

The Complete Donor Thank You Guide

Create fridge-worthy donor thank yous

WITH EXAMPLE DONOR
THANK YOUS

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ABOUT NETWORK FOR GOOD

Since 2001 Network for Good has been instrumental at helping tens of thousands of nonprofits raise more funds by engaging supporters and donors in a more meaningful and impactful way. Refreshingly easy to use Donor Management Software, Fundraising Pages, and Personal Fundraising Coaches provide nonprofits with a complete fundraising solution, reducing their need for disparate systems, saving them time and enabling them to raise more funds to support their mission.



“But I Already Sent the Gift Receipt”

You might be thinking this is a guide for what to put at the top of the gift receipt. Think again!

Although you should include thank you language in your receipts, the receipt should not serve as your thank you message. Thanking a donor is not a receipt's primary purpose and a true thank you shouldn't include financial information. [Lynne Wester](#), the “Donor Relations Guru”, reminds us that you should apply the same thank you manners you use when thanking grandma for a gift. You wouldn't say “Dear Grandma, thank you for the new pair of jeans from Gap with the retail value of \$45.99”. So why would you say this to your donors?

Read on to find out why a solid thank you is an important step in your donor relations strategy and discover new and creative ways to express gratitude.

Who Gets a Thank You?

Pop quiz: Who should receive a thank you?

- a.** A recurring donor who gives \$15 a month.
- b.** A major donor who gives a \$10,000 gift.
- c.** A first-time donor who gives a \$50 gift.
- d.** A regular donor who gives a gift to a special campaign like #GivingTuesday.
- e.** A new donor acquired through a peer-to-peer fundraising campaign.
- f.** All donors.

If you answered “**f**,” you’re right! Every donor should be thanked for their gift. The type of thank you will vary, but no matter the size of the gift or where it came from, every donor should get a thank you.

“Should I send multiple thank you messages to a recurring giver?”

Have you ever heard of anyone getting mad for receiving too much gratitude? Not at all! Recurring donors are a special group of supporters who love your cause enough to give you a financial commitment on a consistent basis. You should thank these donors as often as you see fit. If that’s an email every quarter, go for it. But listen to donors’ preferences. If a donor provides helpful feedback that the frequency of communication they are receiving is too much (or too little), take it to heart and respect their input.

“Is a thank you note enough for a major donor?”

A thank you note is just the first step in your donor relations strategy. In addition to a thank you note, major donors should receive an appropriate level of recognition for their gift (or the option to remain anonymous), engagement with your organization, and updates on how their gift is used.

Depending on who the donor is and what the funds will be used for, the thank you should come from your executive director or board director. We aren’t discussing the importance of a phone call as a thank you in this guide, but this would be the perfect opportunity for the development director to pick up the phone and chat with a generous donor.

“Can the receipt serve as the thank you for a first-time donor?”

I doubt I’ll see them again.”

It’s an unfortunate but true reality: Most first-time donors won’t return to make a second gift. But with a sound donor relations strategy that starts off with a stellar message of thanks, you could turn this onetime donor into a loyal supporter who gives year after year!

“Is it awkward to send another thank you to someone who gave to a specific campaign?”

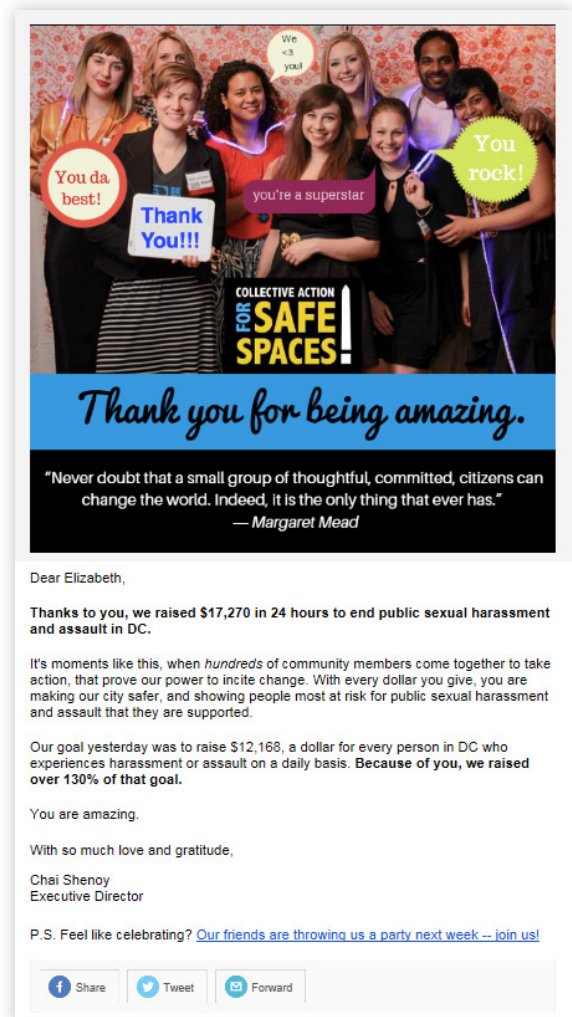
Most definitely not! In this case, your thank you message should focus on how the donor was part of the campaign’s success. If the campaign is ongoing, thank them soon after the gift was made, and then send a second note of thanks to update donors on the campaign’s success. Check out this great #GivingTuesday thank you from Collective Action for Safe Spaces.

Did you notice how many times the word “you” was used in this thank you message? This is an excellent example of what a donor-centric, campaign-specific thank you message should look like.

“Shouldn’t it be the responsibility of the peer fundraiser to thank those who gave to their campaign?”

Sure, but that doesn’t mean that you shouldn’t too.

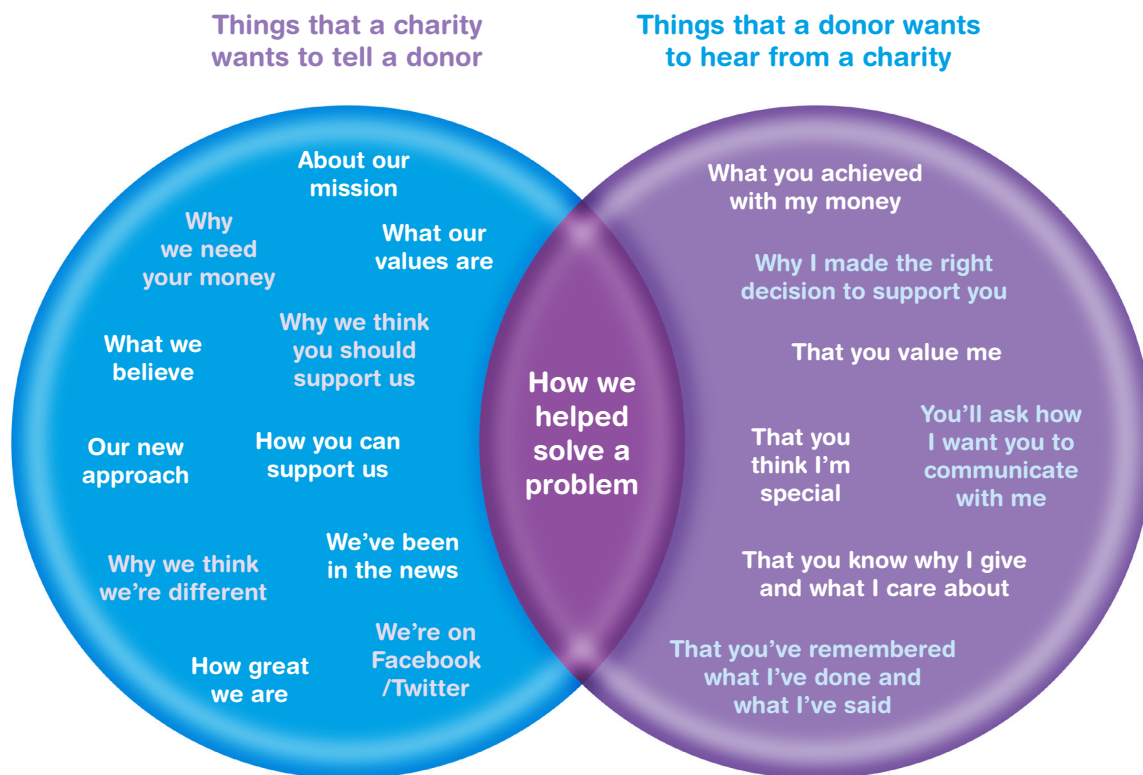
These donors gave to you because a friend asked not necessarily because they are super educated about your nonprofit. How can you show your appreciation and encourage them to stay connected to your organization? The best way to keep these new donors engaged is to start off the relationship right with a proper thank you.



Now that we’ve made it clear that every donor gets a thank you message regardless of who they are or how big the gift, let’s dive into what a thank you message should include (and what should be left out).

What a Donor Wants to Hear

Have you ever read your thank yous from the perspective of your donor? There is a big difference between what your donor wants to hear from you and what you sometimes want to communicate to a donor. If you have a hard time discerning a donor-centric thank you from a “my-nonprofit-is-awesome” thank you, here’s a super helpful [venn diagram](#) from Mark Phillips, CEO of Bluefrog. Avoid statements from the blue circle and instead, focus your donor communication on statements from the purple circle.



Four Qualities of An Amazing Thank You

1. Personal

First things first! Being personal, warm, and authentic with your donors is critical. People expect to have open, honest, and authentic relationships with you. When communicating with your donors, make sure that you are being real and taking them seriously—not just treating them like an ATM.

In addition to creating a warm message, take the time to customize your thank you letters. One way to do this is to segment your audience and to group donors based on the gifts they give so you can message them appropriately. A good email tool should make this easy to do, so take advantage of this option.

If you're doing snail mail outreach, consider writing a handwritten note. We're all doing a lot of email marketing, and we're all used to getting direct mail. It's an unexpected treat to get a handwritten note in the mail. This can really make you stand out from the crowd.

Another way to differentiate your organization is to pick up the phone and tell donors just how important their support really is.

Don't be afraid to do something different and take the time to customize your thank yous. Investing the time to be personal pays off by making a good impression on your donors.

2. Tangible

Your thank you should connect the donor with what they've invested in to a program. It is not enough to say, for example, "Thank you so much for your investment in childcare services," or, "Thank you so much for helping to save the environment." Show exactly how their donation is making a difference.

Donors want to know that their dollars matter, so tell them what you did with their money. One of the best ways you can do this is by telling one specific story of how a donor's gift is making a difference. Stories help make the impact of a gift more real.

If your donors are local, invite people to spend time with you and tour your facility. Show them the work you do, and, if possible, meet some of the people you serve. Let your donors experience and become bonded to your cause. There's nothing like having an unforgettable experience to make a cause tangible.

3. Creative

Don't look at sending thank you letters as drudgery—use it as an opportunity to be creative and connect with your donors. Plan to do something that will differentiate your organization. Sending photos or videos of your work is a fantastic idea. There's nothing quite like telling your story in a picture or a video. This allows you to create a stronger emotional connection with your donors.

Another way to get creative is to let people who love you—some of your best evangelists—speak on your behalf. Instead of sending a thank you note from an executive director, consider sending letters from volunteers, community members, or the person who was directly affected by the gift.



Honor Flight Capital Region's thank you letter included this photo of World War II veterans visiting their memorial. Since Honor Flight raises money to fund trips for veterans to visit their memorial, this was the perfect way to show a donor's gift in action. It can go on the fridge or bulletin board and serve as a nice reminder of the impact a gift made in the lives of these veterans.

4. Donor-Centric

Be mindful of the fact that your donors make your work happen. They should get credit for the work they do. List the accomplishments they've made possible and put them front and center in all of your outreach. Don't just talk about your organization as if it's somehow outside of the work and the investment of your donors.

The idea is that donors made this possible. They get the credit. What did they accomplish? A great thank you letter is not "Thank you for your gift. Here are all the great things we did." As you write your thank you letters, imagine all of the good you do with the donor at the center of it. Strive to make your donors feel that way when they hear from you. Make it about them and the difference they are making together with you.

Four Things to Avoid in a Thank You

1. All About the Nonprofit

After you write your thank you message, count the times you use the words “us,” “our,” and “we.” Now count how many times you used the word “you.” Be sure there are plenty of “yous” throughout the letter, and keep the “we,” “us,” and “our” usage at a minimum. Here’s what an organization-focused thank you message looks like:

Dear Friend,

Thank you for generously donating \$10 to our organization. We are very grateful for your generosity and your support of our mission.

Our work is very important, and what we do is valued in our state. Our organization was formed to aid homeless and abused domestic and farmed animals in Arizona. We assist local humane societies and rescue groups with animals that cannot be adopted into permanent homes. Our mission is to provide lifelong care for these animals and to educate the public about humane animal care and practices, and we are very successful in accomplishing this. We rehabilitate these animals, both physically and psychologically, and, if possible, we work very hard to find appropriate homes for them. In an effort to prevent further cruelty to these animals, we educate the public on caring for companion animals as well as issues concerning farmed animals.

Your in-kind donation helps us to continue the important lifesaving work we do. Again, thank you for your contribution toward our organization. Our work is essential in our state, and donations are how our work is made possible.

Not only is this letter all about the organization and the work they do, there is no emotional story to connect the donor with the cause. From the donor’s perspective, this letter is just words on a page. There is no emotional connection to the organization or the clients they serve, and the donor isn’t shown much appreciation for their gift. Be sure your thank you message is just that: a message of thanks. It’s not the time to explain your organization’s mission (unless this is a donor acquired through a peer-to-peer campaign which should include some education about your nonprofit), to talk about all the great things your organization has done (the message should make the donor feel awesome), or to serve as a receipt.

2. Late

Lynne Wester, author of *The Four Pillars of Donor Relations*, suggests getting thank yous out the door no more than two weeks after a gift has been made. Timeliness on your part shows the donor that their gift was valued and important enough to warrant a prompt thanks. If your donor intake process doesn't allow for a thank you to be delivered quickly, it's time to make a change. This is the first step in forming a positive relationship with your donor, and you want to make a great first impression!

3. Complicated

Thanking donors should not be a complex or a time-consuming process. You aren't expected to overhaul your donor thank you process immediately, but you can focus a few quick wins right now:

- Begin drafting your email thank you letter (see the template included in this guide) for donors who give online.
- Schedule a meeting on your director's calendar to talk about his or her involvement in the thank you process.
- Survey a few donors about your current thank you process. Did they remember receiving a message of thanks?
- [Watch Lynne Wester's webinar](#) about donor relations.

4. The Last Time They Hear From You

Add your donors to your newsletter list, include them in special event invitations, send them holiday greetings, and give them the opportunity to connect with you if they have any questions.

The 4-Step Path to Stronger Thank Yous

As you probably suspected, thank you letters shouldn't be a one-size-fits-all kind of deal. Just like the fundraising appeals that motivated donors to give, your acknowledgments to them should be personal, specific, and emotionally compelling. Making thank you letters a priority now will ultimately help you retain and grow your community of donors.

So, how do you do it? Here are four steps that can help you send timely and accurate appeals, delight your donors, and maintain your sanity in the process.

1. Understand the Results of Your Campaign

The campaign's over, but the fun is just beginning! Now's the time to ask yourself some key questions:

- How many donors gave?
- At what levels?
- Did you have a lot of small amounts or a few large donors carrying the weight?
- Did you meet your goals?
- What will those dollars help you achieve?

Answering these questions will offer you a broad overview of your campaign's results as well as an understanding of impact of individual donations. That information is important to include in your acknowledgements because it reinforces that your donors aren't just giving individual gifts, they're part of a community working toward a common purpose.

2. Keep Your Outcomes in Mind.

Next, take out your crystal ball and imagine you can see into the future. What do you envision? Whether it's reaching higher fundraising goals, encouraging middle donors to become event sponsors, or offering donors opportunities to learn about your programs, get clear about what you want to accomplish. Then, use your thank you letters and subsequent outreach to help make those goals become reality.

3. Equip yourself with the right tools.

To get the most out of your fundraising and to communicate with donors in the right ways at the right times, you absolutely need a tool that helps you analyze trends and tracks more than gift amounts. This tool should help you easily store, sort, and retrieve donor information. Hint: Excel is not that tool.

You'll save yourself (and your staff, and your donors, and... you get the idea) a lot of time and headache by implementing a [donor management system](#) focused on nonprofit fundraising. Need to get this in place? We can help. [Get a personal tour](#) of our easy-to-use donor management system created with nonprofits like yours in mind.

4. Divide and conquer.

Now that you're clear on what's happened and what you need to do, it's time to segment your donors and start tailoring your message to fit their experiences with your organization. If you've never done segmentation before, it's ok to start small and keep it simple. Here are a few ideas to help you think about which groups might make sense for your donors.

- Segment by giving level: It's important to thank donors based on the amounts that they gave. You'll want to mention their gift amount, but also illustrate the impact their gift will have. Plus, different donors need different acknowledgments. An email or postcard might be a great thank you for a \$20 donor, but a \$2,000 donor should get something more personal, like a handwritten note from your Executive Director. Decide which actions you'll take for each level and make a plan to get it done.
- Segment by entry point: Donors that come in via peer fundraising campaigns or social media might need a different type of welcome than event attendees or those already on your email list. Consider how your thank you can both welcome and educate donors about your work and their role in making it happen. (Note: you shouldn't pack all of this into one email, but think about how your thank you letter provides the right introduction.)
- Segment by giving history: Do you have regular annual donors? Monthly donors? Donors who gave this year but haven't in years past? First-time donors? You guessed it: take the time to create tailored messages for these different donors.

Looking for more information on targeting donors? Barbara O'Reilly's [Donor Segmentation 101](#) is a great place to learn about the building blocks of this important fundraising strategy.

Regardless of your organization's overall fundraising approach, it's important that the specific thank you letters your donors receive are closely tied to the campaign and actions they took when they made their donations. It's not just the right and polite thing to do; it's smart fundraising in action.

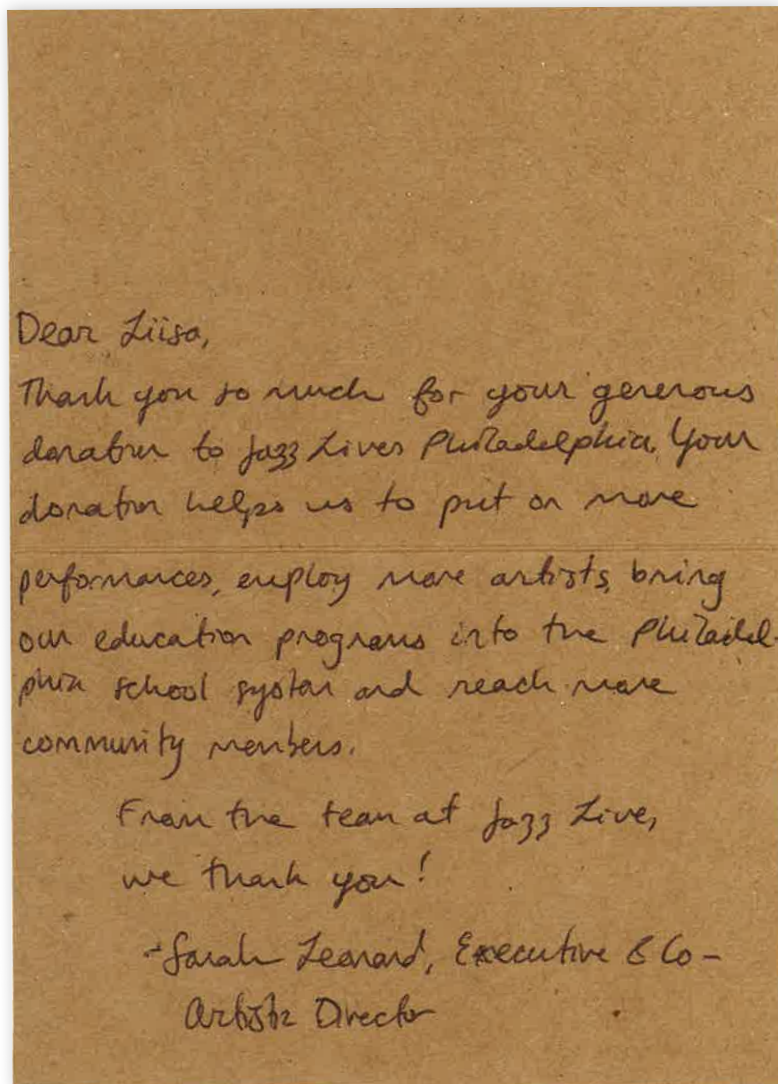
Example Donor Thank Yous

To help get the creative juices flowing, we collected some favorite thank yous that Network for Good staffers have personally received and some submissions that our nonprofit friends have sent us in addition to other examples shared online.

Kudos to all the of the nonprofits and donors who shared their thank yous!

Jazz Lives Philadelphia

[Jazz Lives Philadelphia](#) sends a handwritten thank you message to donors for gifts large and small. A member of Network for Good's product team, Liisa, received this after giving \$5 dollars. Also great? They spelled her name correctly!



Bald Girls Do Lunch

Bald Girls Do Lunch sent this thank you letter to donors at year-end.

Dear Helen,

You make me smile with thanks. You made my day! Your ongoing support of Bald Girls Do Lunch with an end of year gift helps us so much. It goes to work right away to keep our "big umbrella" open and bring women with alopecia areata under it all year long.

I've got some highlights to share about the coming year — made possible because of your annual support.

- Our Alopecia Care Kits™ for newly diagnosed women are sure filling up! While the HeadBlade corporation got us started with the cases, other sponsors are joining in. They are stuffed!
- The new BGDL booklet: Alopecia Areata and You: Tips for Women is the inspiring and fun centerpiece of the kit. I know that any woman who reads it will be on better footing as she starts coping with her alopecia. It's what I wish I had had when I first heard "It's alopecia." Your support of BGDL makes this all possible!
- The volunteer alopecia ambassadors are joyfully coaching via phone, email and over coffees. Donor support enables expansion of this program. We're launching a series of volunteer training webinars in 2017.
- Healthcare providers: this is where we do new outreach to dermatology doctors and nurses. With your help, we've proven that our women-centered format is powerful and effective. Thank you for helping it grow!

Helen, thank you for helping move Bald Girls forward to do even more than ever for women suffering with their alopecia.

With very best regards,
Thea D. Chassin
Founder and CEO

Gardens for Health International

[Gardens for Health](#) asked some of its constituent communities to take photos with customized thank you signs. In a world where mass communication is the most cost-effective route, personalization at this level is often unexpected.



Project Transformation Oklahoma

[Project Transformation](#) updated the header on their newsletter to include this message of thanks after a successful year-end campaign.



THANK YOU!

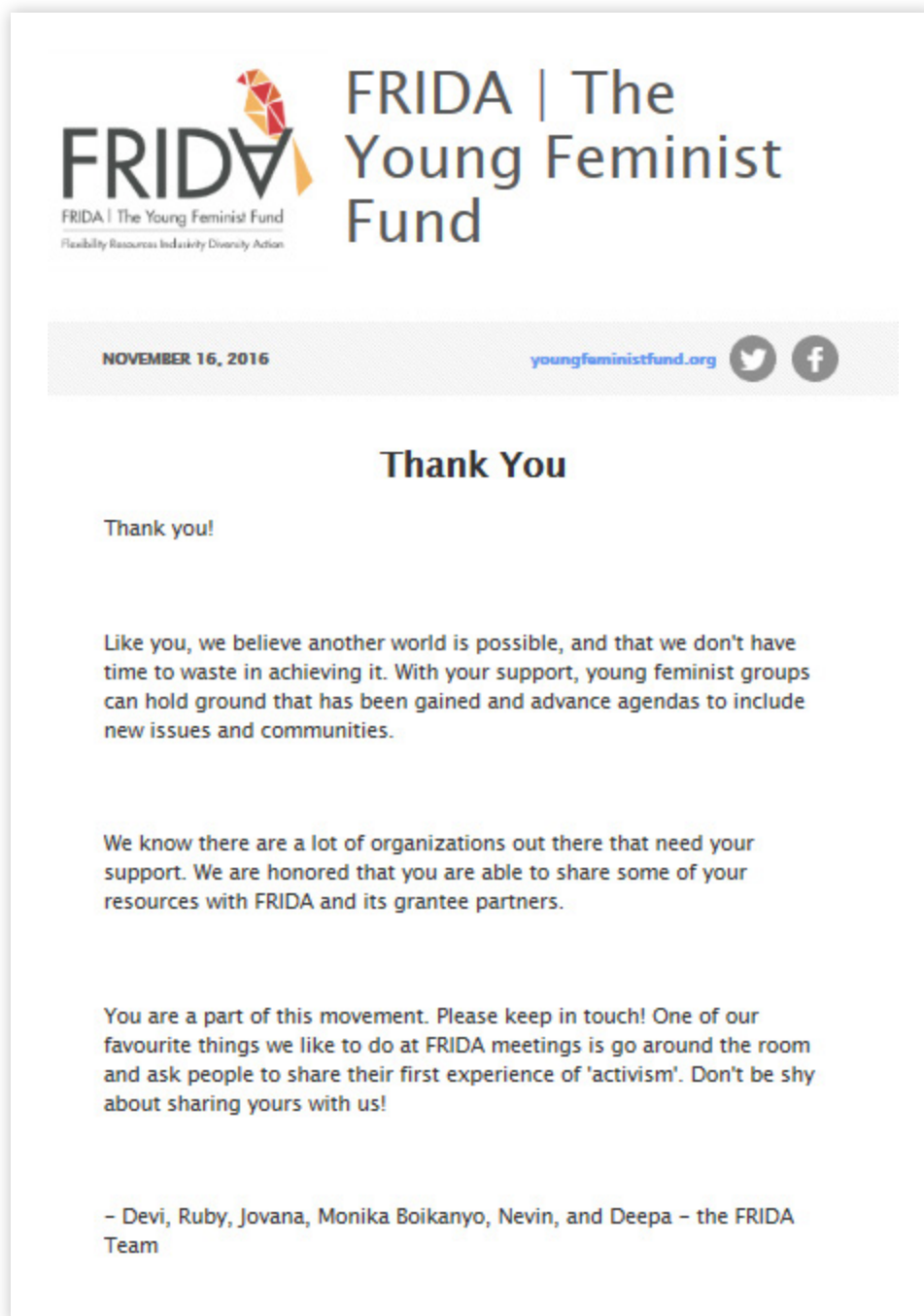
Project Transformation's End-of-Year giving campaign secured funds to continue our incredible work in 2017, and we couldn't have done it without YOU!

Your financial support will create opportunities for hundreds of Oklahoma's children.

Thank you for supporting Project Transformation; joining a team that continues to *Transform Lives Through Relationships!*

FRIDA Fund

[FRIDA Fund](#) automatically generates this thank you email signed by their entire staff after an online gift is made.



Firecracker Foundation

To get the conversation started with donors, [Firecracker Foundation](#) Founder Tashmica Torok, sends this plain text email to thank them for their online gift, gather some more information about the donors' interest in their organization, and let them know they will be hearing from them again soon.

Dear Laura,

Your generosity is so appreciated.

There are now 8 children and their families seeking holistic healing services through The Firecracker Foundation.

Without you, affording that care would be impossible.

Boom! Here you are. Out of nowhere.

How did you hear about this opportunity to invest in the whole healing of children?

Hit reply and let me know what inspired you to give.

A legit note of thanks will be sailing to you shortly.

I just needed to send you a heartfelt message of thanks first.

Sincerely,

Tashmica 'Firecracker' Torok


Water4

Check out this personal, [long form video Water4](#) made for one of their board members and biggest supporters.




Project Healing Waters Fly Fishing

Right after #GivingTuesday, [Project Healing Waters Fly Fishing](#) thanked their online donors with a Facebook message.





**Project Healing Waters Fly Fishing, Inc.**
2 hrs · 🌐

"My pain is soothed, to listen to it, it speaks and drowns the memories of somber times from past. I take each step knowing, I'm not alone anymore. I've found the healing water."
- U.S. Army Veteran / Iraq

This holiday season help more veterans find their healing waters:
<http://www.projecthealingwaters.org/Donations/GivingTuesday.aspx>



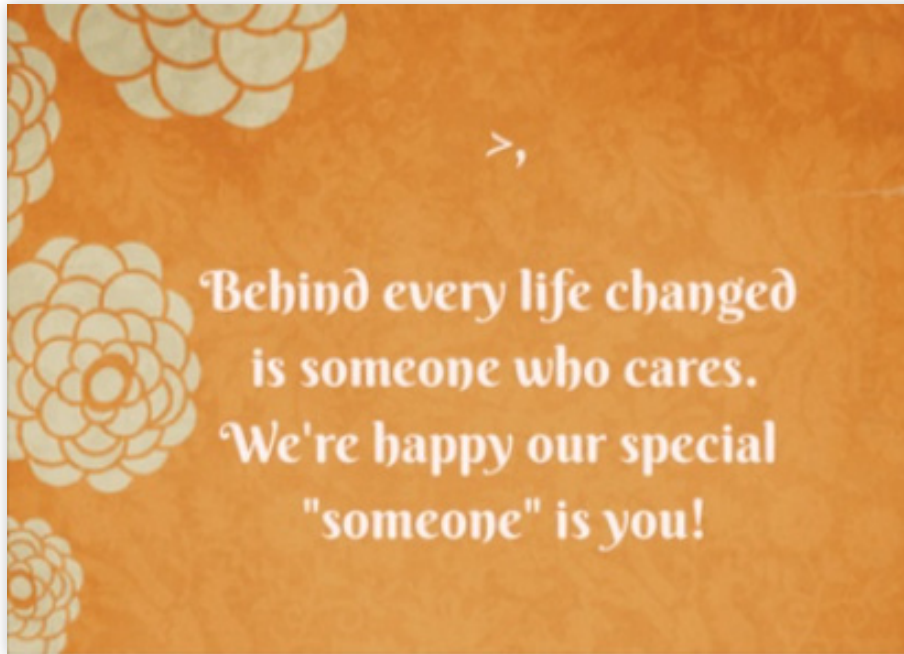
233 Likes 1 Comment 36 Shares

 Like  Comment  Share ·  Hootlet

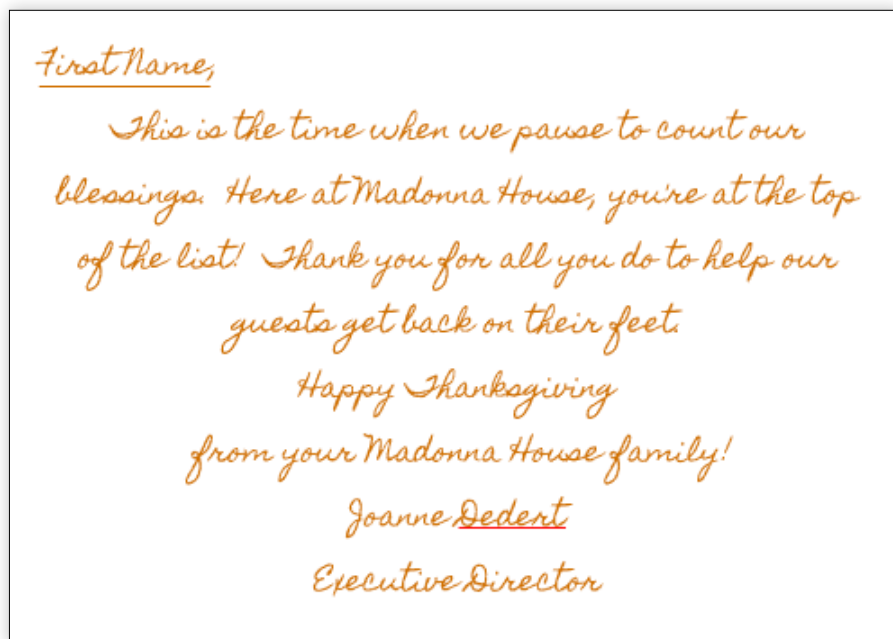
Madonna House

Instead of a traditional Christmas Card, [Madonna House](#) sends a [customized Thanksgiving Card](#) to donors.

The front of the card is customized with a donor's first name.





Inside, the card is "signed" by the organization's Executive Director



Denver Scholarship Foundation

[Denver Scholarship Foundation](#) used a holiday-themed thank you email and included a video message from one of their students expressing her gratitude for support provided by the foundation.

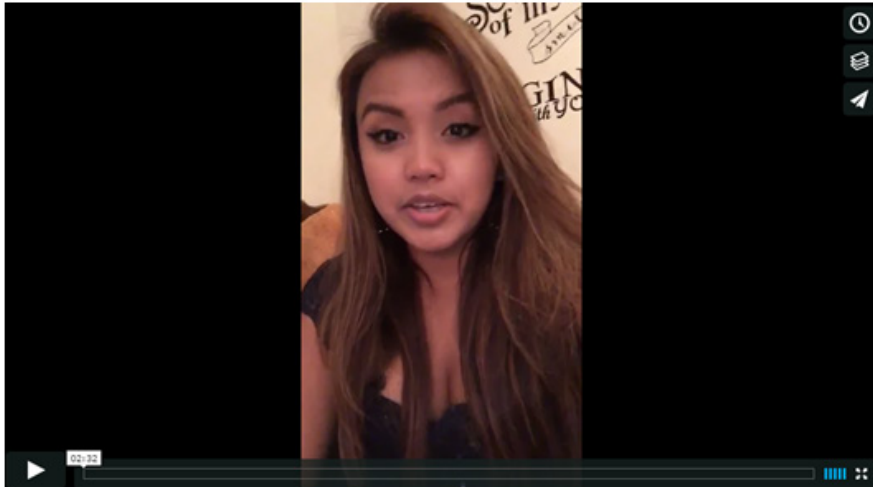
December 23, 2016



Dear **Latia**,

From all of us at Denver Scholarship Foundation, we wish you joy and peace this holiday season! Because of supporters like you, Denver Scholarship Foundation continues to make college possible for Denver Public Schools graduates.

Your support makes a difference in the lives of students across Denver. Watch the video below to see how the George Washington High School Future Center has impacted Theresia.



We look forward to continuing to support students on their way to and through college in the New Year. Happy Holidays!

Beyond the Written Thank You Letter

Ready to go above and beyond with your thank yous? Here are nine more ways to show your donors some love:

- Send a birthday card to donors, and remind them that they are important to the work your organization accomplishes.
- Have your board members personally call donors to say thanks.
- Ask those who directly benefit from donations to write a handwritten note of thanks. Animal organizations could try letting their clients express their thanks to donors with a special piece of artwork.
- Create a YouTube video to thank donors when you reach a campaign goal. Great examples of this are Charity: Water's fifth birthday thank you videos.
- Have some exciting news to share? Send a special announcement to donors with images and a big, bold note to thank them for making the accomplishment possible.
- Invite donors to a thank you reception. You'll show your appreciation and get face time with your donors, giving you the opportunity to learn more about why they support your organization.
- Many organizations send thank you cards and year-end appeals during the November/December holiday season. Don't overlook other holidays as occasions to express your love and thanks.
- Dedicate social media shout-outs to thank and recognize donors.
- Send donors a top 10 list of accomplishments for the year to demonstrate how donations make an impact—and then make it clear that without their support, you wouldn't have a top 10 list.

Thank You Lessons from N Street Village



N Street Village is a Washington, DC-based nonprofit (and Network for Good customer) that has a mission to help homeless and low-income women achieve personal stability. The impact N Street Village has on these women's lives is obvious, and the organization goes above and beyond to show donors this impact with a stellar donor appreciation program.



Network for Good interviewed Chief Development Officer Stuart Allen to get the inside scoop on what makes their donor thank you and donor retention strategy so successful. Plus, Stuart shares donor relations tips that your nonprofit should definitely try!

When does a N Street Village donor get a thank you?

Stuart Allen: If they gave online, they automatically get that thank you and tax receipt. From there, it takes at most a week for a donor to get a hand-signed thank you note in the mail. We try to personalize the mailed thank you note in the signature section if we can, but it gets a little hectic at year-end, when there are more donations, so the personalized signatures get a tad shorter.

How do you thank your donors and what kind of work goes into making a thank you memorable?

SA: Everyone who donates receives a hand-signed thank you, but we do go a little deeper by knowing and understanding our donors and segmenting our data. We tier our donors based on our stewardship matrix, which segments audiences based on giving levels, first-time donors, lapsed donors, increased gifts, etc.

For **first-time donors**, normally after our fundraising events, when we see a spike in first-time donors, we have a phone bank event with N Street Village clients. Our client-volunteers call new donors and personally thank them or invite them to take a tour of our community so they can see what their donation supports. This helps strengthen a connection with first-time donors. The clients who volunteer to help really enjoy participating in the fundraising and thank you process.

Lapsed donors are another approach: We'll run a list in our database and find out who has lapsed or might not have given

recently or as frequently as they used to and try to reengage them. Our annual report comes out in the fall, and we'll see who we want to email and send them a copy of our annual report with news of what's happening around N Street Village. We'll also include in our message to lapsed donors that we miss them and invite them to check out our community or welcome a call to catch them up. If we have new data or a big story to share, that's generally when we try to tend to that group.

For **bigger donors** or people who have been giving for a long time, we get our board members to help with these thank yous. I have a stat (you can see that stat [here](#)) that reflects what kind of impact a board member thank you call can make on a donation, so we make it as easy as possible for our board to complete a set of personalized thank yous. That means we give them pre-addressed note cards and envelopes with stamps, as well as plenty of background on why we're thanking these donors specifically. It is important to make sure your board follows through with the thank yous, because the donor obviously needs to be thanked.

What advice would you give to nonprofits that want to get their volunteers or constituents involved in thank yous or fundraising?

SA: Make sure the thank you is genuine and feels right and doesn't make anyone feel awkward—the volunteer or the donor. Try and keep thank you calls specifically to stewardship messages so the donor doesn't feel pressured to give again right then and there. Also, make it easy and fun for the volunteers. We educate our volunteers on what they can or should say and what to expect when they're on the phone speaking with donors so they can feel comfortable calling on behalf of our organization.

If someone wants to write a thank you card instead of making a call, that's another great way to get people involved. The thing that keeps our volunteers coming back and keeps them excited is when they know their call or letter influenced a positive action like second gift, so we try to let them know they're really doing an awesome job.

What advice would you give to a nonprofit that is building or improving its donor thank you strategy?

SA: First, make it manageable so you can keep your thank yous consistent. Choose a thank you method that you know will be doable, and make sure you can acknowledge donors in a timely manner.

Second—and working off the first—is that it's never too late to say thank you! It may feel weird, but it's really never too late, and there's always something you can share about what their gift helped to accomplish. Don't beat yourself up or skip a thank you.

Last, remember to make it personal. Acknowledge what campaign or fund they donated to and what impact that gift had for your nonprofit. Keeping that messaging consistent will remind them why they donated in the first place.

Thank You Letter Template

Start your donor relationships off right! Send a stellar thank you message to all donors in a timely fashion.

SALUTATION

Make sure donor's name is spelled correctly.

Dear

INTRO

Start with a vivid image or short story of what the donor made possible.

THANK YOU

Say thank you and give the donor credit for the impact of their donation. If the gift was to a campaign or fund, customize your letter to include specifics on what their donation accomplished.

CONTACT

Tell donors how they can be in touch with you. Include your phone number, email, and website.

SIGNATURE

Tell your donors thanks one more time and sign a real person's name.

Keep in mind: Receipts and thank yous are two separate pieces of donor communication.