Sealed with a Kiss—and Scads of Marketing Savvy

A panel discussion of best practices in direct mail for animal welfare groups

BY ROB BLIZARD, CAWA

As the chief development officer for the Washington Animal Rescue League in Washington, D.C., Rob Blizard spends a lot of time with direct mail, and he’s always curious what other organizations are doing to maximize its effectiveness. Direct mail is typically a critical revenue stream, often one of the largest both in terms of gross and net revenue for animal welfare organizations. If you’re wondering about the current approaches and what might help your organization bring in more cash for its programs, sit down at this virtual roundtable as some fundraising experts and shelter leaders talk shop, offering their take on new trends, what’s working, and what’s not. Among them, the six interviewees have a combined total of more than 100 years of experience in direct mail and nonprofit fundraising.

SOURCES

Shelter Development Directors
- Susan Koza, director of development, SPCA for Monterey County (California)
- Shelly Stuart, CFRE, CAWA, senior vice president/chief development officer, San Diego Humane Society and SPCA
- Kelsea Vescova, director of marketing and development, Arizona Humane Society

Agency Experts Working with Shelters
- Craig DePole, senior vice president, Newport Creative
- Tony Genovese, chief executive officer, DaVinci Direct
- Tonie Howard, vice president for the animal care team at Grizzard Communications
What direct mail techniques are working for you?
Sources generally agree that matching gift challenges, holiday appeals, and annual fund drives are all serving them well, and Genovese mentions the appeal of membership packages that include a plasticized membership card. Interestingly, such cards can be effective, even if neither the membership itself nor the card provides any benefits to the donor.

“Packages that try to connect donors to the animals by encouraging a response in addition to a gift” are also effective, says DePole. He notes that involvement devices such as survey forms are helpful, adding to the material’s appeal by encouraging donors to spend more time with it rather than just sending money.

What sort of material is most effective in inspiring donor gifts?
Experts cited packages that highlighted cruelty cases, extraordinary medical services provided to an animal in need, investigations of abuse, and hoarding cases. Think dramatic stories with happy endings, and cases in which the influence and work of the organization is on vivid display. Messaging that focuses on the rescue and positive outcome for a single dog seems to work well, according to Howard.

“Custom, as opposed to canned, programs typically are more effective, as most donors can tell when a story is local and real as opposed to composite and fictional,” says Genovese.

What stories and messages are not working well? What approaches are you avoiding?
DePole notes that packages that spend most of their space detailing specifics of shelter programs or the dry statistics (X number of animals saved, rehabbed, etc.) don’t fare well: “Packages need good storytelling.” The emotional force of a well-told story can have a much greater impact in motivating donors to reach for their checkbooks.

Genovese says that cat stories tend not to work as well as those about dogs. Also, he notes that pit bull stories can decrease the response to a package unless the messaging focuses on the breed’s valor. (Poor kitties and pitties. We still love you, even if you aren’t cash cows!)

Take care in the tone of your appeals. “We do not run stories that tell donors that if they don’t give that animals will die,” says Stuart. “We believe that people like to support successful organizations, so we share success stories. We don’t believe that donors want to continually throw money at a sinking ship, so rather than focus on dire straits, we tell success stories and let donors know how they can help continue this important work with their donations.”

What role does design and photography play in your packages?
Several sources mentioned that they’re using full-color printing options more often for their mail pieces, and others said that they’re testing whether color makes a difference in terms of response. Vescova is seeing a trend toward using more imagery and less copy, perhaps reflecting reading patterns more evident in online fundraising.

In stories about a particular animal’s rescue, “we try to have actual photographs of the animal in the story,” says Genovese. “Before-and-after shots work well, [and] we do recommend shelters use high-quality photographs, as they will reproduce better and generate superior response.”

Moreover, always remember the appeal of the creatures you serve. “We focus on the positive with cute animal faces,” says Stuart. “You would not see a starving animal or an animal behind bars on [our] direct mail pieces.”

Do your packages ever raise restricted funds that go to support specific programs or projects?
Experts generally agreed that unrestricted funds were the better way to go. “Unless there is a very special project that the donors can get behind, there is usually little benefit to restricting donations,” says Genovese.

There are a few exceptions, and several sources noted that their organizations do raise restricted funds through other venues, but rarely in direct mail. Generally speaking, says DePole, it is easier to raise restricted revenue—for a specific item like the purchase of a vehicle, a building repair, or a humane education program—because it is concrete and tangible for the donor. “But most organizations use direct mail to raise unrestricted funds and leave major gifts to raise restricted funds when needed.”

If you do raise money for a restricted use, think carefully and phrase your messaging accordingly. You don’t want to bring in loads of cash only to get your money managers in a tizzy because you can’t spend them where you really need them. Better to be safe than sorry, and avoid restricting, so that the shelter can always have maximum flexibility. “We are very careful about wording on these and make certain prior to the mailing that we can easily handle the restriction,” says Stuart.

Have donor challenges been effective in your direct mail?
“Typically, they result in a 30 to 60 percent increase in net income,” says Genovese. “They encourage donors to give more. … They work better in renewal, although testing in acquisition has proven they can be effective in acquiring donors, too.”

“Matching challenges have been working well,” says Stuart. “We just sent out a challenge [in which our] board agreed to
take responsibility for matching donors’ gifts up to $50,000. It is still in process, but the results are excellent.”

Vescova, too, has seen strong results. “We recently tested a matching challenge appeal. The match appeal generated a 40 percent higher response rate and a 29 percent higher average gift than last year’s appeal. We also targeted the middle donors with a special variation on the match appeal, and that portion had a very high average gift.”

What strategies are you using to get recipients to simply open the envelopes?
You know how it is: Every day you open the mailbox, and it seems like nothing but circulars, bills, and those pesky charity appeals. Just getting recipients to open your mailings can be the biggest challenge of all.

Sources had some ideas about how to cut through the clutter, though, including using strong taglines on the envelope; sending mail that’s thicker or clearly has something inside of it gets recipients to pull out their letter openers. “Packages with low-cost items, like notepads or address labels, or bulky items, like a coin, are getting noticed and getting opened,” says DePole.

By keeping such premiums inexpensive, you can make the expense well worth the financial outlay. Keep in mind the items shouldn’t be low-quality: “On labels, it’s important that the animals be cute and very clear,” says Genovese. “You want to provide the donor with a premium they want to use, as these have a higher perceived value.”

A little mystery can help, too, says Genovese. “[Totally blank] blind envelopes … can help get an envelope opened.” Also, he notes, a teaser that requires that the donor open the envelope to get the rest of the story can be effective.

How do you ensure that the timing and frequency of mailings to contributors who are already in your donor database are as effective as possible?
You know the old saying “less is more”? Not when it comes to donor contact, says Genovese. “Finding the right mix of mailings is most important. Many organizations don’t realize that frequency of contact is important in maximizing net income,” he notes. “Those organizations that have a full schedule raise the most money. … A mailing every four to six weeks is advised.”

Do you provide donors with business-reply envelopes (BREs) in your packages?
Somewhat surprisingly, several sources confirmed that their testing has indicated that unstamped envelopes—ones that require a donor to add their own stamps to mail the donation—do at least as well as BREs.

What kind of results are you having with premiums—tchotchkes such as address labels and keychains?
With email dominating and the post office considering closures of local branches, you may be surprised to learn that most sources feel that name and address stickers are still an appealing premium. “They add between 5 to 10 cents per mailing, but can result in an increase in response rate of 25 percent to 50 percent,” says Genovese. “And since [address labels are] an inexpensive premium, renewal rates … are high enough to easily justify the outlay for the premium.”

At Arizona Humane, Vescova reports, they’ve seen declining results from mailing-labels-only packages, but sending labels with a notepad as well is getting strong returns.

Do you ask for another donation in your gift acknowledgment letters?
Many charities have a policy against asking for another gift when sending receipts that thank donors for gifts they’ve just sent in. A thank-you letter, the thinking goes, should be just that—and nothing more. Otherwise, donors will feel harassed and irked, and the opportunity for meaningful stewardship will be not only lost, but transformed into an irritant.

But not everyone strictly follows this unspoken rule.
At Newport Creative, “We encourage clients to at least include a return-addressed envelope,” says DePole. “You never know when a generous mood is going to strike your donors, and you’ll want them to have an envelope handy.”

The inclusion of a simple envelope that does not overtly ask for money (often referred to as a “soft ask”) is appropriate, he explains, but shelters should probably avoid
including an envelope that mirrors one of their usual unabashed solicitations.

DaVinci Direct also recommends including a reply envelope with acknowledgments: “The old [saying] that your best prospect for a gift is the donor who has given most recently often holds true. And by including a reply envelope, you can easily pay for your acknowledgment program.”

Koza takes the opportunity to close the loop started with the appeal to which the donor initially responded: “Each thank-you letter we send completes the story that we shared in the solicitation; typically, we are sharing a photo and the story about a dog’s new home. We do include a remit envelope with the letter, although it is a soft ask. It is an envelope specifically designed for tribute donations.”

Is a paper newsletter still a part of your direct mail program?
With so much news and information happening online, is there still a use for a “dead tree communication” to donors? Sources seem to feel there is, though its uses may be shifting. “We produce a biannual publication and include a reply envelope,” says Vescova. “The return on investment isn’t overly impactful, but it’s intended to be a storytelling and donor stewardship piece. The timing of it falls within when we mail our direct mail packages.”

That’s a helpful strategy: When sending direct mail pieces, take other recent points of contact into consideration. If your newsletter just featured a great story about a mother rabbit and her kits who found a great home, that may be fresh in their minds when they get your mailing.

“Newsletters are a great way to inform donors, cultivate them, and to generate additional income,” says Genovese. The most successful programs, he notes, insert the newsletter into an envelope and include both a donation form and envelope. Additionally, a cover letter that encourages donors to read the newsletter by highlighting key elements can add to the package’s success.

“Most organizations,” Genovese says, “see a huge improvement in newsletter income by using these techniques, some on the order of 10-to-1.”
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Stuart says San Diego’s newsletter is helpful, raising around $50,000 annually. “We do a quarterly newsletter with an envelope enclosed. ... It is a very soft ask, and it’s there if the donor misplaced our most recent direct mail piece.”

What role is online fundraising and social media playing in your direct mail program?

“Integration between the channels is no longer a special event in the direct mail calendar,” says DePole. “Nearly every campaign has a built-in online component to complement the direct mail. Online revenue continues to represent a small percentage of the total fundraising, but it’s growing and building.” He believes that, in the future, people will still receive substantive content through the mail, but it will drive online giving—which is more frequently taking place via mobile devices, rather than desktop or laptop computers.

Some say that social media is helping with adoptions and general brand-building, but hasn’t been as useful for fundraising yet. Regardless, trends are always shifting, and coordination and integration of mailed pieces and online fundraising is key; many people prefer the convenience of online giving these days, and printed solicitations should include information on how to use the Web to donate.

“We always have a unique URL on our direct mail pieces for those who want to go online to give,” says Stuart. “We will often place [an image with a caption] on our home page using artwork that corresponds to our direct mail artwork, and that [image] will send people to a unique giving page so we can track it.”

What cost-cutting efforts have you instituted?

Look for production and postage efficiencies to keep costs down, advises DePole: “Paper costs are on the rise, but judicious use of materials and clean design ... keeps costs in check.”

“One way to decrease costs is to limit renewal appeals to segments that show positive net income and use modeling to identify the best prospects for acquisition appeals, thus minimizing mailings to nonproductive names,” says Genovese. By doing high levels of presorting, he says, you can reduce the impact of postal costs.

How are you employing segmentation strategies?

There’s an old joke about a guy who goes into a bar and asks every woman he sees if she’ll, er, go out with him. At some point, he figures, one of them has to say yes.

That’s not an approach you want to use with direct mail: Targeting your messaging is extremely helpful. “Segmented mailings are very important to us,” says Koza. “For example, last year we did a small year-end mailing to multi-year givers using a handwritten note that had a 27.85 percent response. ... We expect to segment even more—for example, not [including] our event participants in direct mail campaigns.”

Genovese says that treating donors differently based on how recently they’ve contributed can help improve attrition rates, and recommends direct mailings vary copy for high- vs. low-level donors and active members vs. former contributors.

How are you treating bigger donors differently in your mail program?

Bigger donors should get a more personal touch, experts suggest. “I recommend special treatment for $250-and-over donors, including closed-faced carrier envelopes and first-class postage,” says Genovese. “[Donors who give] $1,000 and [more] should have their own track, preferably utilizing a giving club or society.”

He also suggests that a live stamp on the reply envelope in packages targeted to bigger donors can enhance revenue, making this extra expense a wise investment. Whereas this result may seem contrary to the indications (noted earlier) that BREs may no longer be necessary, keep in mind that these are packages for higher-level donors. In addition, donors may react differently with the awareness the stamp is money the organization has already spent as a courtesy.

At the SPCA for Monterey County, bigger donors receive two solicitations a year, says Koza. These “are produced in-house, highly personalized, and hand-signed by the board chair and executive director,”—helping high-dollar donors feel more singled out for their support.

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If you are in the market for a vendor to help you with your direct mail, visit the website of the Association of Direct Response Fundraising Counsel (adrfco.org) to find a member firm.