

16 Tips for Writing Charitable Contribution Statements



The contribution statement might be one of the most underutilized communication and giving mechanisms within churches today.

There is a reason traditional nonprofits raise more money through this channel than most churches. They recognize it is more than a utilitarian effort or legal obligation. They know that connecting every dollar with impact is essential to building trust and confidence in the mind of the giver. And you don't do this only once but again and again and again. If you are willing to put a little thought into it, it will pay dividends for you.

Here are some common observations I share with churches related to contribution statements that might help you reframe the role they play in your ministry funding model:

1. ***The quality of paper, ink, and envelopes you use matters more than you think.***

Don't use the cheapest paper possible. How you present your church—even on paper—matters.

2. ***Make it personal.*** Lose the “Dear Friend” opening. You know the name and address (personal information) of everyone who has given to you in a way that can be tracked. Variable data is your friend.

3. ***It should be story-driven.*** Include a letter with the giver's record of giving that includes a celebration of the measurable ministry accomplished. This letter should also highlight where the ministry is today and where you'd like the ministry to be in the coming months.

4. ***It can be longer than one page.*** Some of the most compelling direct mail packets used today are lengthy by design. Don't buy into the lie that people don't read. They don't read bad writing. They will read what they deem compelling, relevant, and specific to them.

5. ***Make it readable.*** Use bullets, subheads, and so on. Avoid long, recurring paragraph blocks. Account for different types of readers. Give a reader the ability to scan first and read in detail second.

6. ***Limit the church speak and euphemisms.*** Talk like a human. This is where stories and statistics are important. They transcend history and vocabulary. Insider speak can make someone feel like an outsider. That's the last thing you want a giver to feel.

7. ***Remind them of what they already know and show them progress toward a really big goal.*** The people in your pews have more ways and places to give today than in the history of charitable giving. If you can't demonstrate measurable progress toward larger-than-life goals, you won't be able to build the trust you need to compel them to continue to give.

8. ***Make an ask.*** Tell the reader what it is that you want them to do. Don't leave it up to the reader to figure it out.

9. ***Don't forget the P.S. line.*** Some readers will skip right to the P.S. line. It's okay if it's the length of a paragraph. Make sure there is enough information to summarize the letter in the event that is the only part of the letter the giver reads.

10. ***Include YTD comparisons at the bottom to help people see how they are doing.*** Everyone likes to keep score. You'll be surprised how many people will make an immediate, additional gift to "catch up" or surpass last year just by providing this comparison.

11. ***Offer a postage-paid envelope to make an additional gift.*** Don't make the reader hunt for an envelope and a stamp. If you want them to act, make it easy, immediate, and painless. The incremental cost will be negligible.

12. ***Send them quarterly.*** At least. Frequency is important. The primary function is communication. More frequent is better. People forget. Heck, they probably can't even remember the sermon after lunch on Sunday. (Sorry Pastors!)

13. ***Include all donors for the current and previous year.*** As you pull together your list, this is an excellent opportunity to re-engage a potentially lost donor. Don't be afraid of the ONE PERSON who is going to call you heaping mad that he or she was sent a contribution statement. Watch as many of those who have "gone missing" suddenly re-engage.

14. ***Give them someone to contact if they have questions.*** Include a name, real email address, and phone number. Almost no one will use this, but it conveys that the giver matters enough to capture the attention of someone on staff.

15. **Consider offering a link to a digital channel that complements and supplements the printed channel.** Statistics show that nearly one-third of all online donations originated from a direct mail letter. Shocking. I know. But it's true.

16. **Don't let your work die with this one method of communication.** Coordinate your communication around ministry and impact across all your channels to create a consistent and regular message that allows a broad section of your givers to remain plugged in and informed.

Honoring the Relationship or Fleecing the Flock?

Contribution statements will go to people in your congregation who have already given to you. That means you're talking to people who already believe in you. Give them something tangible that shows them how they have made a difference by giving to your church.

The goal of beefing up your contribution statements isn't to fleece the flock. Rather, the goal is to honor the relationship and contract the giver made with you when they invested their charitable dollars with your church. Contribution statements are a perfect vehicle to remind donors that you are investing their dollars wisely to earn an eternal dividend.

I challenge you to experiment with your next contribution statement. Try something different and see what happens. I suspect you'll be surprised at the response you receive.

By Ben Stroup, "Managing Your Church," Church Law & Tax, November 3, 2015.