

# Raising Money with E-mail

BY MADELINE STANIONIS

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** This article is adapted from the book, *Raising Thousands (if Not Tens of Thousands) of Dollars with Email*, by Madeline Stanionis, (Emerson & Church, 2006). Visit [www.emersonandchurch.com](http://www.emersonandchurch.com) for more information or call 508-359-0019.

*Let's start with some rudimentary math. If you want your e-mail message to generate 10 donations, then:*

- (At least) 1,000 people need to receive your message
- (At least) 250 people need to read (that is, "open") your message
- (At least) 50 people need to click on the link to your donation page

It's a numbers game, of course, just like other direct marketing mediums. It's always about the list. Who they are, how they got there, what they want, and how deeply they're connected to your cause. Take those 1,000 people. If yours is like many organizations, only about 200 are also on your direct mail file. The rest... well, how *did* they get there?

Building an online list is the tricky part of raising money with e-mail. And building a strong, engaged, generous list? That's even trickier.

Two of the best ways to do it are bringing your offline donors online and attracting new donors with compelling issue or advocacy-based campaigns. Then, you can send them your most powerful message — how to compose that message is the subject of the second part of this article.

## BRING YOUR OFFLINE DONORS ONLINE

Inevitably, clients that hire my firm are interested in having us build a list of new prospects. How is it good for their overall fundraising program, they ask, if we're merely moving donors from Column A to Column B, from their direct mail program to their online program?

Here are the reasons I give:

**A) An online program is a service, offering your donors another way to communicate with you.** Chances are they're purchasing airline tickets and books online already. Some will expect the same convenience when making donations.

**B) Increased communication builds a deeper relationship.** A donor who receives a newsy, inspiring e-mail a few days before your direct mail piece arrives just might be more inclined to make a gift.

**C) Donors with whom you have a relationship are some of the best people to help you build your online list.** You've

already sold them on your cause, and they're often quite willing to tell a friend or two about your good work.

Note: I'm not suggesting you remove donors from your direct mail and telemarketing programs once you've brought them online. Not at all! You don't want to risk losing your more predictable income while exploring this new medium. I'm simply saying there are real advantages to bringing them online.

Now, in terms of obtaining e-mail addresses from your offline donors, there are five principal ways to do this:

**1. In your letters, send your donor online to make her gift.** Here's an example from the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. As you can see from the example below, the donor who prefers the ease of making a gift online is given a specific web address (not the organization's home page) to visit so the gift can be tracked.



The image shows a membership renewal notice from ASPCA. The header includes the ASPCA logo and the text 'MEMBERSHIP RENEWAL NOTICE'. Below this, it says 'YES, I am proud to be a member of the ASPCA. Enclosed is my membership renewal contribution of' followed by checkboxes for \$30, \$25, and \$20, and a line for 'Other \$'. A bold instruction reads 'To make your gift go to work faster, log onto [www.ASPCA.org/RENEW](http://www.ASPCA.org/RENEW)'. The sender's name is Madeline Stanionis, Donordigital, 182 2nd Street Suite 400, San Francisco, CA 94105-3801. A barcode is at the bottom. A small note on the right says 'Please return this form and your contribution today in the envelope provided. Please make your check payable to the ASPCA. Your contribution is tax-deductible as provided by law. See reverse to charge your contribution and for important information.'

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**2. Ask for an e-mail address on all your printed forms.** And give your donors a good reason to provide their address: "E-mail is the most cost-effective way for us to keep you informed on how we're putting your support to work."

**3. Put an insert into your thank-you letters and acknowledgments encouraging your donors to take advantage of the many features on your website.**

**4. Bring your donors online to buy tickets or to participate in special giveaways or offers.** I've seen groups offer calendars, fleece vests, gift certificates, even chances to win vacation trips.

**5. Send your direct mail list to a firm that will search databases to try to match your donors' e-mail addresses.**

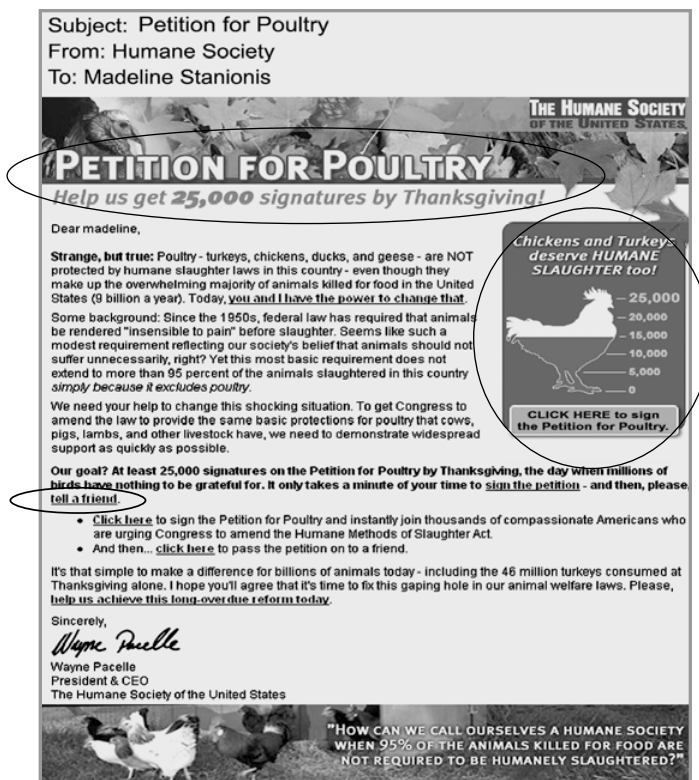
This is called “appending.” It’s fairly inexpensive (15 to 25 cents per e-mail) and may be worth a test. However, keep in mind that the matched names may not perform well and there are privacy and permission problems to think about.

## CONDUCT AN ISSUE OR ADVOCACY-BASED CAMPAIGN

You’ve likely seen online advocacy campaigns inviting you to “Tell your legislator that...” or “Sign this petition for...” People who add their name to your list in the context of supporting a particular issue are often excellent prospects for gifts.

To illustrate how this type of campaign works, let’s take a look at The Humane Society of the United States. They use clear, goal-oriented advocacy campaigns to achieve their objectives and to build their list. A perfect example: the Petition for Poultry, a campaign launched in 2004 to include poultry in our country’s humane slaughter laws.

Here’s the e-mail the Humane Society sent to its house list to kick off the campaign, with key elements circled:



Note these important components: 1) A catchy name and an urgent goal, 2) a graphic insert containing a quick description of issue, goal, and how the recipient can help, and 3) A specific request that the recipient pass the petition on to a friend.

As you can see, the organization set a goal of 25,000 signatures. The results? A total of 75,000 signatures — and

e-mail addresses — in three weeks, about half of them new to the organization! That’s a resounding success, by any measure.

But, alas, what if yours isn’t an advocacy-based organization with national name recognition? What are you to do? There is no denying you’ll have a harder time, but it’s still possible to use this approach.

You might borrow this tactic used by a think tank. To build their list, the group created a petition on campaign finance reform (a subject of one of their forthcoming reports). The petition, which was posted on the organization’s website, contained only a few sentences. Very simply, it said: “I support campaign finance reform” and why.

The think tank first sent the petition via e-mail to their board and staff and then to their small list of donors and friends. Recipients were asked to add their names to an online petition, to be displayed during the press launch of the campaign finance report.

More important, recipients were urged to forward the petition to friends — thereby garnering new names for the organization’s list. Petition signers were told that the petition was to indicate support for their cause rather than to be sent to a legislator or used for a political purpose, yet it generated a strong response.

This method can be adapted for your type of organization. A museum might use a petition to support bringing a particular exhibit to town. A university could gather names of people who support the school’s diversity goals.

## A FEW MORE LIST-BUILDING TIPS

### “Tell-a-Friend”

The phrase “Tell-a-Friend” is quickly becoming overused in e-mail messaging — so much so that I’m afraid your recipients don’t really see it anymore. We’ve found it’s far more effective to give your members specific things to tell their friends.

### Here’s the difference:

- Example 1 — Tell a Friend
- Example 2 — Please tell a friend about how we’re helping Ugandan orphans. Every person who joins in our efforts to find homes and provide desperately needed medical care makes a difference. It will only take you a moment to change a child’s life.

**It’s equally important to make it easy for friends to tell their friends. To illustrate:**

- A client organization launched a petition campaign to half of their list (randomly selected). About 4,000 people signed the petition. Of these, 15 percent (or 600 signers in total) were new. They had been attracted as a result of existing members telling them about the organization.

- The organization then e-mailed the remaining half of their list. About 3,500 people signed the petition this time, but only three percent (or 100 signers) were new.

What was the difference? In the first campaign, once the visitor had signed the petition, she was automatically whisked to a page allowing her to “tell-a-friend.”

In the second campaign the visitor, after signing the petition, was automatically taken to a thank you page that contained only a link to the tell-a-friend page. Thus, by making the visitor click to another page instead of combining the thank you message with the tell-a-friend page, the number of visitors who told a friend decreased dramatically.

### “Viral” Campaigns

Much of what I described here is “viral” — like a cold, it gets spread from person to person. I sign a petition and then ask my office mate to do the same. She sends it to her brother, and he sends to his book group. And on and on. It means that what you’ve done has not only spread to your current list members, it has filtered out and encouraged new people to get involved. Needless to say, you want your list-building activities to be viral!

### Tracking Sources

One last and important reminder: be sure to “source code” all of the names you gather. Then, for example, if you find that your best performing names are those that came in through tell-a-friend messages... well, you know what to do — more “tell-a-friend” drives.

Tracking also allows you to follow up on an issue for which a group of new names were drawn in.

### COMPOSE YOURSELF!

As far as e-mail copy is concerned, there are two key writing components. The first is the subject line; the second is the body of the e-mail itself. Since readers encounter the subject line first, let’s begin there.

### The Scoop on Subject Lines

Talk about time being of the essence! To capture your constituents’ attention and convince them that of the many e-mails bombarding their in-box, yours is the one they must read, you have a grand total of... one or two seconds! With that in mind, let’s address a few subject line fundamentals.

- **Length.** E-mail programs vary as to how many characters the recipient will see. Be on the safe side and limit your subject line to 50 characters.
- Shouting symbols (\$, !, CAPS, \*) and words such as Free, Sale, Teens, will land you in the spam filter. Avoid them. Stay up to date on words to avoid by reading articles on the topic at: [www.emailsherpa.com](http://www.emailsherpa.com) or [www.clickz.com](http://www.clickz.com).

### TEASE, TELL, OR TAKE ACTION?

Depending on the situation, you’ll speak in different voices with your subject line. For example, if your issue is timely and your relationship with the donor is well-established, your job may simply be to “tell” him or her what is happening. Here’s what I mean:

- **A crisis occurs overseas and a relief agency delivers an e-mail letting donors know how they can help:** “Send a blanket to Bangladeshi flood victims.”
- **The e-mail that helps your users take care of business:** “Order your Golf Gala tickets now,” or “Your membership expires soon — renew today.”
- **The content is time-sensitive:** “Six vegan-friendly Easter decorations,” delivered a few days before the holiday.

However, you won’t always have opportunities to “tell” your readers the facts. Here’s when a little “teasing” is needed to get your reader’s attention, two examples:

- **A provocative subject line:** “*The movie President Bush doesn’t want you to see.*” That approach works for me... I want to find out just what that movie is.
- **A clever subject that’s quick and easy-to-scan:** “It’s beginning to look a lot like justice...” sent just before the Christmas holidays by Earthjustice.

Finally, whether you’re telling or teasing, it’s always important to use your subject line to call your readers to action. After all, nothing happens (sending you a donation, filling out a petition) until they take the next step. The best “take action” e-mails are:

- **Specific.** Rather than exhort readers to “Tell them no,” say instead: “Tell Big Tobacco to stop selling to children.”
- **Well-timed.** Ideally, the topic is in the news.
- **Local, if possible.** “Tell Big Tobacco to stop selling to Boston children.”

Once you’ve motivated your constituents to open your e-mails, it’s critical to give them something good to read.

### Composing an effective e-mail — Four elements

Writing good e-mails starts with the basics of writing good copy, period. You must have a story to tell, offer a compelling reason to give, and use clear and persuasive language. Only a few key elements distinguish e-mail copy from other forms of writing:

1. **Make your e-mail scannable.** How do you read your own e-mail? Do you pore over every word? Of course not. Neither do your constituents. If you’re like most people, you tend to scan rather than read your messages. Therefore make sure your message is “scannable.” That means:

- Short sentences and short paragraphs
- Numerous links to your donation page
- Graphic insets telling your reader what to do

- Bullets
- Selective use of bold and italics (reserve underlining for hyperlinks only)

Using these guidelines, your goal is to create a compelling message that, in seven seconds or so, tells your constituent exactly what to do.

**2. Keep it simple and short.** In a direct mail fundraising letter, you have pages (sometimes as many as eight!) to let your story unfold. Not so with e-mail!

Chances are good your constituents are a little overwhelmed by the volume of e-mail they receive, and a windy e-mail from you will only add to the deluge. Keeping your message short and to the point is a service to your recipients. That means:

- Presenting only one or two key points
- Using as few words as possible to state your case
- Avoiding the history of your appeal (this is no time for background info)

**3. Be aware of “preview panes.”** Many readers won’t get past the part of your e-mail visible in their preview panes. Here’s an e-mail I received from The Humane Society:



Note how the issue and the ask are prominent in the first few sentences. You needn’t read any further to grasp the point of this e-mail.

That first impression is critical to your success. Treat those top few inches of copy and design as precious real estate. Tell your whole story right there.

**4. Keep the medium in mind.** E-mail tends to be more casual than print. That means a more personal, less formal tone is appropriate and even expected. For example:

- Salutations and closings are typically more relaxed. A letter might begin with “Dear Ms. Stanionis,” while an e-mail would start with “Hello Madeline.”
- E-mail copywriters tend to use more colloquial terms. Direct mail copy might say “We were truly overwhelmed by the generous response to our request.” In e-mail, that translates to, “Wow! You overwhelmed us (and that’s hard to do)!”
- An up-to-the-minute style of writing is also appropriate. In direct mail language: “It was lovely to celebrate our anniversary with you last month.” In e-mail: “I’m writing this at midnight, just getting home after the anniversary party. Whew! What a night.”

Finally, a sure way to become e-mail proficient (and prolific) is to observe your own habits. Which messages earn your readership? How are you reading them? Pay close attention and I think you’ll be surprised at what you learn.

I’ve highlighted here the key ways in which writing e-mail is different from other forms of writing. Still, good writing is good writing: specific, clear, and forceful. E-mail hasn’t changed that a bit! **GF**

MADELINE STANIONIS IS THE PRESIDENT AND CREATIVE DIRECTOR OF DONORDIGITAL, HELPING NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS, CAMPAIGNS, AND SOCIALLY RESPONSIBLE BUSINESSES USE THE INTERNET TO BUILD THEIR CONSTITUENCIES AND ACHIEVE THEIR GOALS. SHE CAN BE REACHED AT MADELINE@DONORDIGITAL.COM.