

Secret to Response: The Offer is King

The purpose of an offer is simple: it gives a reader a reason to respond to you right now.

Every day, you probably weigh dozens of offers yourself.

In every mail order catalog you receive, each item is an offer. When you buy lunch, "Would you like fries with that?" is an offer. When you visit a website, pretty much anything you can click on, including the word "more", is in fact an offer.

But wait, there's more: the richer you make your offer, the stronger the response. A terrific offer overcomes resistance and inertia. That's why challenges and matching gift campaigns often boost fundraising income significantly: Because people want to take advantage of a limited-time offer. We absolutely, positively adore multiplying our gift to a favorite charity...without in fact spending a penny more. And we don't want to miss the chance.

Direct marketing professionals say, "The offer is king." They mean: Find the right offer, and response pours in.

Conversely, without any offers, expect no response. I mention this because I see plenty of donor newsletters that contain no offers at all. (And you wonder why no one ever calls or writes?)

Don't bury your offer

Making an offer ("Call this number for more information.") at the end of a long article guarantees that most people will miss it.

Celebrate every offer you make. Make it big, bold, easy to spot.

What's in an offer?

Remember: the purpose of offers is to stimulate response. And you're probably *already* making offers. Each appeal letter you send is an offer, for instance. Essentially you're saying: "Send us a gift, and we'll make the world a better place in your name."

Other common offers from fundraisers include:

- "For more information"

- An invitation to join an exclusive society such as a President's Circle
- An invitation to an event
- A free, informative brochure
- Free membership
- Discounted membership ("Your family membership entitles you to unlimited visits...")
- A member card
- A free subscription to your electronic or printed newsletter
- Special, timely updates from the president
- A free calendar of upcoming events and shows
- Discounts for advance purchase of tickets
- Special member-only previews
- Matching gift campaigns
- A special report on something that matters to your donors or prospects
- The ease and convenience of giving online
- A naming opportunity
- A behind-the-scenes tour
- A cow (see below)

Heifer's Four-Footed Offers: Making the Intangible Real

Heifer Project International (Little Rock, AK; founded 1944; www.heifer.org) has a simple plan for ending world hunger: they give poor people livestock that produce food and income, as well as training in how to keep the animals healthy and reproductive. It's the "teach a man to fish" philosophy in action.

In FY2004, Heifer raised roughly \$45 million from individuals for its work in 51 countries. How? In part, through offers in what it calls "the most important gift catalog in the world."

The Heifer catalog offers donors the chance to buy an animal suitable for farming: a water buffalo, a llama, chickens, a flock of ducks, even honey bees. If you can't afford an entire pig this year (\$120), you can buy a *share* of a pig for as little as \$10. Heifer even has a gift registry, if you're looking "for a more meaningful way to celebrate events such as weddings, anniversaries, birthdays, graduations, and holidays."

There is an interesting communications strategy behind these offers. Heifer has taken something fairly intangible (its mission, and the donor's

hope that "my gift will make the world a better place") and turned it into something quite tangible: a pig or other bountiful creature put into a person's needy hands. "Nothing's more satisfying than finding exactly the right solution to a problem," says Heifer. "That's the good feeling you get when you give an Asian subsistence farmer a water buffalo."

I can see it. I can almost smell it.

Now in truth you are not buying a specific animal for a specific family in a specific country. Nor are you benefiting a specific child with your gift to a development agency such as Plan, to give another example. The child's entire community benefits from your gift.

Heifer makes this clear in the fine print: "The prices in this catalog represent the complete livestock gift of a quality animal, technical assistance and training. Each purchase is symbolic and represents a contribution to the entire mission of Heifer International. Donations will be used where needed most to help struggling people." Okay, it's a symbolic purchase. Bottom line, somebody somewhere still gets a cow.

The lesson is this: when you can make your mission more tangible, it's easier for the prospect to imagine the result. In turn, when prospects can easily imagine the result, they're more likely to become donors. They can see the mission in their mind's eye. It's real. It's not a promise. It's a promise *fulfilled*.

Heifer International has made its mission tangible through livestock offers. What can you offer that will tangibly symbolize your mission? A university selling \$2 million endowed chairs offers pictures of 20 assorted chairs, different styles from different periods, throne to recliner, wittily chosen. Each has a space on it labeled, "Your name here."

What's your tangible symbol?

[possible illustrations for this section: the Take the Tour page from the Roger Williams Park Zoo case; or any page from the Colgate endowed chairs case]