



Donor Love Is Everything

Presented by: 

John Lepp knows donors. In fact, his company, Agents of Good, which he cofounded with business partner Jenn Love, is a nonprofit consulting agency that helps nonprofits create donor-centric marketing material and other resources. His mission is to know what donors want and need from the charities they support and to help those charities give it to them. Lepp and the other Agents of Good members set out to create a love story between the nonprofits they help and their donors—and he has a lot of ideas that other nonprofits can use to do the same thing.

Lepp and other Agents of Good spend a lot of time researching donor preferences, evaluating communications they receive from charities, and “secret shopping” nonprofits to see how they steward their donors. More importantly, they spend time talking to real donors. Lepp gets tons of insight from his mother-in-law, who supports numerous charities and sends him all their communications.

“Charities just sort of ignore her,” Lepp says of his mother-in-law. “They don’t give her any opportunity to feel like a hero.” That’s the kind of problem he tackles at Agents of Good—he wants to help donors feel heroic and inspire them to give again.

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Unfortunately, uninspiring communications are widespread in the nonprofit industry. When asked about the biggest mistakes nonprofits make, Lepp laughed before saying, “All the things! There are so many mistakes I don’t even know where to start.”

But really, Lepp says, most of the mistakes nonprofits make boil down to being too transactional with their donors instead of being focused on building relationships. “They’re too focused on ROI and not on building relationships,” he says. Instead of focusing solely on ROI, he says, nonprofits should be focused on making donors feel loved and building relationships that will inspire them to give again. “If [nonprofits] have done a good job, donors will come back,” he says.

So what's holding nonprofits back from changing their approach to donor retention and overall fundraising? Lepp thinks that a large part of it is organizational fear; it's hard for nonprofits to break away from the status quo. "But it's not good enough to be status quo anymore," Lepp says—it's time for nonprofits to change their approach.

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Lepp cautions nonprofits not to make changing their approach too difficult. Loving donors and building relationships with them is easy to do, but nonprofits often over-complicate things. Focus on simple things,” Lepp says. “It's easy to complicate things. You don't need a \$3,000 solution for a \$1 problem.” He encourages nonprofits to start by making small changes or taking small actions that can have a big impact.

Even the smallest changes can leave a major impression on donors. Something as simple as changing the envelope you use for direct mail can make the difference between a letter being read and being tossed in the trash. Lepp notes that the vast majority of the mail his mother-in-law gets from nonprofits is in a white #10 envelope; changing the size or color of your direct mail envelopes will make your mail more interesting-looking and grab donors' attention.

Taking a few minutes out of your day to write thank-you notes to your donors will also leave a major impression, Lepp says. He notes that donors give, at least in part, to feel good about themselves; making them feel good about themselves, even if it's through a simple thank-you note, will bring them back to your organization. He also suggests restructuring boring receipts and donation confirmation pages to wow donors. Each activity need only take a few minutes, but they'll both have a positive impact on donor retention—that's a pretty great ROI!

Whatever you decide to do to build relationships with your donors, Lepp says, make sure you keep your donors at the center of your plans. Put your organizational fear on the backburner and focus on the people who support you. Be willing to try new things. Be willing to fail. Be willing to take chances. The payoff will be worth it.

“Donor love is everything”

“Your donors want to win!” Lepp says. “They want to be a part of winning. And they can help you win by giving.” That is the sentiment nonprofits should keep at the front of their minds. Lepp urges nonprofits to “build a love story” between themselves, their donors, and the people they help. “Donor love is everything,” he said. “That's what will work.”