



GIVING THANKS: TIPS FOR ACKNOWLEDGING SUPPORTERS AT YEAR'S END

“**B**eing engaged with donors and expressing appreciation is a critical and ongoing process for a nonprofit organization,” says Alan Bell with Charity & Associates, P.C. in Chicago. “But the transition to a new year provides a unique opportunity to thank donors in innovative and inspiring ways.”

From hand-delivering boxes of local fruit to personalizing notes on thank you letters, there are many ways for land trusts to recognize their supporters at year's end. Of course, thanking them is critical, but *how* you thank them can help your land trust stand out in the crowd.

Here are several tips on how your land trust can distinguish itself when thanking donors this year, garnered from nonprofit fundraising experts. One tip that rises to the top: personal is always best.

1 Put thought into a meaningful, affordable gift.

Like a present you'd carefully choose for a close friend or family member, the perfect gift is a reflection of both the giver and the recipient, says Illene Roggensack of Third Sector Innovations in Colorado. “The gift should be meaningful to him or her and also ‘feel’ like the land trust.”

Roggensack's favorite example of a well-chosen donor gift comes from her home community in western Colorado, which is renowned for its peaches. Each year, a local health care clinic director would drive to Denver with a load of peaches and deliver them to the clinic's grant funders.

“The grantors *loved* those peaches and probably even came to expect them,” says Roggensack. “This gift was a unique representation of both the nonprofit and the community it serves, and went a long way in furthering the relationship with the funders.”

A small, personal gift, especially when it comes as a surprise, can help a land trust convey to volunteers, partners, landowners and donors that the organization cares about them as people, says Judy Anderson of Community Consultants in New York.

“If your mission includes farming and local food, delivering a locally

made pie as an unexpected thank you can really make someone feel special,” says Anderson. “Remember, however, that the messenger is just as important as the thank you gift. You want someone who is engaging and happy to chat.”

2

Send thank you letters that are personal and positive.

A nonprofit thank you letter should be more like a warm and relatively short greeting card than a formal business letter, counsels Kivi Leroux Miller of Nonprofit Marketing Guide & EcoScribe Communications in North Carolina. “Even if your thank you letter appears on stationery, think of a good Hallmark card as you write,” advises Miller.

When donors feel valued and appreciated as people, they are more likely to trust and support an

organization, says Anderson. “Friendly, conversational and informative thank you letters are key to building greater connections with supporters. Ideally, you want to know what they care about, and tailor the thank you letter toward that topic.”

The ideal thank you letter should relegate tax language to a postscript or footer where it won’t detract attention from the letter’s emotional appeal, says Beth Hershenhart of Innovative Resources Group in New York.

“Too many organizations focus thank you letters on the cold, impersonal IRS-required language,” says Hershenhart. “They have squandered a critical opportunity to genuinely thank their donors for their generosity. I advise land trusts that taking the extra care to acknowledge each donor—perhaps including the length of time that he or she has supported the organization or referencing a particular interest or concern—will pay dividends.”

Some groups take the personalization one step further, crafting homemade cards, including photos from their work or enlisting board members to pen handwritten notes. “Even just a handwritten sentence or two from a board member in the margin of a formal letter makes the thank you more personal and sincere,” says Roggensack.

For institutional funders, Esther James of Esther James Grant Consulting in New Jersey, recommends that land trusts mail a summary of their key achievements through the year, including a “call to action” for 2013.

“Because people are bombarded by holiday mail, it’s a good idea to keep your messages simple and upbeat,” James says. “White space and photos are as important as words. Rather than exclusively focusing on your organization’s internal changes and accomplishments, your letters should communicate that your land trust’s work is complementing the motivations and aspirations of its supporters.”

Roggensack recommends one way to avoid getting lost in the holiday mail shuffle: “I personally like the idea of board members getting on the phone to say thank you.”

3 Amplify your message with social media and technology.

Social media tools, such as Twitter and Facebook, shouldn’t replace your land trust’s year-

your supporters to share their own ideas for your land trust in the year ahead.”

Bell suggests providing a “gratitude report,” which could take various forms, from a print report with inspiring imagery reflecting the impact of the donations to a video of the organization’s staff and leadership expressing personal messages of gratitude. “Whatever form the gratitude report takes, the most important goal is to make sure that your donors truly understand the impact of their donations and

“My favorite thing is to call a donor on the phone when the gift comes in. I call right away,” says David Cooper, the Land Trust Alliance’s new vice president. “I let them hear the excitement in my voice, even if I have to leave a message. It’s so important not to take any donor for granted.”

end paper mailings, but they can be used to amplify them, “expanding the number of people who see the content of the letters and enhancing the online credibility of your nonprofit,” says James.

She suggests that land trusts “tweet” a shortened link with a catchy hook to a website page where supporters can find engaging content from year-end letters. “Very few people will click on a link that is billed as ‘Land Trust Year End Letter 2012,’” says James. “Your Twitter message should highlight whatever it was in your letter that would add value to a reader’s day.”

Similarly, land trusts should go light on text when posting year-end letters to Facebook, including a vivid photo instead. Posing a question that followers are asked to answer is a good way to engage Facebook audiences, says James. “Your year-end letter can offer a great opportunity to invite

that such support is deeply and unconditionally appreciated,” says Bell.

4 Share.

“The end of a year is a special time to reflect on what you—the staff, board, partners and donors—have achieved together; we are all on the same team,” says Albert Joerger, president of The Joerger Group in Florida. “In my messages to donors I always say I want to create a community where my children will want to live. I like to give a glimpse into what it feels like to be a conservationist. I try to convey how humbled I am by their gift. Capture their heart by sharing yours.” 🌱

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