

Art of the Ask: 7+ Tips on Fundraising Offers and Reply Slips

As much as forty percent of the success of your next appeal rides on the strength of your “Ask,” or fundraising offer. In this free report from fundraising copywriter Lisa Sargent, find seven-plus tips for your reply slips – try one, or test them all...

Every fundraising appeal your nonprofit sends will always (or at least it should always) include a way for your donors to give. Call it a reply slip, a response device, or a donation form – it’s up to you – but how you treat that response form can make a massive difference to the results of your mailing.

In fact, with as much as forty percent of the success of your next appeal hinging on the strength of your offer, you want to make absolutely certain that your reply slip is just as strong – and makes it easy and clear for your donors to give, and give an amount that feels generous for them.

Which brings us straight to tip #1.

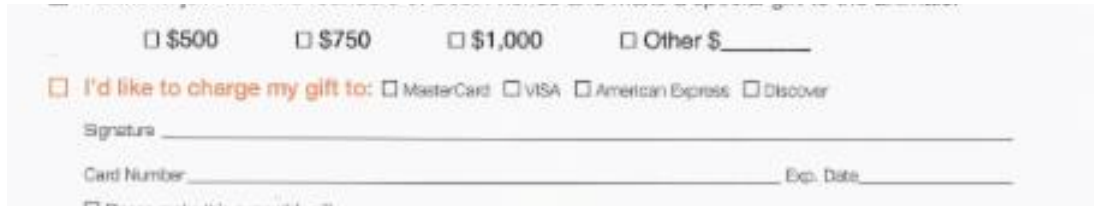
1 Use merge-field multipliers HPC and MRG to ask each donor for the right amount.

You already know that asking donors for too much or too little is a good way to kill your appeal. HPC (Highest Previous Contribution) and MRG (Most Recent Gift) help you avoid that trap.

Let’s use HPC to exemplify, and assume that my highest-ever gift was \$500. On a reply slip, then, the ask strings are calculated from that, typically in multiples of 1.0, 1.5, and 2.0, or, on a reply slip merge field:

<<\$HPC1.0>>, <<\$HPC1.5>>, and <<\$HPC2.0>>

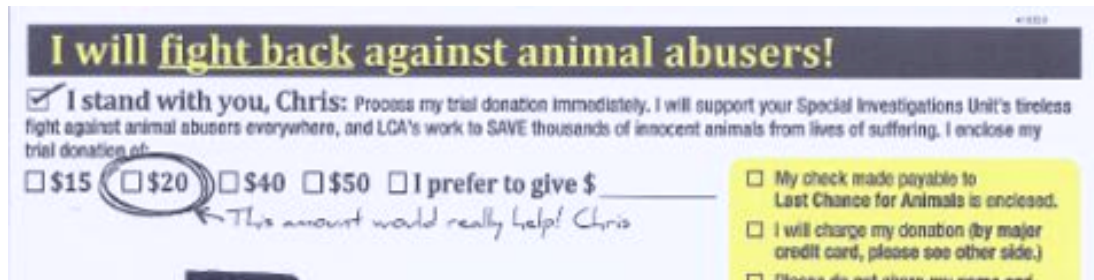
Same goes for MRG. It emerges from your mailshop on an actual reply form like this:



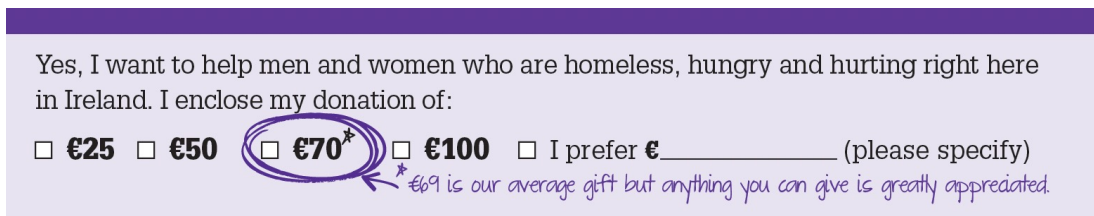
Note: if you're wondering whether to use MRG or HPC, I have it on the advice of two extraordinarily smart and hugely experienced fundraisers that for donors, eight out of ten times HPC and MRG are the same amount.

2 Use merge-field multipliers HPC and MRG to ask each donor for the right amount.

Consider an ask-string callout by circling one of the amounts on your reply slip (often the middle) or boxing off some copy with an arrow and copy that says, "This amount would really help." Here's a real-life example:



You can also leverage social proof with copy like, "Our average gift is \$xx. If you could send \$xx or more [etc...]." Here's how we handled it for one client:



3 Try something other than “Other.”

Ubiquitous on a reply slip, that last tickbox with the “other” write-in gift option is like the fifth crew member on the original Star Trek series. (“Captain, I’ve found something... **cue screams and untimely off-screen death by creepy alien*... AHHHHHHH!*”)

Next time, try “I prefer” or “My choice of.” OR, if you’re really feeling up for something different, you can get even more creative, as this [“Surprise us!” WGBH ask-string case study from SOFII](#) illustrates... and this [incredibly giant gift option from Greenpeace](#), also featured on SOFII.

4 Offer a money-back guarantee.

Yup, you heard me. I’ve used them; they work. Superb if you have something specific for which you’re raising money, and a deadline. You let donors know that if you don’t make goal, you’ll refund the gift. 99.9% of donors will tick the box or write in to say “keep it no matter what.” And they’ll feel good about it too.

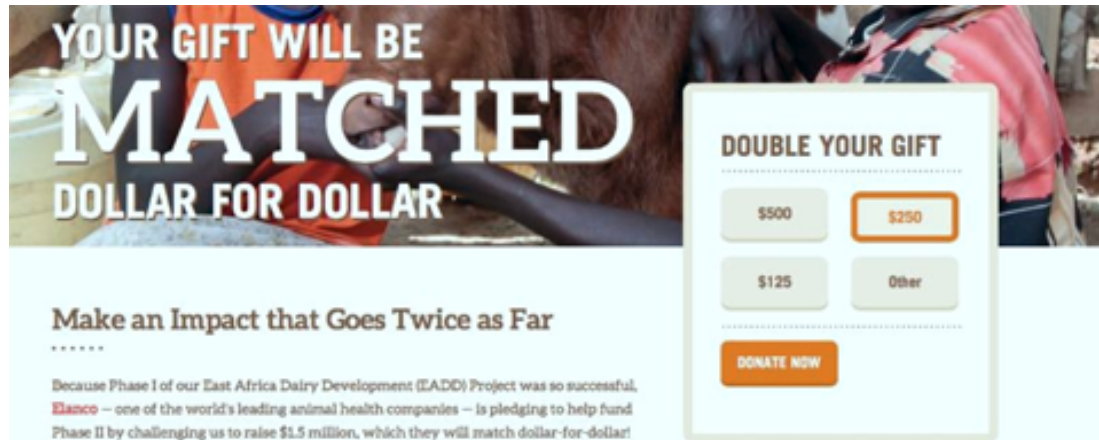
FYI - there was once a great case study on SOFII about this; I can’t find it. But the gist lived in a post from The Helen Brown Group, part of which is the actual copy from a Habit for Humanity UK money-back guarantee:

“We already know from helping 125,000 extremely poor families build homes that this is the best way to help them out of poverty. But we want you to be sure, too. So when you send your £15 gift we’ll make you a money-back guarantee. If, after reading more about how we use your gift, you believe it hasn’t done what we’ve said, write to us within six months. We’ll send it back to you - every penny.”

5 Add a match.

These you’ve seen a million times. If not, I can tell you from direct experience: matching challenges are effective, and often wildly so. Ask if they’d let you double the good it will do by agreeing to let the gift be used in a match. Another upside to the matching challenge? It lets you use a deadline. And *that* builds instant urgency.

Here's one of many examples out there, this one digital, from Heifer:



6 Remove choice.

It's true: faced with too many options, donors will do... nothing. As Neuromarketing's Roger Dooley says, "It's been known for years that too many choices can reduce consumer purchases." So now and then consider testing less choice – right down to a single ask of one amount only.

7 Give 'em a reason.

If I could give you one piece of required reading from this article, it would be [For Impact's Types of Funding Pitches](#). A one-page tip sheet with pitches you can adapt, from using The Gap, to Funding the Prototype, to The Widget. Good, good stuff. (H/T to [Tom Ahern](#), who first alerted his readers to the original article in 2009: it's stood the test of time and has been transformed along with For Impact's website, every time.)

7+ Question all assumptions.

Who says your reply slip needs to perf-off at the bottom (or top)? Who says it needs three amounts? Who says you can't include a "Sorry I can't give right now" option? I know many great organizations who challenge assumptions like these – and do remarkably well by it – every year.

The point is, crafting a strong offer and equally strong reply device should never be rote, and never an afterthought. Want to jump to the head of the donation form class with extra reading? See this actionable, informative article from the ever-generous Jeff Brooks and Moceanic, [The Easy Way to Raise More Money by Being Relevant to Each Donor](#). And one more: this evergreen SOFII article called [“Why I Still Hate the Reply Device,”](#) from Jerry Huntsinger, to challenge your thinking.

About Lisa Sargent...

Lisa Sargent is an award-winning fundraising copywriter and story strategist on a mission to transform the way nonprofits communicate with their donors, for visibly better results and retention. Contributing author to acclaimed decision science book *Change for Better* and upcoming author of *Thankology*, Lisa’s free Donor Thank-You Clinics were named one of the world’s “top 10 gifts for fundraisers” by SOFII (Showcase of Fundraising Innovation and Inspiration) and remain the most-ever visited exhibit there. Follow Lisa’s no-holds-barred blog *Sargent Writes* and subscribe to her newsletter, *The Loyalty Letter*, at www.lisasargent.com for free insights on the art, heart, craft, and science of generous stories, fundraising writing, and donor communications.



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