that mean sponsoring a child with a one-off gift to be matched? Or will recurring gifts to a sponsored child also be matched? And if so, for how long?

*Lesson: Develop ONE very clear offer to ask your donors to give to. This may mean selecting one aspect of your programs that is compelling to donors. Ask them to support maternal health OR stopping hunger OR teaching children to read and write OR water projects. Believe me, you will raise more money this way.*

### **Response Killer 5 - No urgency**

The letter does not specify a deadline for gifts. It says they need funds by June 2013. But the letter was sent in August 2012. That's 10 months away! That's not urgent enough for any donor to act.

The "end of financial year" and "in time for Christmas" are two well-used and natural deadlines in non-profit appeals.

If you can't use these, you will have to come up with some other kind of deadline. Like please give "before the monsoon season". Or an implied urgency like, "Please donate your \$100 by 3 September. We'll rush your gift off before another 1011 mothers die in Ethiopia this year".

*Lesson: Give donors a specific deadline for giving.*

## **Copywriting**

Copywriting was touched upon under Offers but this section deals solely with language and copywriting techniques.

### **Response Killer 6 - No headline**

Done correctly, the headline is one of the most read parts of a direct mail letter. Yet this letter does not have one.

I'd argue you could lift income and response to this letter simply by putting a good headline on top. Something that highlights a benefit or makes a promise to the donor:



Multiply your gift 6 times and stop hunger in Ethiopia!

Your gift stops children from dying... and multiplies 6 times!

Turn your \$50 gift into \$300 and give 1000 people clean water!

You will notice these examples are not especially creative. They don't have to be although it's nice if you can combine creativity and clarity. There are other types of headlines you could use and test although I don't have the space here to discuss them all. The important thing is that the headline communicates clearly and shows the donor what their gift does.

Some people may argue using no headline makes the letter feel more personal. After all, you wouldn't write a letter to your grandma with a big headline on top. That's something you would have to test.

But in this case, the letter was sent in an envelope with an International Needs logo on the front. Donors are not silly. They know an envelope with your logo on it probably contains an appeal. So you may as well use a headline to get their attention up front, tell them what you want and show them a clear benefit.

*Lesson: Use a headline that clearly communicates a benefit to the donor.*

## **Response Killer 7 - "We" do not write letters**

If you want donors to feel more connected to your mission then make your letter more personal by using "I" instead of "we".

The letter opens with:

We invite you to come on a new journey with us?

Who is "we"? Every single staff member in the organisation? The CEO and his personal assistant?

Using "we" and "us" makes the letter feel like it's from a big, faceless corporation rather than a friend talking to another friend. Try this instead:

I invite you to come on a new journey with me.

Using "I" and "me" makes the letter more intimate. It also shows the writer stands by his statements. This builds trust.



One sentence in the letter says:

In order to enhance child education, health and nutrition, we will provide child sponsorship, safe water supply and environmental sanitation...

I suggest a rewrite to something like:

I am passionate about giving children an education and better health and nutrition.

So I, with the help of my field partners, hope to find more child sponsors, supply safe water and improve health and hygiene...

It's not perfect but using the "I" makes it sound like there's a person in the building who actually knows what is going on, knows the staff personally and has seen the work firsthand. It doesn't sound like an organisational spin machine churning out a press release.

*Lesson: Use "I" instead of "we" in your direct mail communications.*

## **Response Killer 8 - Poor use of story**

One purpose of using a story in direct mail fundraising is to show the donor how their gift makes an impact in the life of one person. The donor's gift may ultimately help more than one person. It may even help hundreds or thousands of people. But it's hard for donors to relate to thousands of people.

That's why you use a story to give a name and face to the type of beneficiary your organisation serves.

The story helps donors to empathise with the beneficiary.

Even better, great storytelling can help donors see themselves in the shoes of the beneficiary, feeling their pain, wanting to do something to help.

Although this letter does include a story of sorts about an 18-year-old Ethiopian woman, the details have been poorly executed. It tells rather than shows. Also, it uses several clichés and jargon.

So how could we improve it?

First of all, find a story of a real young woman. Use her name. Or an alias, if she can't be identified. Find out as many details about her as possible. Her background, her parents, the type of house she lives in, how far she walks to get water, how far away is the nearest doctor. Find out the name of her boy.



Is she married? Is the father around or gone? I know it's often hard to get these kinds of details but push for them. They make a big difference.

Now let's look at how you can improve the language and paint a more emotive picture for the donor. Here's the original passage in full.

Picture a young Ethiopian woman of 18. In a land of extremes, she is pregnant, living in extreme poverty, walking miles for water and has unhygienic living conditions. Only just surviving a horrific labour her baby boy is born, but because his mother didn't have access to maternal healthcare, he is already severely malnourished. Now his life is at risk.

This is how it could be rewritten, depending on the details you can acquire.

Picture a young Ethiopian girl of 18. Her name is Mia. She and her husband, George, live in a squalid one-room house they share with their pigs. Mia's pregnant. Heavily pregnant. But that doesn't stop her from trekking three hours a day to the closest stream for water. When she went into labour, there was no doctor. No midwife. The closest hospital was five hours' walk away. Her husband was helpless as Mia screamed in pain for hours. At last, it was over. Her baby boy, Peter, was born. But he was so little, so weak. And weak herself, Mia could not give him enough milk. Now six months old, he's severely malnourished. He might die.

What has changed?

First, at age 18, I'd argue the "young Ethiopian woman" could be called a girl. "Girl" sounds more innocent than "woman".

I used her name, her husband's name and her baby's name. She's placed in a family context the donor can understand.

Consider the phrase "In a land of extremes..." What does that mean? Either define how it is extreme or cut it. I cut it.

The "trekking three hours a day" for water and "squalid one-room house they shared with their pigs" shows rather than tells how they were "living in extreme poverty" and in "unhygienic living conditions".

And I cut "didn't have access to maternal healthcare". The latter sounds very dry and bureaucratic. Instead, "When she went into labour, there was no doctor. No midwife. The closest hospital was five hours' walk away. Her husband was helpless as she screamed in pain for hours." Note how I showed "horrific labour" rather than telling it.





Can you see how this rewrite forges a stronger emotional connection with the donor than the original? The details help the reader form a picture in her mind of what life is really like for this girl. And most female readers would appreciate the terror of being without medical help during a long, traumatic birth. This is not well depicted by the phrase "without access to maternal healthcare".

*Lesson: Find a story of a real beneficiary, use specific details and paint a picture that evokes an emotional response.*

## Response Killer 9 - Using language that makes the donor feel guilty

Did you see the sentence tacked onto the end of the attempted story?

Picture a young Ethiopian woman of 18. In a land of extremes, she is pregnant, living in extreme poverty, walking miles for water and has unhygienic living conditions. Only just surviving a horrific labour her baby boy is born, but because his mother didn't have access to maternal healthcare, he is already severely malnourished. Now his life is at risk.

**Would you try to help them or pretend they don't exist?**

Although the writer probably did not intend this, the phrase "pretend they don't exist" could be construed as indirectly blaming the donor for the problem.

I don't believe any donor would deliberately pretend suffering doesn't exist. But donors do get caught up in the busyness of their lives. That's just reality. And they don't want to feel guilty about this. What they do want is to be shown how easy it is for them to help fix the problem.

So try one of the following:

It's easy to provide a birth attendant to a remote village. I just need your gift today.

Your \$100 gift helps prevent other mums and babies from dying.

Making a donor feel guilty can prompt a gift. But it's terrible for donor retention and relationship building. The donor will resent you for extracting a gift from them.

It's much better to get a donor excited about your work. Show them how their gift will save lives or otherwise bring about positive change.



*Lesson: Inspire the donor to help your cause. Make them feel excited – not guilty – about giving to you.*

## **Response Killer 10 - Sentences are too long**

Microsoft Word has the Flesch Kincaid readability statistics built into its Spelling and Grammar check.

I won't go into details here about how these statistics are calculated. You can do a Google search if you want to know more about the Flesch Kincaid scores and what they mean.

The body of this letter, excluding the salutation and signature, turned up the following scores. Beside each score, I've indicated the score to aim for. This is a guide not an absolute.

But I can guarantee your appeal letters will be better read, understood and responded to if you follow these guidelines.

**The letter has 18.2 words per sentence.** For direct mail, aim for an average of 10 words or less per sentence.

**The letter has a Flesch Reading Ease score of 51.3.** For direct mail, aim for a score of 70 or higher.

**The letter has a Flesch Kincaid Grade Level score of 10.6.** Most magazine and newspaper writing falls between grade levels 8.0 and 12.0. Academic and scientific text is generally in the 10.0 to 14.0 range. For direct mail, aim for a score less than 8.

The shorter the sentences, the easier it is to read. Period. It doesn't matter if the audience is educated. They will read through academic language and technical manuals if it's their job. For something voluntary like donating to your cause, you better make it as easy as possible for the donor to grasp.

Not convinced? Let's take a look at the stats for the story paragraphs about the young Ethiopian girl I rewrote under Response Killer 8. (And no, I did not rewrite my rewrite to make my scores better!)





	Direct mail guideline	Original story	Rewritten text
Words per sentence	10 on average	15	7.2
Flesch Reading Ease	70 or higher	50.6	85.7
Flesch Kincaid Grade Score	8 or lower	9.9	3.1

*Lesson: Shorter sentences increase your copy's readability and the likelihood of a gift.*

### **Response Killer 11 - Does not show why the donor should give**

The copy tells you International Needs will provide child sponsorship, safe water supply, environmental sanitation and community income building packages.

But it does not show why the donor should support International Needs above other non-profits doing the same kind of work. The letter is severely lacking in proof that actually shows the donor this organisation can actually get results.

It needs a testimonial about how sponsorship changed a child's life. Or how building a well meant a family no longer kept getting sick from drinking dirty water.

And it's not enough to say "We helped 500 mothers give birth safely last year". You need to give that fact a face, a name and show how that happened. (See Donation Booster 9)

If you like, you can then bolster your claim by adding any relevant information that may make your charity or project more worthy of support than others. For example, if you're reaching a group of people that nobody else works with.

*Lesson: Provide proof to the donor that your charity is worthy of support.*



## Response Killer 12 - Poor use of the PS

It's great the letter uses a PS, since many donors read them.

But it's crammed into a space where the donor is lucky to see it. The whole point of using a PS is to catch the donor's eyes when they check the signature to find out who the letter is from.

In this case, the PS is slipped into a spot above some images and the coupon. These elements distract from the PS and drown out its effectiveness as an attention-getting device.

The language of the PS is on the right track since it includes an ask and a benefit. But including a specific dollar figure would make it stronger.

Also, a more specific benefit than "start changing lives" would be better since every development agency uses the same line. But using a more specific benefit means you need to have one very clear offer. (See Response Killer 4)

*Lesson: Place your PS where the donor expects to see one, right under the signature of the signer. And include a specific ask and benefit.*

## Response Killer 13 - Coupon is confusing

Sometimes donors look at your coupon first to figure out what the appeal is about.

But this coupon doesn't help the donor much. It offers no less than four sponsorship options and three program choices! And some of them don't match up with the language used in the letter.

Along with child sponsorship is women's sponsorship, community sponsorship and holistic sponsorship. The last three never even got a mention in the letter. How is the donor supposed to know what those kinds of sponsorships entail?

Then donors are given options to support health, income or awareness programs. But the donor doesn't really know what that really means. If they made it through the letter, a health program could relate to malnutrition, sanitation or maternal health... but your donor isn't sure which one or whether to assume it's all three.

The program options also don't use suggested gift amounts, preferably based on the donor's giving history.



Then consider the statement at the top of the coupon:

Yes, I want to help multiply critical funds to support the people in Ethiopia!

The generic wording "support the people in Ethiopia" gives little clue as to how funds will be used. And although it uses the word "multiply", ideally it should tell the donor by how much.

Finally, the coupon is very cramped with some kind of shaded background that makes the text hard to read. And it's not pre-populated with the donor's details so they need to fill in that information again. (See Donation Booster 19)

*Lesson: Keep coupon options to four or five at the most, use suggested gift amounts and ensure your coupon's Yes statement tells the donor how their gift will be used.*



## Design

### Response Killer 14 - Poor use of photographs

The photographs used are too small. Faces are unclear. Several show large groups of people – it's usually best to stick to four or five people at the most.

Even more problematic is the photographs don't seem to convey or support any specific message. (See Donation Booster 20)

In this case, it probably would have been better to use no photographs. Or just one at a larger size. Given how crowded the space is, removing the images would have given the copy more room to breathe.

*Lesson: Don't use photographs for the sake of it. Ensure they are clear and support a specific message.*

### Response Killer 15 - Poor use of graphic elements

The road signs and the tree?

After reading the letter, I assume the road signs are meant to tie into the "road to development" idea mentioned at the end. I'm not sure about the tree, unless it's supposed to represent the growth of Ethiopia as a nation.

The point is, neither idea is properly developed in the letter. Like the photos, the letter is probably better off without them unless they can be strongly linked to the offer and ask. (See Donation Booster 21)

*Lesson: Integrate graphic elements with your appeal offer and ask.*



## The 22 donation boosters that inspired 4 times the cash

Now it's time to look at the pack that quadrupled income.

Before beginning, a caveat. I'm not saying this is a perfect piece of direct mail. Upon looking over the pack, I can see several things I'd change or tweak. It's rare to get things exactly right... but it's possible to make them "good enough" to improve your results.

You can apply many of the Donation Boosters to your direct mail copy. But this is not meant to be a comprehensive how-to on how to write your direct mail.

This ebook is designed to show the thinking process behind the development of the pack. And how certain improvements can lift income and response.

Seasoned fundraisers will recognise the basic direct mail principles that always work. But no doubt, some of you will look at this and identify things you'd do differently. Also, some of the principles may need to be adapted depending on your organisation and the specific cause.

Direct mail is a process of continuous learning and testing. So I will also highlight areas that could have been improved in hindsight.

You may disagree with my techniques and methods. That's fine. My answer to that is to test. If you get better results that way, that's great.

Again, I divided up the Donation Boosters into the categories of offer, copywriting and design. You'll notice that most of the points under Offers relate to the headline. That's because most of the successful elements in the offer are captured in the headline although the offer and ask are repeated throughout the pack.

### Offer

I wrote earlier that an appeal using a matching gift offer comprises two components. It's worthwhile to remind ourselves of these again.

One component is the **match** itself, that is, every dollar you give will be matched by another dollar or \$2 or \$5.

The other is the **cause** or **program** itself. For example, feeding the hungry or helping poor children go to school.



## **Donation Booster 1 - The headline clearly defines the match**

The copy clearly highlights the matching component of the offer. That is, the donor's gift will be multiplied 6 times.

Also, the copy does not stop there. It actually references a specific ask amount and shows exactly how much extra value the match generates.

Make your gift go further... Turn \$75 into \$450

This has the effect of:

- Giving a concrete value to the matching gift in the donor's mind.
- Doing the calculation work so the donor isn't left hanging thinking, "Uh, so if I give \$45, that will be... um..."
- Getting the donor thinking about higher gift amounts or the amount you want them to give.

*Lesson: Clearly define the matching offer and set the expectation with a specific ask amount.*

## **Donation Booster 2 - The headline clearly defines the cause component**

The project in question involves income generation through revolving loans and training for poor farmers in Uganda. Although the words "revolving loans" are not used here, donors can clearly see exactly what their matched gift will achieve:

6 times the piglets, cows, chickens, oxen and goats for income generation

6 times the seeds, farm tools and training for farmers

This also reinforces the 6 times multiplied theme of this matching appeal and leads into the true benefit of the donor's gift. (See Donation Booster 8)

*Lesson: Clearly define how your donor's gift will help the cause.*



### Donation Booster 3 - The headline is very specific

Instead of defining the offer in the headline as:

Your gift provides:

6 times the piglets, cows, chickens, oxen and goats for income generation

6 times the seeds, farm tools and training for farmers

I could have written something more general like:

Your 6 times multiplied gift will give hungry people an income for life.

There may well be other places where you could use the shorter "income for life" line, eg. in an email or online or other places where copy needs to be shorter. For this letter, I preferred being as specific as possible for the following reasons.

**A government-funded matching gift is a common offer.** In Australia, this type of matching gift is very popular amongst overseas development agencies. So I wanted the matching gift offer to stand out upfront with a very specific picture of what the donor's gift will do.

**It paints a clear picture for the donor.** Donors can see exactly how their gift will be used – on livestock and farming equipment. You don't get this picture with "income for life".

**Donors love animals.** Animals especially are appealing to donors – as proven by numerous fundraising Christmas catalogues featuring goats, chickens, pigs and cows.

**Phrases such as "income for life" are almost like clichés.** Although frequently used by development agencies (and life insurance companies), I feel they make copy predictable and therefore less likely to be read. Note I'm not suggesting you should never use "income for life". I'm just making the point I wanted something here that would cut through the noise.

*Lesson: When using common offers, specific details can make it stand out in the donor's mind.*



### Donation Booster 4 - Use of a specific deadline

There's nothing like a deadline to get donors giving. In this case, the March 29 deadline creates urgency and gives the donor something concrete to work towards.

In fact, around and after the deadline, International Needs had donors contacting them and asking whether it was too late to give and get their gift matched. This shows that donors DO pay attention to your offer and instructions.

Possible improvement: I could have provided some kind of "reason" why the gift was needed by March 29. This is one of those cases where I could not use "by June 30" or "in time for Christmas". But I could have worked in some copy around "helping more farmers faster if you give by March 29".

*Lesson: If you want donors to act, give them a deadline for doing so.*

### Donation Booster 5 - The headline shows the need

The headline highlights a poignant fact about the intended beneficiaries.

All for people in Uganda now struggling to scrape together one meal a day!

This tells the donor not just what gift is wanted but **why** it is needed. In this case, it's because the people are so poor they eat only one meal a day if they're lucky. This is about showing the need, not telling. I could have said:

All for the hungry people in Uganda!

But the former paints the picture in a much more compelling fashion.

*Lesson: Show, not tell, the donor the need for their gift.*

### Donation Booster 6 - The headline shows the true benefit of the donor's gift

The real value of the donor's gift is not in providing revolving loans to people in poverty.

It's not even in providing an income for people who otherwise can't make a living (although that's part of it).

It's actually in how that income will change lives.





Think about that for a moment. Why do you go to work? So you can buy food to eat, pay off your home, send your children to school and take them to the doctor when they're sick. You probably don't work just for the sake of it.

Consider the same things in fundraising. Are donors more likely to give so someone can have an income? Or because it means a poverty-stricken person in Africa can feed their children?

All for people in Uganda now struggling to scrape together one meal a day!

**PLEASE, YOU MUST ACT BY MARCH 29 TO STOP HUNGER.**

So what's the true benefit here? I've picked it as stopping hunger.

In fact, revolving loans offer several true benefits outlined in Donation Booster 8. But for the headline, I just picked the one I felt was most compelling, in this case, stopping hunger. This also fit in well with the story I used. Then I talked about the other true benefits in the rest of the copy.

*Lesson: The offer should incorporate the true benefit of the donor's gift.*

### **Donation Booster 7 - This headline/ Johnson box is not clever**

The headline does not use alliteration, double meanings, word play, jokes or literary gymnastics.

It is supposed to communicate clearly to the donor what gift is wanted and how it will be used. Here it is again.

**MAKE YOUR GIFT GO FURTHER... TURN \$75 INTO \$450**

Your gift provides:

6 times the chickens, cows, oxen, goats and piglets for income generation

6 times the seeds, farm tools and training for farmers.

All for people in Uganda now struggling to scrape together one meal a day!

**PLEASE, YOU MUST ACT BY MARCH 29 TO STOP HUNGER.**

Some writers will look at this headline and say it's too long, too wordy and too pushy. But the aim is not to be short and pithy. Nor do I want to tread softly, softly.



The aim is to get the donor to give.

The headline is one of the most read parts of a direct mail letter. Sometimes, the ONLY part. So if I get one shot at communicating the message, why would I be vague and not too pushy?

Is my headline clever and quirky? No. Will it win marketing awards? No.

But if donors read nothing else except the headline, will they know what this appeal is about? Yes.

*Lesson: Be clear not clever with your copy.*



## Copywriting

### Donation Booster 8 - The copy highlights the true benefits of the donor's gift

In Donation Booster 6, I talked about the true benefit in the headline.

Before reading on, have a look through the letter and brochure copy again. See how many true benefits you can identify for the beneficiaries of the donor's gift. Ask yourself, what is the donation really doing?

Here's a list of true benefits – what the gift really means to a poor Ugandan:

- Can give their children enough food to eat
- Can send their children to school
- Can see a doctor and buy medicines if sick
- Can buy decent clothing rather than dressing in rags.

Now what about some of the more intangible true benefits?

- Relieved of the constant worry of never having enough no matter how many hours you work
- Not having to watch your children starving
- Becoming self-sufficient, not relying on handouts to survive
- Having dreams for the future you can actually achieve
- Having the chance to give back to others.

You can probably think of more – even some not included in the copy.

These true benefits tap into the emotions that capture donors' hearts.

You can't do it by talking only about revolving loans or improved farming methods. (See Donation Booster 10)

*Lesson: Identify and write about true benefits in your copy.*



## Donation Booster 9 - The letter copy focuses on one specific story

For the letter in the pack, I deliberately selected Betty's story for the following reasons:

- She was a single mother trying to survive on her own. That's a situation that many donors can relate to.
- She was caring for two orphaned grandchildren. Poor children always tug at the heartstrings.
- It was not her fault that she was poor. Innocent victims garner more sympathy.
- She made a great success of her revolving loan with plans to expand her farming business. This shows donors how much their gift can achieve.
- Because of her success, her son and grandchildren will not have to live in poverty. This shows donors their gift impacts future generations.

After the headline, I opened the letter with Betty's story, painting a picture of what her life was like and the desperation she felt.

You get up in the morning to make the best you can out of your little farm. You may grow a little maize or keep a scraggly cow, perhaps a few chickens.

But there's never enough. Never enough to feed you, your family... or to sell. The reality is that there's only going to be one meal to eat today. It'll be a scanty one of maize and beans.

Then what about the children? You're so worried about getting enough food to eat that you can't even think about sending them to school. They can't go. You can't afford the fees. And you need them at home to help with the animals and the farm.

You pray they don't get sick because you can't afford a doctor. You can't ask for help because everyone else has the same problems as you.

You go to bed feeling hungry... and weary. Knowing you'll have to get up and do it all again the next day.

That's what life was like for Betty. Not just a single mum but also a grandmother responsible for her two orphaned grandchildren.

Later I provided details about how she was able to climb out of poverty with assistance from International Needs. How she raised the piglets, bought a cow and some chicks. How she can now feed her family and send the grandchildren to school.



Betty received two piglets through International Needs Australia.

Betty raised these piglets, which have now produced three litters with a total of 64 piglets. Most of them she sold, producing an income. Now she can pay for food. That's meals three times a day for her son Frank Musoke. And the two little grandchildren Muyungo Tonny and Luggo Owen. She can pay for utensils, clothing, medical care. What a load off her mind!

With income from her piggery project, Betty recently bought a local cow and 25 layer chicks. She hopes to sell milk from the cow and raise the poultry so she can sell eggs.

In fact, Betty has been doing so well that she can pay school fees and other costs for her son. That's USD \$275 a term – not possible when she was living on under \$3 a day. And her grandchildren also go to school – an opportunity she is thankful to be able to give them.

Then towards the end, I highlighted Betty's dreams for her family and how they can now come true.

Remember Betty from the start of this letter? Let's see what she wants from life now. Now that she no longer has to struggle and scrape for survival.

Now she has the power to dream... just like you. And like so many of us, her dreams for the future are for the children in her care.

Her piggery, the new cow, the chicks... she plans to further expand her livestock project. Now she's working in the hope to support Frank, Muyungo and Luggo through university. So they can have a better future. And not live hand to mouth wondering how to get their next meal.

Advantages of using a story in this way:

**You show both the need and solution in practice.** You can see how Betty is in desperate need. But you can also see how the revolving loan solution actually worked in her life. This individual story is more compelling than talking generally about a faceless and nameless group of beneficiaries.

**You use rich detail that forges an emotional connection.** Focusing on one case allows you to use details that make the story much more believable. In your mind's eye, you can picture Betty and her family still hungry after eating a bit of maize and beans. You can see her feeding piglets and carefully managing the money she brings in. You can see this lady worked hard with just a bit of help.



Donors can't help but feel sorry for her, inspired by her and then proud of her. They can understand her hopes for the future... and then see they can help others just like her with their gift.

Again, it's hard to achieve this effect if you write only about "families in need" or "poor communities" without a specific story.

**Donors like focus and small numbers.** Many charities use the very common "Millions of people are starving, please help" approach.

When you talk about millions, it's very hard for donors to feel like their gift can make a difference. It's much easier for them to grasp the impact of their gift on one family's life.

*Lesson: Use a specific story with as many details as possible to show the need, the solution and forge an emotional connection.*

### Donation Booster 10 - The copy avoids internal jargon and program language

The letter and brochure limits the use of terms such as revolving loan, microcredit and microloans. Instead of talking about the **what** of revolving loans, it shows the **how**. Specifically, how a revolving loan can help a person in poverty. (See Donation Booster 9)

If a program officer or an inexperienced copywriter had written this letter, it would very likely be full of jargon. Here are a few examples along with the translated version.

Jargon	Translation
Household income economic enhancement	Ability to earn a living
Increased farm production	Raise more and better crops
Agricultural outputs	Raise more and better crops
Agricultural interventions	Training and equipment to raise more and better crops
Favourable climatic conditions that favour farming	Good weather for farming



As well as using bureaucratic language, the letter would probably talk about the **mechanics** of the income generation program.

That is, how many farmers will be involved, the community groups formed to support the farmers, the time period of the program, the names of the local partners and government bodies involved, etc, etc.

This type of information is **internally focused** in nature. It is interesting and very important to program officers who need to ensure the project is well-run and achieves its objectives.

**But it is not interesting to donors.** This information is not focused on the needs of donors. Donors just want to know how their gift makes a difference. They want to see and hear from the people they're helping. They need to connect emotionally with your cause.

And donors **connect with people, not with programs.** That's why you need stories about beneficiaries. (See Donation Booster 9)

Note that **donors may understand intellectually** how your project is efficient, effective and has the support of all major government and social groups in your target country. **But it doesn't touch their emotions and hearts.**

By the way, I'm not having a go at program people. They're doing a great job at what they were employed to do – developing and monitoring programs and services that make the world a better place. They may have worked very hard with the field people to get all the right people and processes in place to get the best value out of your donor's donation dollars.

And it may well be appropriate for them to use more formal language in their reports. They're just not supposed to be writing your fundraising letters!

*Lesson: Translate jargon and bureaucratic language. Use donor focused information – stories about people. Avoid internally focused information – project and program details.*





## Donation Booster 11 - Thanking the donor for past support

When your donors gave their previous gifts, presumably you sent them a thank you letter and receipt of some kind.

Donors love being thanked and there's plenty of testing that shows thanking improves donor retention and encourages further gifts. So it's always wise to again acknowledge previous support when you're asking for another gift.

I used three kinds of thank yous – the direct, the implied, and the “in advance”.

**Direct thank you.** This is straightforward. You thank them for past support and set them up for another gift. Here it is from the bottom of page 1.

But first, I want to thank you for your generous support of International Needs Australia in the past. You've previously shown interest in helping people like Betty, who live in the world's poorest countries. So I thought you may be interested in this opportunity to reach out and touch someone's life again.

**Implied thank you.** You talk about how “a generous donor like you” has helped in the past. Here's an example on the last page.

It was a generous donor like you who gave Betty the chance to even think about that dream. And who is giving her son and grandchildren the chance to achieve it.

**“In advance” thank you.** This is a courtesy where you thank the donor in anticipation of the gift.

Thank you on behalf of the people in Uganda – 6 times the number of them – who will be truly grateful for your generosity.

*Lesson: Thank and acknowledge the donor in as many ways as you can.*

## Donation Booster 12 - The copy is all about “you” the donor

The use of the word “you” is a proven income booster in both fundraising and commercial direct marketing.

Many fundraising copywriters will tell you there should be more references to “you” than “I” in a fundraising letter. And definitely not many uses of “we” although sometimes you can't avoid it.

Let's look at how this was done in this letter.





**Opening the letter.** I feel the use of the word "you" is so important that I make every effort to use it in the headline and the opening sentences of a letter.

Although the letter opens with Betty's story, I used the word "you" or its derivatives multiple times to put the donor in Betty's shoes. Here are a few examples.

**You** get up in the morning to make the best you can out of your little farm. You may grow a little maize or keep a scraggly cow, perhaps a few chickens.

But there's never enough. Never enough to feed you, your family... or to sell...

**You** pray they don't get sick because you can't afford a doctor...

**You** go to bed feeling hungry... and weary. Knowing you'll have to get up and do it all again the next day.

**Reinforcing the impact of the donor's gift.** I frequently talk about "Your gift" not "A gift". This puts the responsibility back on the donor (hopefully after you've inspired them with a great story). If you use "A gift" then it could be anybody else's gift.

**Your gift** could help provide 6 times the number of cows, chickens, goats and piglets for livelihood projects.

So **your gift** is not a handout... it helps make people self-sufficient

Remember, it's your chance to turn a gift of \$50 into \$300!

**Explaining needs and programs.** Aha! You thought I was against explaining program details. I'm not – as long as it's done in a donor-focused way. That includes using "you" in your copy.

Instead of talking generally about the needs of the people, you again put the donor in the beneficiary's shoes.

But let's look first at why many Ugandan farmers struggle in poverty.

If **you're** a farmer, **you** may keep animals such as cows or chickens. But **you** find your cow does not give much milk. And **your** chickens do not gain a lot weight because **you** don't know much about rearing poultry for sale.

But what if **you** did have one of those expensive cows that produce high volumes of running milk? Well, **you** don't have the skills to keep and care for it. It needs special feed, which **you** also can't afford. And it has particular needs for its care and shelter.



As a farmer, **you** may grow maize, beans, cassava or potatoes. But your crop harvest is very low. That's because your seed quality is not very good. And you never learned about the modern farming techniques that would increase **your** crop yield.

**You** don't know how to set up a drying area for **your** maize crop that would save it from spoiling due to moisture. And **you** can't afford to spray your crops to kill the pests that blight them.

Contrast this with:

But let's look first at why many Ugandan farmers struggle in poverty.

Many farmers may keep animals such as cows or chickens. But their cows do not give much milk. And their chickens do not gain a lot weight because they don't know much about rearing poultry for sale.

But what if they did have one of those expensive cows that produce high volumes of running milk? Well, they don't have the skills to keep and care for it. It needs special feed, which they also can't afford. And it has particular needs for its care and shelter.

Many farmers grow maize, beans, cassava or potatoes. But their crop harvests are very low. That's because their seed quality is not very good. And they never learned about the modern farming techniques that would increase their crop yields.

They don't know how to set up drying areas for their maize crops that would save them from spoiling due to moisture. And they can't afford to spray your crops to kill the pests that blight them.

The first version has 16 "yous" and depicts a vivid picture.

The second version talks about farmers in the third person. You still get the picture but it doesn't have the same effect. Instead of pulling the donor into the scene, the donor is looking at it from afar.

**Taps into the donor's own dreams and hopes.** This is about relating your copy to some aspect of the donor's life.

In this case, I tapped into a dream common to both Betty and many donors – to get their children through university. What donor doesn't have similar dreams for their own kids' futures? You'll see several "yous" scattered through too.

Whether **your** own children are very young or grown up, chances are **you** had dreams for them. **You** may have wanted them to do well in school, play sport,



sing... and eventually see them go on to university or other tertiary studies.

When **you're** wondering where your single meal for the day is going to come from, **you** don't really think about things like this. **You** can't because each day is such a struggle to live through.

Remember Betty from the start of this letter? Let's see what she wants from life now. Now that she no longer has to struggle and scrape for survival.

Now she has the power to dream... just like **you**. And like so many of us, her dreams for the future are for the children in her care.

Her piggery, the new cow, the chicks... she plans to further expand her livestock project. Now she's working in the hope to support Frank, Muyungo and Luggo through university. So they can have a better future. And not live hand to mouth wondering how to get their next meal.

*Lesson: Use lots of "yous" and make the copy all about the donor.*

### **Donation Booster 13 - Using repeated asks**

A common complaint about fundraising letters is that they ask for a gift multiple times.

However much you dislike it, testing shows this technique works.

It's easy to understand why when you consider how donors actually read through your fundraising letter.

Rarely will a donor read your letter straight through. They'll look at the envelope, open it, glance at the headline, maybe the first few paragraphs and captions on photos. Then at the end of the letter to see who it's from. Here they spot your PS. They look at your coupon, if it's separate to the letter. They'll read the front of your brochure and turn it over.

Then, if you're lucky, they'll actually skim the pages of your letter or open up your brochure.

Many donors will never get that far. They may only look at the headline. Or the PS. Or the coupon. (Or the envelope!!)

That's why you use repeated asks. Because you want them to see the ask, no matter what page or what piece they're looking at.

Here are some of the asks I used in the letter:



Make your gift go further... Turn \$75 into \$450! (Headline)

Imagine it... 6 times the impact. Your gift could help provide 6 times the number of cows, chickens, goats and piglets for livelihood projects. (Page 2)

Remember, it's your chance to turn a gift of \$50 into \$300! Or \$100 into \$600! Or \$1000 into \$6000! (Page 3)

So please give now to ensure your gift will be multiplied 6 times over. (Page 4)

Your gift can make 6 times the impact in providing an income and new hope for the poorest people in Uganda... Please GIVE NOW! (PS)

From the brochure:

When you give by 29 March, the Australian Government will multiply your gift 6 times over. (Cover)

Please, will you help give a livelihood to more battlers like Karim and Agnes? In this case, your gift will help 6 times the battlers out of hunger and poverty! (Inside)

Help 6 times the hungry families. (Back)

From the coupon:

YES! I want to provide 6 times the cows, chickens, oxen, goats, piglets, seeds, tools and farmers' training. This means I can help 6 times the number of Uganda's poorest people who will then have an income for life.

Notice all the asks reinforce the offer – either the 6 times multiplier or the income generation project.

*Lesson: Use repeated asks. They work. Trust me.*

## **Donation Booster 14 - Clear instructions on how to give**

Don't just ask the donor for the gift. Tell them exactly how to give.

On the last page of the letter, I've written this:

You can make your gift by filling out the enclosed coupon and mailing it back in the reply paid envelope. Or you can call 1300 731 550. Or visit [www.internationalneeds.org.au](http://www.internationalneeds.org.au) to give via the secure website.

This information is repeated on the back of the brochure.



This may seem like overkill. But making a donation is a voluntary activity. There's no penalty or fine for not giving.

So it's sensible to make it so easy for the donor to give that they have no excuse not to donate right then and there. That's also why you include reply paid envelopes in your pack. So the donor doesn't have to go hunt up an envelope, find a stamp, write on the address... you get the picture.

*Lesson: Make it easy for the donor to give by giving them instructions on how to give.*

### **Donation Booster 15 - Using short sentences and paragraphs**

Short sentences and paragraphs are much easier for donors to read and follow.

This may seem obvious but it's common to find paragraphs that run to more than 10 lines, even 20, in a letter. That's fine for a project report. Not fine for fundraising.

Also, short paragraphs are much less threatening to the reader than large blocks of text.

What's easier to read? This?

You get up in the morning to make the best you can out of your little farm. You may grow a little maize or keep a scraggly cow, perhaps a few chickens. But there's never enough. Never enough to feed you, your family... or to sell. The reality is that there's only going to be one meal to eat today. It'll be a scanty one of maize and beans. Then what about the children? You're so worried about getting enough food to eat that you can't even think about sending them to school. They can't go. You can't afford the fees. And you need them at home to help with the animals and the farm.

Or this?

You get up in the morning to make the best you can out of your little farm. You may grow a little maize or keep a scraggly cow, perhaps a few chickens.

But there's never enough. Never enough to feed you, your family... or to sell. The reality is that there's only going to be one meal to eat today. It'll be a scanty one of maize and beans.

Then what about the children? You're so worried about getting enough food to eat that you can't even think about sending them to school. They can't go.



You can't afford the fees. And you need them at home to help with the animals and the farm.

Remember the Flesch Kincaid scores? (See Response Killer 10) How does this letter stack up?

	Letter score	Aim for
Words per sentence	12.8	10 or less
Flesch Reading Ease	75.6	70 or above
Flesch Kincaid Grade Score	5.8	8 or less

I was a little high on the average words per sentence. But the other scores show the letter has high readability – according to Flesch!

*Lesson: Break up your copy into shorter sentences and paragraphs.*

## Donation Booster 16 - Writing informally

Fundraising letters are not the place for academic prose or textbook grammar.

If you want your letter to be read, write the way you talk. But don't try to be too chummy. The donor will see through that.

Just make it sound like you're having a conversation with the donor. Imagine you're really excited about this appeal and you're explaining to the donor just why and how they should support your great cause.

Because a fundraising letter should have a conversational tone, you'll find I've broken a lot of grammatical rules in the letter. Here are a few examples.

Starting a sentence with "And" or "But":

As a farmer, you may grow maize, beans, cassava or potatoes. **But** your crop harvest is very low. That's because your seed quality is not very good. **And** you never learned about the modern farming techniques that would increase your crop yield.

Using ellipses or dashes to break up text and add drama:

You go to bed feeling hungry... and weary.

And her grandchildren also go to school – an opportunity she is thankful to be able to give them.



Starting paragraphs with questions instead of a statement:

What does this really mean for the poor in Uganda? To answer that, let's go back to Betty.

The examples above were written to make the text easier to read or grasp. Or to simulate natural pauses in thought or conversation. Or to achieve a certain dramatic effect.

You'll also find paragraphs without topic sentences. Because how can you use a topic sentence in a one-sentence paragraph? And there'll be a split infinitive or two. Because they make you sound like a real person instead of a grammar book.

I should actually point out that I've been a grammar Nazi. I've hunted down stray apostrophes. Shoved prepositions back into their places in the middle of sentences. Put "thats" and "whiches" back in their boxes.

Deep down in my heart, I still place high value on correct grammar and punctuation. I wince when I see "your" and "you're" used incorrectly. (Oh, the pain!)

So why have I broken these rules? Because the aim is not to write completely correct English.

The aim of a fundraising letter is to raise money. It's easier to do this if you write how you talk.

And nobody I know, and I really mean NOBODY, speaks perfectly grammatical English.

*Lesson: Write the way you talk.*

## **Donation Booster 17 - Use of the PS**

Like the headline, the PS is one of the most-read parts of a direct mail letter. And like the headline, it may be the ONLY part they read.

I've used the PS in a fairly standard way to restate the offer and ask.

PS. They don't have to live on one meal a day! Your gift can make 6 times the impact in providing an income and new hope for the poorest people in Uganda. Remember, that includes single mothers like Betty who can now provide her family with food, clothing and an education. Please GIVE NOW!





What does the PS achieve?

- Touches on the true benefit of stopping hunger
- Reinforces the 6 times multiplier
- Mentions income generation
- Incorporates a little bit of story
- Includes an ask.

Again, if donors only read the PS, they would still understand what the appeal is about.

There are other ways of using the PS. You could highlight a premium you've included in the pack. Or you could focus on the urgent deadline. That's just a couple of suggestions.

*Lesson: Include a PS that communicates a message you want the donor to read.*

### **Donation Booster 18 - A donor-focused brochure that supports the letter**

Some non-profits manage to write lovely, donor-focused letters. Then they turn around and write an internally-focused brochure.

You probably know the type of thing I mean. It talks about how long the organisation has been around.

The different types of programs they run, even if they're not likely to interest donors. It includes statistics on how many people they've helped.

Worse, they break all the principles I've been talking about. Using jargon. Referring to "we" and not to "you". Writing really loooong sentences and paragraphs.

It's not too hard to write a donor-focused brochure. The principles are the same as writing a letter. It's just the text has to fit into a DL format or whatever kind of unusual shape the direct mail manager wants to test.

However, that's not a reason to suddenly throw out everything you know about communicating with donors.

So let's take a look at the brochure in this pack:





**Features the offer.** The front reiterates the 6 times multiplier offer and the deadline.

**Simple step-by-step.** Inside, the 3-step giving outline makes it very easy for the donor to understand the process of giving, how their gift multiplies and what it's then used for.

**Another success story.** Also inside is a story of another couple, Karim and Agnes. It outlines their successful revolving loan enterprise and the impact it's had on their family of five children. This shows that Betty's case, featured in the letter, is not a one-off. Others also benefit from these income generation projects.

**Donor-focused explanation of the income generation project.** Information about the program repeatedly emphasises the 6 times multiplier.

Provides 6 times the livestock as revolving loans. This may include chickens, cows, oxen, goats and piglets.

Provides 6 times the high quality seed for planting as revolving loans.

Provides 6 times the modern farm tools and equipment.

Trains 6 times the farmers in modern animal husbandry methods.

It also uses simple, non-technical language without jargon. Imagine if the text above was replaced with bureaucratic language like:

Provides household income enhancement opportunities to rural workers.

Which version do you think donors can understand more easily?

**"You" are in the picture.** Several "you" are incorporated into the copy.

Imagine how discouraging it would be to work hard each day and still not be able to feed **your** family.

AND

Hopefully, **you** will agree this is a responsible way to use **your** gift!

**Asks for the gift.** The brochure uses several asks and outlines the methods of giving. (See Donation Booster 13)

The brochure essentially repackages a lot of the same kind of information into a different format. Yes, some of it is expanded (like the program information).



Yes, some of it is new content (like the extra story).

Why bother doing this?

It's another way of presenting the offer and ask to the donor. Remember the idea behind using repeated asks? Whatever piece or whatever page the donor is looking at, you want them to see your ask.

*Lesson: Make sure your brochure is donor-focused.*

### Donation Booster 19 - Coupon reinforces the offer

The response device is extremely important.

If the donor sits down to fill this out, you want every aspect of the response device to reinforce their giving decision. You want the donor to feel good – even excited – about their gift to you.

**Use of the classic Yes!** The Yes! with a restatement of the offer reiterates the message in the letter and brochure. Note the use of the “I” pronoun gives the donor ownership over the gift they’re making.

YES! I want to provide 6 times the cows, chickens, oxen, goats, piglets, seeds, tools and farmers’ training. This means I can help 6 times the number of Uganda’s poorest people who will then have an income for life.

**Use of the specific dollar amounts.** The gift amounts suggested in the letter and brochure turn up here. Again, they’re couched in “I” statements.

- I’d like my gift of \$75 to turn into \$450
- I’d like my gift of \$120 to turn into \$720
- I’d like my gift of \$175 to turn into \$1050
- I’d like my gift of \$1000 to turn into \$6000
- I’d like my gift of \$ \_\_\_\_\_ to multiply 6 times

Coupling the gift amounts with the multiplied value is a lot stronger than simply listing the gift amounts of \$75, \$120, \$175 and \$1000 by themselves. Here the donor can see exactly how their gift will multiply. Donors get that satisfaction of feeling they’re getting good value for their donation dollar.



**Pre-addressed coupon.** The response device will be pre-printed with the donor's name and address so they do not have to fill this in.

Possible improvement: In hindsight, I'd remove the pig equation under the suggested dollar amounts. Then make the coupon text larger and black to improve readability. Just as the donor is about to give, I don't want them to need reading glasses to fill out the response device.

*Lesson: Make the donor feel good even as they're filling out the response device.*



## Design

### Donation Booster 20 - Using the right photos and captions

Here are some guidelines for photo selection:

**Show the faces of your beneficiaries.** The pack uses photos of Betty, her son, her grandchildren. It also uses photos of Karim, Agnes and their children.

In hindsight, the pictures of Karim and Agnes could be enlarged to show their faces more clearly. However, you can see nice, smiling faces on Betty and her family.

Sometimes it's not possible to show beneficiaries for child protection, privacy or security reasons. But then you could always use a silhouette or obscure faces so people cannot be identified.

**Use before and after photos.** Showing beneficiaries before and after they received help can be very effective if the change in their lives is visually obvious and dramatic. This is very popular for medical-related procedures. For example, showing a child with only one leg then another picture of the child with a prosthetic leg running around with his friends.

Sometimes, it's appropriate to only use after photos. The photos of Betty and her family are examples of this. Betty with her livestock, Betty with her son and grandchildren tending the pigs, Betty's grandchildren now going to school.

**Show beneficiaries engaged in their every day activities.** Show beneficiaries in their natural environment – in their homes cooking, in villages playing or gathering water, in school rooms with their friends or busily writing, in hospitals awaiting surgery.

**Make sure facial expressions convey the right message.** I've rejected many photos because beneficiaries look surly, angry or sad when the message is about "a changed life" or a "brighter future".

For this pack, I actually requested extra photos of Betty for this very reason. In the photos supplied, she wasn't looking at the camera and she looked ill and downcast.

If I hadn't been able to get better images, I may have decided to use no photo. It's hard for the donor to empathise with what looks like ungrateful beneficiaries. Betty was certainly not ungrateful but she had been sick when



the original pictures were taken. So no wonder she looked unhappy. I was fortunate to get photos from the field that fixed this issue.

It's not always possible to incorporate all these guidelines. But keep them in mind.

Good quality fundraising photographs can be very hard to get, especially for smaller charities. Often you're stuck with pixelated images from someone's phone. But the right images are worth pushing for because they can really make your pack come alive.

Also, donors love photos. They often look at photos and read captions. That's why it's important to have captions on all your pictures.

You could use the caption to just describe what's in the picture. But I think that's a wasted opportunity. Why not reinforce your offer or highlight some true benefits in your captions? I've opted to feature true benefits.

Betty, with son Frank Musoke and two grandsons, has an **income for life** from these pigs. (Page 2 of letter)

"The children **rarely fall sick now** because they can feed well." (Brochure cover)

*Lesson: Push to acquire photos of beneficiaries that will make your pack come alive. And use captions to reinforce your offer or highlight true benefits.*

## Donation Booster 21 - The offer is supported visually with appeal graphics

The pack makes use of the following visual design elements.

**The 6 times the impact pig logo.** This is used on all pieces in the pack and ties in with the revolving loan concept. It also has the appeal of the cute piglet for the donor.

**The gift table.** The specific dollar amounts outlined in the headline are further strengthened with a table outlining how gifts of different amounts will be matched. The table is reused in the brochure.

The gift table makes it very easy for donors to see the 6 times multiplied value they get out of their gift. These amounts were set to cover particular gift ranges of International Needs' donor base.

**The pig equation.** This supports the gift table and shows in practice the 6 times



multiplied impact of the donor's gift. It also provides a visual tie back to the appeal logo.

*Lesson: If you use graphics, ensure they support your offer and ask.*

## **Donation Booster 22 - Design highlights the offer and ask**

Whether you're looking at the letter, brochure or the coupon, the 6 times matching offer is a strong point of focus. It's not buried amidst other clutter.

Also, the ask to give by March 29 is featured prominently in the following places:

- In the headline of the letter
- In the PS of the letter
- On the front of the brochure
- On the back of the brochure
- On the coupon

No matter what the donor looks at first, the pieces are designed so the offer and ask catch the eye.

*Lesson: Design your pieces so the donor can't help but see your offer and ask.*

## **Where to next?**

Phew! You made it!

I hope this case study gives you some ideas of how to strengthen your future appeal letters.

How you can easily improve appeal results through sharper, clearer copy that touches donors' hearts... and gets them giving.

If you want more help, then read on...



## Need more help?

I'd love to have a chat with you about all things fundraising and what you need to bring more income into your charity.

To find out what's possible for you, simply request a strategy and tactics session with me. Just email [june@junesfundraisingletter.com](mailto:june@junesfundraisingletter.com) or fill out the contact form at [www.junesfundraisingletter.com](http://www.junesfundraisingletter.com).

## A bit about June

June Steward is an experienced fundraiser and direct response copywriter working for her own consultancy called There Is No Square. She works with various non-profits, helping them to increase income and improve donor retention.

This includes raising funds through current donors, acquisition, monthly giving and major gifts. She likes direct response channels including mail, email, telephone and the web.

June began the blog June's Fundraising Letter in 2013 because she's passionate about helping all charities and non-profits improve their donor communications and ultimately, their fundraising results.

## What other fundraisers like you are saying...

### "More than double our fundraising income"

Over the past year, June has helped us with several direct response campaigns. She has advised us on appeal strategy and tactics as well as writing mail, email and website copy that has helped us more than double our fundraising income.

The direct mail appeals she wrote has led to the rise in direct mail income from \$689,000 last year to \$1.7 million this year. She also wrote the materials for our monthly giving acquisition and upgrade program which has increased from \$26,000 in 2013 to \$130,000 in 2014.





June has been able to produce consistent results and help us establish a solid income stream for the future. She is professional, proactive and easy to work with. We're already planning further appeals and fundraising activities with June in the year to come.

**Andy Scobie**  
**Head of Fundraising**  
**BirdLife Australia**

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### **"Results far exceeded our expectations"**

From our very first conversation with June we knew that she had the knowledge and experience to add value to our annual financial year end appeal mailing.

June provided the concept, copy and design direction for a direct mail pack and the results far exceeded our expectations. Our total income surpassed our target for this year's campaign by 25%, and achieved an increase of more than 30% on the previous year's appeal.

She considered the strategic angle for every aspect of the pack, and wrote a number of targeted variable paragraphs for our many segments.

However, it was her winning concept and story that really resonated with our donors. We ended up rolling this out beyond the direct mail to across the whole campaign.

June is professional and extremely flexible, able to work to tight deadlines and with limited resources. We would have no hesitation in recommending June for fundraising strategy and direct mail copywriting.

**Rose Young**  
**Senior Marketing Coordinator**  
**Baptist World Aid**

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### **"20 gifts of \$5000 or more"**

We engaged June to write a direct mail pack to make up the shortfall for an appeal that did not perform as expected. I am delighted with the results of June's work - more than four times the income raised! This has put us back on track with our budget.



June also wrote the direct mail copy for the end-of-financial-year appeal. The results speak for themselves. We raised 2.25 times more than last year with an excellent response rate. Plus we had 20 gifts of \$5000 or more when we usually average 1-3 gifts in this range for each appeal.

We've more than covered the extra costs involved in these appeals. June has also provided advice and suggestions to help us take the next steps up in our fundraising. I am eager to see the results from the next campaigns we work on together!

**Sheldon Rankin**  
CEO  
International Needs

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### **"Improvement of 216% in income"**

Thanks so much to June for everything she did for our EOFY campaign. We saw an improvement of 216% in income from our direct mail and email compared to the previous year. In fact, this year we raised more money than we ever have from these channels for this campaign.

June assisted not only with writing copy but also advised on strategy, concepts, segmentation and reporting. And all of this on a very tight timeline.

Her work has helped restore confidence within the organisation that direct mail is a worthwhile fundraising activity. I look forward to working with her on future campaigns and donor nurture activities.

**Joel Nicholls**  
Fundraising Manager  
LightFM

