



Why I Love Lapsed Donors

By Sue Citro

It's true, I will say it, I wish every lapsed donor was still giving to my organization. And at the same time, I learn so much from lapsed donors. The trick is how to learn these things before they lapse.

When fundraisers talk about lapsed donors, we often talk about those who feel they can no longer afford to give, and those who, like some previous ex-boyfriends, just weren't a good fit. Maybe we didn't enable them to connect with the cause as they hoped or maybe they were curious about our mission and work and wanted to try it out. Whatever the reason for those shorter-term relationships, it's cool we moved them up the scale of friendship from strangers to casual acquaintances.

With those donors who remain a bit longer before lapsing, how do we keep moving them up that pyramid to friends and then best friends? What can we do to keep things blooming and deepening for our donors? Too often — like the second or third season of a hit TV show that reinvents itself and then fans take to social media in protest — we inadvertently lose the very thing everyone loved the most — the crux of our storytelling and brand.

It's not that lapsed donors are gone forever and sending them millions of appeals will not automatically bring them back. It's about getting to the core of what brought them to us in the first place. What were they trying to do? What were they hoping to accomplish? What was the story we told that really resonated with them and why? They chose us and I always want to know why.

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Maybe we told a story that resonated because it was happening close to where they live or because the pet finding a new home looked like their childhood dog. Was it because we come with high charity ratings or are endorsed by a favorite celebrity? There are many reasons that exist, and all are valid. Usually though, I find the story that grabbed them was a good story. It didn't overplay on their emotions and wasn't hard to follow — the impact was clear and the story ended on a positive note.

The stories that tend to resonate most with donors are the ones that demonstrate the social proof of making a difference and feel aligned with the commitment your donors want to make to your cause. These are the stories that help make it clear you are an authority who was trusted to act and you did so. Finding a story like that might sound like a tall order but it's also a story that you could probably tell yourself, likely the story that made you decide to work for the organization you do.

There is no perfect story. What I find is the fastest way to bring lapsed donors back is keep telling the stories of your work and communicating that impact. It feels so easy to say and sometimes is the very thing we forget to do as we worry more about being on TikTok or launching a new mobile app.

Recently, we launched a donor insight panel to better listen to our supporters, to hear why they give and what inspires them. Reading the 1,000-plus comments we get each month only continues to reinforce how connected we all are to the causes we care about.

So, this holiday season, as we circle around and remember what makes us nostalgic for the holidays, remember in the upcoming year to keep doing that with your donors, too. Help them to tell your stories, to share them with others and to keep remembering the impact that together you're making possible. In addition to your mission, you'll likely create an organization with less lapsed donors next year, too.

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