



ASSOCIATES

Simone P. Joyaux, ACFRE | [www.simonejoyaux.com](http://www.simonejoyaux.com)

A tip for you and your organization: Share these articles with your staff colleagues and your board. Start a conversation. Ask strategic questions. Learn together. Then make change.

### Keeping your donors

## **A donor-centered organization, your donors, & relationship building**

Mini articles from Simone's web column "Unraveling development," *Nonprofit Quarterly*, [www.nonprofitquarterly.org](http://www.nonprofitquarterly.org)

### **Part 1: What is donor-centricism?**

"Donor-centric" is another way of saying "building trust." A donor's relationship with your organization deepens or frays mostly based on how much trust you can create in three areas:

- Trust that donors play an essential, vital, central role in your mission's success.
- Trust that your organization does worthwhile things with donor gifts.
- Trust that your organization conducts its operations efficiently.

Sadly most organizations focus on their own needs and why their good work requires donations. Instead, the donor-centered organization puts the donor at the center. "Because of your gifts, we do this vital work." "Your gifts stopped the river's pollution." "Only with your gift can we feed families." "Because of you, great things happen."

To understand what donor-centered means, read the research about what donors want. For example, Adrian Sargeant's research found that the following components matter in the fundraising relationship: thanking donors for their gifts; informing donors how their money is spent; responding quickly when donors contact the organization; being polite in communications; and more.

Sargeant found that the overall perception of service quality provided by the fundraising department dramatically affects donor retention. No surprise there. We all know that quality of service is important, critically important.

But how do donors define service quality? Things like: confidence that donations are spent appropriately; keeping donors informed about how gifts are used; employee behavior instills confidence; communications are courteous and timely; employees understand donor needs; and more.

And guess what, Sargeant's research tells us that almost all donors are not hugely satisfied with the quality of service provided by the fundraising department.

Hey! How does your organization measure up? Are you worried yet?

Donor-centered is like customer-centered. And when you're customer-centered and donor-centered, you build loyalty. And you want loyal donors.

Dale Carnegie, 1930s self-help guru said it so very well: "You'll have more fun and success when you stop trying to get what you want, and start helping other people get what they want."

I told you before, read *Building Donor Loyalty* by Sargeant and Jay. Check out the Donor-Centric Pledge (DCP) in *Keep Your Donors*. You can download the DCP from [www.simonejoyaux.com](http://www.simonejoyaux.com). Click on Resources | Free Library | Fund Development.

Interested in trying your hand at a donor survey? See the Audubon Society of RI member survey in *Keep Your Donors*, inspired by Adrian Sargeant's research.

## **Part 2: Do you treat your donors like ATM machines?**

Do you treat your donors like ATM machines? I've heard donors say you do.

Giving is not a financial transaction. Giving is one of the most personal acts anyone can make.

But too often, in the press for money, organizations focus on money rather than donors. Be careful. Don't be that kind of organization. Treating giving like a financial transaction is a quick way to lose donors.

Keep this in mind: The purpose of fund development is to find donors, not donations. The smart organization would rather have a donor who has been giving \$25 annually for 10 years – than someone who'll give you \$500 today. The 10-year donor is loyal. Keep her. She's telling others about you. Nurture the relationship better and she may give you more money when she's able. And donor loyalty drives bequest giving, too.

Remember, donors are not just interchangeable money sources. Donors give to you for reasons you can only guess at. (Don't guess. Ask them why they give!)

My colleague Richard Radcliffe, legacy guru from the U.K., says that the most important question we can ask a donor is: Why did you first give? (By the way, if you ever have a chance to hear Richard Radcliffe speak, do it! Richard is insightful, focused, and very funny. And he's spoken with thousands of donors through personal interviews and focus groups.)

Adrian Sargeant's research (remember his book, *Building Donor Loyalty*) reinforces Richard's comment: You need to know why donors started giving to your organization. In fact, Sargeant goes on to say that probing why a donor made that first gift is essential in determining whether you can develop a relationship with that donor. The more you know, the more you know!

Giving is about the donor, not about your organization or your cause. Your organization is the conduit by which donors live out their interests and fulfill their aspirations. Donors are different one from the other. And you need to know their interests and disinterests, their motivations and aspirations.

Test yourself right now. What do you know about your donors? Do you know what excites your most loyal donors and what annoys them? Do you know the different interests of different donors?

It's time to build a donor-centered organization. And if your donor centric quotient is already pretty high, aim for higher!

Read Kay Sprinkel Grace's e-book *Donor-Driven Philanthropy*. Download at [www.simonejoyaux.com](http://www.simonejoyaux.com). Click on Resources | Free Library | Fund Development | General Information.

Read these great blogs: [www.sethgodin.com](http://www.sethgodin.com), [www.theagitator.net](http://www.theagitator.net), and [www.futurefundraisingnow.com](http://www.futurefundraisingnow.com). Subscribe for free. Read daily and learn.

## **Part 3: Top priority: Pay attention to the emotional needs of your donors.**

Emotions are the decision makers. Emotions trigger your decision about where to give gifts and whether to eat chicken or steak for dinner.

Neuroscience (thanks to MRIs) and psychological research prove it. Just ask Drs. Antoine Bechara and Dr. Antonio Damasio.

The direct mail industry has identified 7 emotions that really move cash, mountains of cash as vast as the Himalayas. The direct mail people spend millions on research, so pay attention. Here they are, the 7 emotional triggers for direct mail response, in no particular order.

- Anger ("This is wrong! Do something!")
- Exclusivity ("Me? You want me to join your special group of donors?")

- Flattery (“You’re absolutely right. I am special because I keep giving to you.”)
- Greed (“I want more theatre in the community and giving to you makes sure great theatre stays.”)
- Guilt (“I know polar bears are drowning because of my car and my poor recycling skills. I’ll feel better when I give to that environmental group.”)
- Salvation (“My gifts make change and make the world a better place.”)

Let me illustrate these emotions for you.

In 2001, I founded the Women’s Fund of Rhode Island (WFRI). WFRI works to level the playing field for women and girls. Why did I found the Women’s Fund?

Because I’m angry that social injustice is a dominant force in the United States. Women are still paid less than men – for the same work. Women represent more than 50% of the U.S. population and a paltry portion of elected officials. In fact, the U.S. ranks 82<sup>nd</sup> in the world for the number of women in the national legislature, e.g., the U.S. Congress.

I’m afraid of living in a community and world where so many people are excluded, for example women and people of color and gays and lesbians and those who are less affluent. I feel guilty because while I’m disadvantaged as a woman, I am a well-educated, heterosexual, white, affluent woman. I win on all counts except gender.

I’m flattered to be part of the exclusive group of women and men who fight for social justice in Rhode Island. I’m proud to be the founder of the Women’s Fund. And I believe that my work in philanthropy – both as a volunteer and a professional – is the reason why I exist. My passion for philanthropy is my salvation.

Think about one of your most meaningful gifts. What feelings prompted you to give? Talk with your donors. Ask them why they give and you’ll hear their interests and feelings.

Now take a look at your solicitation letters and your newsletters and all your materials. Are the emotions there? If not, add some heart. Yes, right now.

It’s your job to stroke the emotions of your donors and prospects. You trigger their emotions through the stories you tell, the accomplishments you produce.

Learn more in Tom Ahern’s books and free e-news. [www.aherncomm.com](http://www.aherncomm.com)

#### **Part 4: Keeping your donors**

Want to keep your donors? Want profitable relationships that last? Do it with a comprehensive relationship-building program that includes communications (this column) and cultivation (next column).

Mostly organizations communicate through newsletters – and most newsletters are clueless. Wrong content. Poor writing. Lousy readability.

Tom Ahern finds these 7 flaws in most donor newsletters:

1. Don’t deliver news that donors care about
2. Don’t put the donor center stage
3. Aren’t very friendly
4. Skimp on emotional triggers
5. Don’t tell stories
6. Expect people to read in depth
7. Don’t have real headlines

How flawed (or flawless) are your newsletters?

I remember when I followed the directions of my various English teachers. You know, never start a letter with “I”. Never have just one sentence in a paragraph. Of course, all sentences must have a verb. And so much more – which pretty much is all wrong for communications.

I’ve spent quite some time trying to learn to write better in order to communicate. So my first recommendation to you: Forget what your English teacher taught you. Hurry up and learn to write better!

One-sentence paragraphs are fine. One-word sentences are fine. Sentences starting with “and” or “but” are just fine. Sentences without verbs are just fine.

Other writing tips:

- Improve your headlines! Headlines are more important than articles. Read any good daily newspaper. Their headlines tell pretty much the whole story. And headlines help people decide what they want to read. (Here’s a tip: Take your headline and show it to someone who doesn’t know the story. Ask them what the story is. If they get it right, your headline works.)
- Avoid passive voice and complex sentences. Use short sentences and short paragraphs.
- Make it easy for the reader. Write at 8<sup>th</sup> grade level. Use Microsoft grammar check to evaluate your writing.

Always remember, people don’t have to read your stuff. If you make it hard to read, they just won’t read! People skim. If the headlines don’t interest them, the story won’t either. So what happens when just about no one reads your newsletter? This isn’t good relationship building.

Here’s another surprise: Readability matters. Using reverse type reduces readability by something like 500%! Indented paragraphs are essential, mandatory. Makes the text easier to read.

Another no-no: using sans serif typefaces like Arial. For reading on paper, a serif type (e.g., Times New Roman) is essential.

These are truths, facts. Not opinion. And sadly, graphic designers are rarely taught readability. Get prepared for a fight when you say, “use a serif typeface” and “no reverse type” and “indent the paragraphs, damn it!” Get prepared for another fight, because most marketing / communications staff don’t know this stuff either.

Compare your newsletter to the documented body of knowledge. Remember, your opinion (or that of your board members) doesn’t matter.

Use the body of knowledge to create the best newsletter possible. See all the details in Tom’s various books: *How to Write Fundraising Materials That Raise More Money*, *Raising More Money With Newsletters Than You Ever Thought Possible*, *Keep Your Donors: The Guide to Better Communications and Stronger Relationships*, and *Seeing Through a Donor’s Eyes*. Subscribe to Tom’s free e-news and read all the archives for more about writing. Visit Tom at [www.aherncomm.com](http://www.aherncomm.com).

## **Part 5: Nurturing relationships through donor-centered communications**

Keep your donors by nurturing relationships with communications (last week’s column) and cultivation (this column).

Communicating isn’t enough. You have to connect personally. Create opportunities for the donors to engage more deeply, if they want to do so.

Pay attention to this recent comment made by Tom Belford in his daily blog *The Agitator*: “The idea is to think broadly about the types of personally relevant interactions you can offer each of your supporters. But — ideally — it should be interaction that can lead to some sustained flow of communications that you can maintain with the individual supporter.”

Sure, you design some cultivation to fit everyone. One size kinda fits all because you can only do so much. For example, try these ideas:

- Make personal thank-you calls to donors within a few days of gift receipt (And Penelope Burk’s research says it’s best if board members make these calls. See *Donor-Centered Fundraising*.) Don’t ask for another gift! Just say thanks.
- Annual donor / volunteer thank-you party
- Quarterly focus groups with donors asking their opinions
- Personal interviews with individual donors asking them to share their philanthropic story (Ask your board members to help with these interviews.)
- Quarterly cultivation gatherings where you give updates about what’s happening
- Invite donors to serve on committees where their skills and interests can best be used

Obviously you personalize the tactics in this list. For example, you might ask donor Mary Smith to serve on your Governance Committee. And donor Bob Jones joins the task force to plan the fundraising event. Or the personal interview questions for the Rodriguez family are somewhat different than the questions for the Murphy family.

I know. It takes time to nurture relationships. And maybe you're just a one-person shop. But you have board members and other volunteers who care about your mission. Engage them in the relationship-building process.

I know. You wish your donors would just keep giving without much effort on your part. Maybe three newsletters per year. A couple solicitation letters. A smile when you see them.

Sorry. Not enough. Ignore relationship building at your peril.

There's so much you can do – at low-cost or no cost. Relationship building is where you invest your time and money. It's relationship building that builds donor loyalty and keeps your donors.

Check out the relationship-building ideas in these books: *Keep Your Donors* (extensive details, ideas, examples of donor-centered communications and cultivation); *Building Donor Loyalty* (research results about donor expectations and satisfaction); Ken Burnett's *Relationship Fundraising* (the book that started it all). And check out Ken's *The Zen of Fundraising: 89 Timeless Ideas to Strengthen and Develop Your Donor Relationships*.