

“Inoffensive” is the Wrong Star to Wish On If You’re Not Getting Complaints... You’re *Not* Communicating.

by Tom Ahern



*It had arrived:
an email from a
new client. And I
trembled.*

The subject line: “Responses to the appeal letter.” Lily was reporting in. Lily is the manager of annual fund and membership. She is gung-ho star material, ready to scale walls and shoot threads from her wrists, totally dedicated to her organization’s success.

I’d written an appeal for her agency. She had taken a big risk on it. And we all had our fingers so tightly crossed that our nails were turning blue.

I closed my eyes ... wrapped my arms around a really deep breath ... clicked the email “open” ... and I read ...

The appeal has had a huge impact!

My breathing began again. Well, OK then. “Huge impact.” I can cling to that. I guess I’m not a totally incompetent nincompoop.

But her next statement raised an issue. “We are starting to get in responses to the appeal — some very positive ... and some very angry.”

But let me set some context.

I work under The Verbatim Rule. I ask my new direct mail clients to agree that they will send out what I write for them exactly as I write it, without fiddling. Verbatim. Not a word changed, unless I made a factual error.

The Verbatim Rule exists for one reason: to sanctify the intensity of professionally crafted direct mail.

Direct mail is not a medium that rewards meekness. Clients who want to tone it down, who judge it “too sales-y,” who second-guess the mechanics (“... a P.S. is so undignified ...”) will undermine a full and healthy response.

The Verbatim Rule is good for me (less cursing under my breath). And it’s good for the client (more income).

But there is a footnote to the Verbatim Rule.

Expect complaints

Replacing inoffensive direct mail with real direct mail, filled with black arts and emotional triggers, is like replacing ordinary fences with electric fences. Expect reactions.

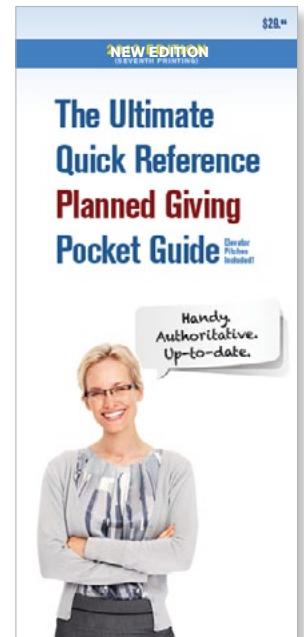
Strong direct mail will touch nerves. And not every nerve you touch will enjoy the experience.

Are complaints a problem? Not really. Unpleasant, maybe. But, handled properly, I think they’re pretty much the definition of an opportunity to have a great conversation with a supporter. First, though, be sure to read Jeff Brooks’ note below on who the “complainers” typically are.

In direct mail, *all* response is indicative of something worth knowing. Complaints are as good as praise in that regard.

Negative response means your appeal went far enough emotionally. Complaints mean your appeal was upsetting enough to get noticed. It’s a weird measure, I know. But it’s accurate to the penny.

Lily was okay with a few complaints, because we’d discussed that phenomenon in advance.



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Over...

Still, she was concerned. What she really wanted to know was this:

How many angry responses is too many?

There's no industry measure I'm aware of that answers the question. Certainly, none is mentioned in "bibles" like Mal Warwick's *How to Raise Successful Fundraising Letters* or Alan Sharpe's *Mail Superiority*. Jeff Brooks (www.futurefundraisingnow.com; www.truesense.com) knows a heck of a lot more about this stuff than I do, so I asked his opinion. Here's Jeff Brooks on "complaint metrics":

"I've never heard of a standard metric for complaints. Twenty-five per 10,000 does strike me as unusually high." [That was the number I'd

suggested]. "But even then, I'd hesitate to worry; that number is statistically equal to zero."

In direct mail, all responses, even complaints, are good.

And most complainers turn out to be lapsed and/or low-dollar donors.

The paranoid fantasy of some orgs — that our fundraising will cause everybody to up and leave — wouldn't be measured by complaints, but by a serious drop in retention. The only fundraising tactic I've seen do anything like that is rebranding. Strong fundraising, never. It increases response and retention."

Tom Ahern is considered one of the world's leading authorities on how to speak properly – and profitably – to donors.

He has authored five how-to books on donor communications. Each year, he delivers dozens of workshops on the techniques of (and psychology behind) successful fundraising communications. He also writes fundraising materials for some of America's leading nonprofits. His specialties include audits, donor newsletters, direct mail, and case statements.

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I Can Vouch for Tom's Opinion Complaints Paralyze Fundraisers

I love this article from Tom so much that I just had to get my voice in. I recall a few years back producing a major gifts brochure for a large health system in Pennsylvania.

The VP decided to do the 20,000 piece mailing in-house. The brochure was accompanied by a cover letter that they produced, with each letter and matching #10 envelope addressed to "Dear Mr. and Mrs."

Problem? All 20,000 recipients were medical school grads, so *it should have said "Dear Dr."*

Oops. Chaos!

Well, not really. After I calmed down Mr. VP-Gone-Mad, he received 6 unpleasant complaining letters next week, *each one* loaded with a mighty check (\$1000 to \$6000).

The entire mailing had a 27% response rate. To this day I do not know why. But please, don't try duplicating this error deliberately.



I hope you found this white paper stimulating and useful.

My mission is to make available to you the best know-how, insight, and tools so you can keep yourself, your career, and your organization permanently ahead of the curve.

Contact me. Let me know how you're doing. And let me know how I'm doing.

Let's improve and succeed together.

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