

BEYOND THE GALA: MINI GUIDE – 5 FUNDRAISING STRATEGIES THAT OUTPERFORM EVENTS

Smarter Tactics for Donor Retention, ROI, and Long-Term Growth

Rethinking the Role of Events in Your Fundraising

Fundraising events can be powerful moments of connection and visibility—but they’re also resource-intensive and often deliver a lower return on investment (ROI) or cost per dollar raised (CPDR) compared to other strategies. Research from the *Chronicle of Philanthropy* and the Association of Fundraising Professionals (AFP) shows that many event-based gifts are one-time-only, with donor retention depending heavily on what happens *after* the event.

That’s why leading fundraisers are expanding their approach.

Events still have a place—but a more comprehensive strategy blends them with high-performing, relationship-focused tactics. The five strategies outlined below have consistently delivered stronger donor retention, deeper engagement, and more sustainable revenue than events alone.

Strategy 1: Donor Storytelling That Moves Hearts

Why it Works

People give to people. Claire Axelrad calls storytelling “the glue that binds your donors to your mission.” Compelling narratives of real impact turn abstract missions into emotional experiences.

What to Do

- Collect and share real stories from clients, families, or team members.
- Pair stories with a visual (photo, short video, or quote card).
- Publish on multiple channels—email, social media, website, and appeals.

Example:

In my *Storytelling for Impact Toolkit* we feature Eli and the Joneses as living proof of impact. Link donor stories directly to fundraising appeals with donation tiers based on outcomes (e.g., \$20 = 1 backpack of weekend meals for Eli)

Strategy 2: Monthly Giving Models That Boost Lifetime Value

Why it Works

Recurring monthly donors stay longer, give more, and require fewer resources to retain—they already identify with your mission. Compared to one-time donors, recurring donors stay engaged for more than four times as long, have retention rates upwards of 80%, and give up to five times more over their lifetime. While individual recurring gifts may be smaller, they add up to significantly greater value with less effort required for renewal or re-acquisition. Their steady, predictable giving enables long-term planning and cultivates stronger, more loyal relationships—making recurring donations one of the highest-ROI strategies in modern fundraising.

What to Do

- Create a **branded** monthly giving program (with a name and theme).
- Offer insider **benefits** (behind-the-scenes updates, early invites).
- Emphasize **impact per month** instead of total dollar amount.

Example:

One nonprofit featured in DonorPerfect's monthly giving benchmark study raised 40% more in one year by automating thank-you videos and sending handwritten notes once a quarter.

Bonus Tip:

Launch your monthly giving campaign in Q2 or Q4 as these months are reported as high-traffic conversion windows.

Download my [Monthly Giving Program Checklist](#) to help you stay on track.

Strategy 3: Segmented Email Appeals with ROI Insights

Why it Works

Segmenting your donor list—rather than sending one-size-fits-all emails—significantly improves engagement, response rates, and gift size. According to research cited by Claire Axelrad and the Association of Fundraising Professionals (AFP), segmented campaigns enjoy up to 26% higher response rates and better average gift amounts. The logic is simple: the more tailored your message, the more likely donors are to connect with it emotionally and take action.

What to Do:

1. Segment by giving behavior, not just giving capacity

- *First-time donors*: Welcome them with a gratitude-forward appeal and an easy on-ramp to give again.
- *Lapsed donors*: Remind them of the impact they once made and invite them back into the story.
- *Monthly donors*: Celebrate their ongoing commitment with updates, not asks.
- *Major donors*: Send personal notes or video messages, not mass emails.

2. Customize by donor motivation

- Mission-oriented givers? Highlight outcomes.
- Community-driven donors? Spotlight peer engagement.
- Values-driven supporters? Emphasize long-term change and alignment.

3. Use stories strategically

- Instead of leading with a program update, open with a short, powerful story like Eli's—showing how a weekend backpack meal met a real need.
- Include impact-based donation tiers (e.g., "\$20 = a weekend's worth of food for one child").

4. Track open rates, clicks rates, and conversions to calculate email ROI:

How to Track & Measure Email ROI

"Don't stop at send." If you want to move from good to great in your email fundraising, treat each appeal like a mini campaign. That means tracking not just *who* received it, but *how they responded*—and whether that response led to action.

Why Segmentation + Storytelling = Stronger Email ROI

Personalized, segmented email appeals aren't just a nice-to-have—they consistently outperform generic mass emails. Research shows segmented emails boost response rates by 26% or more, especially when tailored to giving history and donor motivation. When you pair segmentation with strong storytelling and donor-centered language, your average gift size also increases. By tracking email open rates, click-throughs, and conversions, you'll learn what subject lines grab attention, what messages inspire action, and which donors are most likely to give—helping you refine future appeals for even better ROI.

Key Metrics to Track

Metric	What It Tells You	Benchmarks*
Open Rate	Are your subject lines compelling?	20-40% (nonprofit average)
Click Rate	Is your content driving engagement or curiosity?	2.5–5%
Conversion Rate	Are people taking action (donating, RSVPing)?	1–3% (typical for appeals)
Unsubscribes	Is your content relevant and valued?	<0.2% per send

***Note:** Benchmarks vary by sector. Use your own averages as a baseline.*

Metric Details -

- Open Rate – % of recipients who opened the email (target: 20–40%)
- Click Rate – % who clicked on a link (target: 2.5–5%)
- Conversion Rate – % who completed a gift after clicking (benchmark varies by list quality and ask)
- Unsubscribes/Bounces – Helps you maintain list health

What to Do With the Data

- Low open rate? Rethink subject lines and test A/B versions.
- Low click rate? Improve content layout or storytelling CTA.
- Low conversions? Reassess the landing page or ask amount.
- High unsubscribes? Consider whether segmentation is off.

Formula: Email ROI

$$\text{Email ROI} = \frac{\text{Net Revenue from Email Campaign}}{\text{Total Cost of Email Campaign}} \times 100$$

Example:

You send a segmented appeal to 2,000 donors.

- 120 people give a total of \$6,000
- The cost (email platform, design time, content writing) = \$500
- Email ROI = $(\$6,000 - \$500) / \$500 \times 100 = \mathbf{1,100\%}$

Bonus Tools to Help:

Your CRM: Use your CRM's segmentation tools and email integrations to automate personalized thank-you messages, trigger follow-up sequences, and tailor outreach based on donor behavior, giving history, or event participation

Email Platforms: Mailchimp, Constant Contact, and others offer built-in analytics.

Segment for Insight: Tie donor segments to click/conversion data to understand *who* responds best—and when.

Strategy 4: Mission-Driven Volunteer Campaigns That Convert

Why it Works

According to *Independent Sector* and *Fidelity Charitable*, volunteers are twice as likely to donate compared to non-volunteers. They've already shown up with their time—making them emotionally invested and primed to become long-term supporters, monthly givers, or passionate ambassadors. Their firsthand experience with your mission creates a deep connection that most appeals alone can't replicate.

When you give volunteers a meaningful glimpse into your impact—like seeing how Eli's backpack gets filled or hearing from the Joneses about their mentorship journey—you transform goodwill into generosity.

Best Practices

Start with Mission First - Design volunteer opportunities that offer hands-on experiences tied to your impact. Whether it's helping assemble weekend food bags or greeting guests at a community art night, center the experience around why it matters.

Integrate Storytelling - Use pre- and post-volunteer touchpoints to share the human stories behind the work.

- Before the event: Send an email introducing a story like Eli's and how volunteers help make it possible.
- After the event: Share a photo with a quote from a family served or a note of thanks from your team.

Include a Light Ask - Don't shy away from offering giving opportunities—just do it in context.

- Add a donation QR code or short story at your volunteer table or in your follow-up email.

- Share giving tiers tied to outcomes: *“Just \$20 helps provide another backpack of weekend meals like the one you helped pack today.”*

Offer an Optional Giving Challenge - Invite volunteer teams, churches, or local businesses to participate in a peer-to-peer challenge:

“You packed 50 bags today—can you help raise \$500 to fill the next 50?”

What to Do

- Launch a Volunteer-to-Donor pipeline, with touchpoints that show impact.
- Invite volunteers to fundraise peer-to-peer for giving days or birthdays.
- Spotlight volunteer stories in your appeals and thank-you campaigns.

Example:

One food pantry turned their volunteer newsletter into a donor cultivation tool—adding soft appeals, impact stats, and donation prompts at the bottom of each update. Their donor conversion rate rose by 22% in six months.

Strategy 5: Non-Ask Touchpoints That Build Trust

Why it Works

Donors don’t want to be treated like ATMs. When every message is an ask, people begin to tune out—or worse, opt out. Strategic, non-ask communications deepen relationships by showing appreciation, celebrating impact, and reinforcing the donor’s role in your mission.

Best Practices

- Send handwritten thank-you notes or personalized video messages.
- Share behind-the-scenes updates from your programs.
- Spotlight donor-funded success stories like Eli and the Joneses—not tied to a new campaign.
- Invite donors to a “mission in motion” tour or low-pressure gathering.
- Send newsletters with impact updates, student quotes, and gratitude—no donation button.

What to Do

- Build these into your calendar monthly or quarterly.
- Use your CRM to automate a cadence of touchpoints for new donors, recurring givers, and major supporters.
- Track open and response rates to see what’s resonating—and when you’ve earned the right to ask again.

Example:

An organization where I worked, increased second-time gifts by 40% by creating a “donor thank-you track” with a series of emails like: “Here’s what your gift made possible this month,” without an ask. Thanking is important to donors.

Bonus Tip:

Most modern CRMs—regardless of brand—offer built-in tools to help automate donor touchpoints and monitor engagement. Whether it’s tracking email opens, click-throughs, or donor activity timelines, these features make it easier to follow up consistently, personalize your outreach, and evaluate what’s working. Explore what your CRM can already do to support smarter segmentation and stronger relationships.

Bonus Section: Try One Strategy This Quarter

Don’t try to do it all at once. Pick one strategy and implement it this quarter.

Try this:

- If you’re heavy on events: Replace one event with a 3-part storytelling campaign.
- If you’re losing lapsed donors: Create a reactivation email sequence.
- If you’re short on time: Start with a donor thank-you email and photo once a month.

What you’ll gain:

- Increased donor retention
- Reduced staff burnout
- Better ROI and CPDR
- More meaningful relationships