

# Development for Conservation

## How to Write Killer Fundraising Letters

Presented at

**River Rally - 2018**

**Olympic Village, California**

2 May 2018

**David Allen, Development for Conservation**



**DEVELOPMENT  
FOR  
CONSERVATION**



<http://www.developmentforconservation.com/about-us/resources/>



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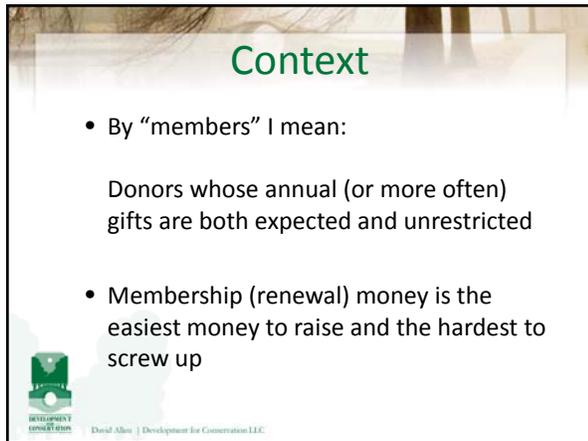
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## Context

- By “members” I mean:  
  
Donors whose annual (or more often) gifts are both expected and unrestricted
- Membership (renewal) money is the easiest money to raise and the hardest to screw up



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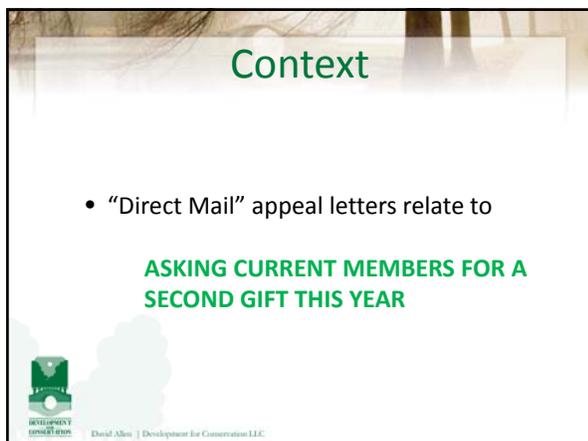
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## Context

- “Direct Mail” appeal letters relate to

**ASKING CURRENT MEMBERS FOR A SECOND GIFT THIS YEAR**



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Context

**OR**

ASKING NON MEMBERS TO "JOIN"  
MAKE A FIRST GIFT

**NOT** renewing members



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Acknowledgements

- Jeff Brooks, The Fundraiser's Guide to Irresistible Communications
- The Nature Conservancy



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Nine Rules for Writing Irresistible Appeals



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## Rule #1

If you're not testing, you're not learning.



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## Testing

- A/B Tests – make sure everything else is held constant
- Code the response cards
- Make sure each test group is demographically identical



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## To get an A/B List

- Start with an Excel spreadsheet file of the mailing list
- Sort by zipcode first and then by street address
- Create a new column "A"
- A1 = 1
- A2 = if(A1=2,1,A1+1)
- Copy that formula for each cell below A2



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## Rule #2

The secret to good writing is  
in the editing.



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## Why People Give

People give because they believe:

- what you are doing is worth doing,
- you can get it done, and
- their gift will make a difference.



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## Editing

- Every number in your draft letter is suspect. Take 'em out.
- Use the we/us/our filter: do these pronouns include the reader?



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## Editing

- Use the Flesch-Kincaid reading ease tool and write letters at the 6<sup>th</sup> grade level (OK, maybe 8<sup>th</sup>)
- Is there an ask on each page? Is the ask clear and obvious?



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## Sample from Vermont

Because our work is not just about a legal transaction, but about building relationships over time and providing an ongoing service, we give our members the opportunity to make additional gifts during their membership year. Today I ask you to please consider making that extra gift.



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## Sample from Oregon

Please contribute to this effort and please join us on upcoming *Connect with the Land* tours, volunteer work parties and gatherings at Green Island and other MRT protected lands. And help spread the word on how *your* investments in clean water and shade trees bring smiles, and happiness, and life to a river. Thank you for your support of the McKenzie River Trust.



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**Sample from Wisconsin**

Your holiday donation of \$100 will go a long way toward helping us with our mission to create, support, & protect the Ice Age Trail. Will you help us make 2016 even better?



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Let's make 2016 even better!

You can help by making a \$100 holiday donation today. Together, we will create, support, & protect the Ice Age Trail – one step at a time!



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**Rule #3**

Don't tell me, SHOW me.

(In words, that is)



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## Tell a Story

- Stories convey emotion
- Stories stimulate the imagination
- Stories move us to action
  
- Make it a story about one person
- Make it first person
- Make the donor the hero



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## Rule #4



### Technique matters.

(Don't trust yourself and don't trust your donors when it comes to technique.)



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## Useful Techniques

- Write longer letters
- Include a PS Note
- Communicate urgency
- Tell a story, or several
- Be corny, be obvious
- Clearly ask for a specific amount of money
- Have an ask on every page



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**Rule #5**

Design for older, female eyes.



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**Design**

- 13 pt type
- 1.15 pt line spacing
- Double space between paragraphs
- 1.25 inch margins
- Serif font
- High contrast paper
- Minimal graphics; no print over graphics



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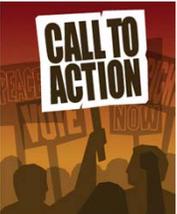
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**Rule #6**

Have a Call to Action.  
Make it urgent.  
Make it specific.



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## Specificity

Your support could bring hope to some special kids.

Your gift of \$25 or more – sent by December 31 – will give low-income kids in our community soccer uniforms, so they can compete joyfully in this character-building sport.



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Please join today with a gift of \$100 or more. Help make it possible for James and thousands like him to learn about nature. To even imagine that he could be a Naturalist.



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## Rule #7

Segment your file.

Tailor the response cards.



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### Segmentation

- Board and former board members
- \$1,000-plus members
- \$250-999 members
- \$100-249 members
- \$99-minus members
- Lapsed members
- Event only donors



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### Response Cards

- Keep it simple
- Include a space for email and phone numbers
- Have several boxes for gift amounts, but not too many
- “Other” is outside the largest gift amount, not the smallest
- Use the reverse side for a special message



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### Rule #8

## Texture Matters



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## Texture Ideas

- Include a real photo
- Include a leaf or pressed flower
- Or Bookmark
- Use a real stamp
- Use a textured stock



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## Non-Traditional Looks

- Newsprint
- Greeting Cards
- Postcards
- Multichannel Communications



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## Rule #9

Rewrite your letters to be donor-centric.



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## Writing and Editing Fundraising Letters

Writing and editing fundraising letters is better thought of as an exercise in technical writing, than as writing actual letters. There are techniques, rules, and form to the exercise that, if followed closely, will help you raise more money. Many of these techniques are counter-intuitive. But they are accepted because when they are tested against a control, they outperform the control. If any one of them strikes you as wrong for your organization, we suggest that you test it before you accept a different idea.

### Rules for writing letters:

- Start with a story. Return to the story at several points in the letter.
- List your board members down the left hand side of the first page.
- Use 1.25" margins, 13pt type, and double space between paragraphs.
- Run the letter to four pages.
- Use graphics **ONLY** to draw attention to specific points in the text.
- Don't use photos and if you do anyway, never type words over them.
- Always include a PS note and use the PS to reiterate the urgency in the letter.
- Ask for a specific amount of money.
- Ask on every page.

### Rules for editing letters:

- 90% of all the numbers that get put in letters are unimpressive and meaningless. Take them out. When you leave a number in, make sure it's a number the reader can relate to. Hint: few people know how big an acre is.
- Go through your letter with a highlighter and mark every mention of the pronouns "we," "us," and "our." If they don't explicitly include the reader, change them such that they do. For example, "We live in a beautiful place," includes the reader. "Your gift will help accelerate our work," does not.
- Measure the readability of the letter on the Flesch-Kincaid scale (available through Microsoft Word). Edit to a 6-8<sup>th</sup> grade level by reducing compound subjects and predicates, limiting four-syllable words, and writing consistently in the active voice.
- Is there a clear ask on every page? Is the ask specific? If not, build one in.

## PRACTICE

### From Maryland...

So please give what you can for this, our final fundraiser for the year and last chance to balance the books. To do so will put us in position next year to:

- Develop the plan for the use of Holly Hill, including trails and conservation techniques
- Advance land conservation approaches throughout Calvert County
- Continue all of our great events and programs, and
- Save the next piece of land!

### From Arizona...

We have more work to do and your support can help in so many ways – it helps us provide education, helps give us the means to stay ahead of the bulldozers, and helps ensure the lands we secure are safeguarded forever.

With your generous support, we will continue to make strides for Sonoran Desert conservation.

### From Oregon...

As a friend of the Trust, you've had a hand in conserving nearly 5,000 acres of land and water in eastern Oregon, from headwater streams to forested wetlands, open spaces, and coastal rivers. In 2017 alone, you helped bring three new properties into conservation, stretching from the Cascade mountains to the Pacific Ocean.

Please consider a year-end gift now to support our work together.

# DAVID ALLEN

I am a non-profit organizational development consultant. I work with nonprofit organization boards to help their members learn how to be better leaders and advocates.

My background includes 30 years working in membership fundraising, major donor development, communications, and marketing. I worked for about half that time for Nature Conservancy (TNC) chapters in Oregon, Texas, and Wisconsin. In addition to my duties for the individual chapters, I served TNC as an internal fundraising consultant and major gift development trainer.



In 2000, I served as the vice-president of operations for the Wisconsin-based, international conservation organization Sand County Foundation, a position I held through mid-2009.

Gathering Waters Conservancy, a land trust service agency based in Wisconsin, called me in 2002 to ask whether I would be interested in teaching a seminar for Wisconsin land trusts on major donor development. From 2002, then, through 2009, I consulted on a nights and weekends basis with just a few clients each year.

In March of 2009, I launched my consulting business full-time using the name **Development for Conservation**.

Also in 2009, I partnered with Nancy Moore to form Conservation Consulting Group. Together we help land trusts prepare for accreditation by providing assessment, planning, and leadership coaching services.

I consider myself a strategic thinker, problem solver, facilitator, educator, and program developer who brings a particular passion for conservation and the environment.

## **Practice Competencies**

### *Fundraising*

- Development Audit
- Staff/Board Training and Development
- Major Gift Coaching
- Capital Campaigns

### *Organizational Development*

- Strategy Development
- Practice & Process Assessment
- Problem Solving Facilitation
- Marketing

**David Allen**

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