



# The Key to Meaningful Donor Thank You's: Understanding the "Why"

**How to Determine Why People Give and Volunteer  
and What Rewards are Truly Consequential**

*"The thank-you letter is the most important piece of communication a donor receives."*

– Dr. Adrian Sargeant, Director, Centre for Sustainable Philanthropy, University of Plymouth

**Brainstorm Exercise + Tips to Energize Your Thank You Letters and Emails**

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## How to Use This Resource

**Use these tips as a checklist for creating rewarding donor acknowledgments that will be meaningful to your supporters – speaking to *why* they supported you in the first place.**

**Knowing what motivates people to give can be a window** into what type of thank you will be significant and appreciated. You want to craft an acknowledgment that speaks not just to *what* they gave, but to *why*.

### **COMMON PROBLEM:**

So many thank you letters begin with “*Thanks so much for your gift of \$XXX to XYZ charity.*” That’s dry and boring and does nothing to reinforce the *reason* your donor gave in the first place. For them, it wasn’t about the money. It was about what that money would accomplish.

So... don’t lead the letter with the money!

### **CREATIVE SOLUTION:**

**How different would it be if you began with “*Congratulations!*”**

- *Because you reached out with your gift, Sammy has a chance at a future.”*
- *Timmy will go to sleep with a full tummy tonight, because you cared.”*
- *Children who’ve never been more than a few blocks from their poor neighborhood will have their eyes opened to a whole new world, because of your thoughtful gift of theater tickets.”*
- *Water that wouldn’t have been drinkable will soon quench the thirst of 100 people, because you cared.”*

Of course, people give for different reasons. That’s why you need a thank you letter that channels what your donors really care about. It’s best not to guess.

**FIND OUT WHAT YOUR DONORS CARE ABOUT!**

**TO DO: One simple way to find out what inspires your supporters is to ask a random sampling of donors “*what motivates your giving?*”**

Here are three different ways to ask:

1. **Include a blank space in your remit/reply device that asks simply: “*What one word or phrase best describes why you give?*”** (I’ve had folks say things like “caring,” “children,” “giving back,” “doing the right thing,” “repairing the world,” “seniors need help,” “I want to share with others,” and so forth).
2. **Call a random sample of donors** and ask them this question.
3. **Send a one question survey** via Survey Monkey or Google Docs (both have free versions). Offer multiple choices for ease of tallying responses.

**Then... brainstorm some ways you might make your thank you letters more meaningful** based upon the responses you receive.

## **CREATE YOUR OWN BRAINSTORM EXERCISE**

**EXAMPLE:** Imagine your supporters told you they wanted to “give back.” What is a phrase you might include in your thank you letter?

1. *By giving back, you’re making it possible for Cherie to become the first in her family to graduate from college.*
2. *Not everyone gives back. Were there more people like you, cancer wouldn’t stand a chance. Thank you for helping us get closer to a cure.*
3. *Life is filled with surprises. Sometimes we’re on the receiving end; other times we’re blessed to be able to give. Thank you for sharing your blessings and continuing the circle of giving, assuring others get the help they need.*

**EXAMPLE:** Imagine your supporters told you they're most motivated by stories of needy children. What might you include in your thank you letter?

1. *Because you cared, Sammy now has a roof over his head. Please allow me to tell you a bit about him, and about how your donation helped.*
2. *You are a hero! Even though you and Lisa have never met, she is thinking about you as her fairy god-mother – because your gift changed her life!*

**CREATE YOUR OWN EXERCISE BASED ON FEEDBACK YOU RECEIVED**

**X% of our supporters said they were motivated to give by our reputation for effectiveness.** Based on that feedback, we could thank folks by writing:

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

**X% of our supporters said they were motivated to give by our reputation for compassionate care.** Based on that feedback, we could thank folks by writing:

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- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

**X% of our supporters said they were motivated to give by \_\_\_\_\_**  
Based on that feedback, we could thank folks by writing:

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

**X% of our supporters said they were motivated to give by** \_\_\_\_\_  
Based on that feedback, we could thank folks by writing:

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

Or you can simply borrow some of the responses from previous [Cygnus Donor Surveys](#) and consider how the responses of 31,000 Americans and Canadians might inform your acknowledgment process (see below).\*

## TIPS TO ENERGIZE YOUR ACKNOWLEDGMENT PROCESS

**\*Here’s why folks care and why they give:**

*“I love being invited to volunteer for the organizations I support, to make a more personal connection in addition to the connection I already feel to the cause through giving.”*

- Do your thank you letters offer opportunities for involvement** beyond being a donor? What opportunities could you refer to in your thank you letter, or maybe just include on an inserted sheet or add as a link in your email thank you?

[HINT: Consider direct service volunteer opportunities, committees; advisory groups; focus groups; free events and tours]

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*“Even though my giving is modest, it represents a financial sacrifice for me. It’s important to me to support organizations I strongly believe in, even if I can only give an amount that probably won’t make much of a difference.”*

- Do you thank every donor, regardless of size,** letting them know their gift is meaningful? Do you tailor the letter so you don’t sound ridiculous (e.g., “*Thanks so much for your extraordinarily generous gift that will end cancer*” when the donor gave \$10 and knows full well they can’t end cancer)? What are some ways you could modify your thank you language for donors of different amounts – recognizing that you likely have major donor prospects who are now giving you small gifts, so you definitely want to make them feel important?

[HINT: Consider describing the *progress* the donor’s gift will help you make toward solving the problem and/or giving your story a happy ending]

- \_\_\_\_\_  
*Gifts under \$100*
- \_\_\_\_\_  
*Gifts \$100 - 499*

- \_\_\_\_\_  
*Gifts \$500 - 999*

- \_\_\_\_\_  
*Gifts \$1000+*

*“Philanthropy is about caring for others over caring about myself. **Some people are motivated by the tax deduction, I suppose, but I think that they are missing the real meaning of giving.**”*

- You’ll notice no one says their reason for giving is to get a tax deduction.** So why do so many thank you letters focus on this aspect of the gift? I’ve seen nonprofits simply send a receipt along the lines of *“Thank you for your tax- deductible gift of \$50. Your support is much appreciated.”* That’s no way to reinforce the donor’s emotional decision to give or to make them feel uplifted by their giving. Is there a better way, or place, to incorporate information about tax deductibility?

[HINT: Consider the bottom of the letter, below the P.S., in small type]

- \_\_\_\_\_  
For gifts of under \$250

- \_\_\_\_\_  
For gifts of \$250+

**\* Check out this free, informative live video chat where Gene Takagi, J.D., discusses the legal aspects of donor acknowledgments and I talk about getting more creative with your thank you’s:**

**[Chronicle of Philanthropy Live Video Chat: Clever Ways to Thank Donors.](#)**

*“Giving is something that, for me, is done with no expectation of anything in return. A simple thank you is more than enough.”*

- Notice that even someone who overtly states they don't expect *anything* in return says they'd like a thank you.** Are there folks you're not sending thank you letters to (perhaps your online donors are only receiving a *pro forma* computer-generated receipt) that might also deserve a more personal written acknowledgement? How might you go about this?

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*“Giving is a habit that needs to be modeled for us when we are young, practiced and improved through our lives, and encouraged in our children. Nothing satisfies me more as a mom than seeing my kids get involved in causes they care about – especially when I care about them too.”*

- Does your acknowledgement program nurture the giving habit?** When I worked in the trenches, and kids made a gift, I used to enclose stickers with the thank you note to positively reinforce their behavior. You can do the same for adults by enclosing a story about someone helped, a snapshot or a thank you from a client. Or even stickers (how about a nice gold star)? I also talked with families about sitting down together at the end of the year to discuss their philanthropic agenda.



What ideas do you have to nurture the giving habit?<sup>1</sup>

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*“I feel a moral obligation to contribute to programs that assist those in need, even if it means temporarily going without myself. We should all be in this together.”*

**Do you thank your donors for joining a community** of like-minded supporters so that they feel part of something larger than themselves? Folks like being part of a tribe. What is some language you could use in your thank you letter that helps your donors feel connected?

[HINT: Think about your organization’s values. Try to match those with your donor’s values. If you’re all about “equal justice,” “supporting mothers,” “ending hunger,” “cleaning up the environment,” “ending inequality,” and so forth, don’t forget to assume your donor cares about this too. Thank them for this!]

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<sup>1</sup> There’s lots more on this under [Ways to Layer on the Thanks](#) and [62 Creative Ways to Show Gratitude](#) and [Sample Donor Thank You Greetings Calendar – More Ways to Get Creative](#) (featured in [How to Cultivate an Attitude of Gratitude and Keep Your Donors](#))

*“I actually gave more money last year than I realized...and often more than I could afford. I don’t regret it, though. I would like to give even more if I could.”*

**Do you let your donors know you noticed when they gave more**, or perhaps made an additional gift? If not, where might you insert a word, phrase or sentence that let’s your donor know you noticed?

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- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

*“Sometimes I feel taken for granted by not-for-profits that we have been supporting for a long time; so I was elated when someone called to express their gratitude for the gift I quietly make to them every month.”*

**Do you thank your monthly, recurring donors** beyond the first time they make their gift commitment? How might you layer on some thank you’s throughout the year?

[HINT: Thank monthly donors in your blog, e-newsletter, annual report and social media, both as a group and as individuals]

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

*“As a young professional, I am looking for not-for-profits that I can engage with and grow with in more than one way. I especially appreciate the ones that want more than just my money. The ones that also value my participation are rare, but those that do get my support.”*

*“I like interacting with other donors who are passionate about an issue or an organization. I find that being around like-minded people always gets me re-engaged. There’s just nothing like being in a room full of other supporters.”*

**Does your thank you ever include an invitation** to donors to join you at networking events specially designed to help them become more involved (e.g., open houses, trivia nights or lectures targeting young adults, singles, families or seniors)? What might you consider offering to these folks?

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- \_\_\_\_\_

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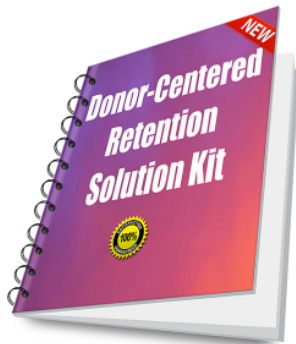
## If you found this helpful, you may also enjoy:



### [Template](#)

### [Anatomy of a Nonprofit Thank You Letter plus Sample](#)

This is a simple, **step-by-step guide to crafting a killer donor thank you letter.**



### [Donor-Centered Retention Solution Kit](#)

This is your **comprehensive road map to creating an intentional donor retention system!** It's way less expensive to retain a supporter than to get a new one! Nonprofits lather so much attention on getting donations and new donors that many forget that, for the majority of donors, that first gift is just a test. And 8 times out of 10 it's likely to be the last. Donor retention is not brain surgery. But it *definitely* requires using your brain to think through things strategically. Use this Guide to get everyone on the same page and pumped up about developing a robust donor retention program to sustain your organization through good times and bad. It walks you step-by-step through creation of a comprehensive system of timely response that will maximize the lifetime value of your supporters.



### [Attitude of Gratitude Donor Guide](#)

Everything I've learned about donor acknowledgement over the years, all tucked it into **one handy no-nonsense guide on the practice of gratitude**. 100+ full pages, with lots of ready-to-use samples and templates. Plus it includes the [Creative Ways to Thank Your Donors](#) E-Book!



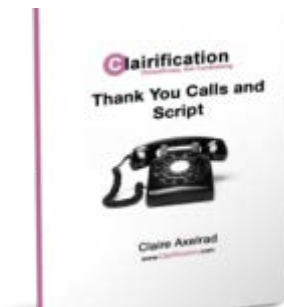
### [48 Hours: Your Donor Acknowledgment Solution Kit](#)

This complete Solution Kit walks you through creation of an intentional **step-by-step system of timely, donor-centered responsiveness** that will maximize the lifetime value of your supporters. Includes an action plan, easy-to-use worksheets and sample policies and procedures.



### [Nonprofit Donor Retention is Not as Hard as You Think](#)

This is a simple step-by-step handbook with a host of **straightforward action tips**. Includes how to calculate retention rates and lifetime value, plus a compendium of links to research, white papers and other valuable resources to boost the lifetime value of your donors so they sustain you well into the future.



### [Thank You Calls E-Book + Script](#)

This *free* practical book tells you everything you need to know about making dynamite donor thank you calls that increase donor loyalty. It's great for staff, Board and volunteers. In fact, it's a great introduction to getting on the phone and connecting directly with your supporters — a non-threatening way to introduce folks to fundraising.

**NOTE:** *[When you enroll in Clairification School](#) you receive a discounted price of up to 50% on ALL of these resources. So please take advantage. [And let me know if the cost is ever a true hardship]. You may also purchase all these companion guides together at an additional ["Bargain Bundle"](#) discount of more than 30%.*

**Please**, if I can ever be helpful to you as a coach, speaker, facilitator or trainer, don't hesitate to contact me. It doesn't have to be a major project. I offer my discounted ["Hour of Power"](#) precisely for the purpose of addressing simple, discrete challenges. Have a question? I'm only an email away at [claire@clairification.com](mailto:claire@clairification.com).

**Thanks so much for all the wonderful work you do to make our world a better and more caring place.**

To your success,