In organizations’ constant search for better ways to recruit new donors, they sometimes overlook the possibilities for raising additional money from current donors. In fact, grassroots groups often act as though their current donors are precious and fragile, like Grandmother’s good china, and should only be brought out on special occasions. Consequently, many organizations appeal to their donors at most once or twice a year.

Years of fundraising experience, however, show that many donors will respond well and generously when asked for extra gifts, and that organizations that ask their donors for money three to six times a year will have a higher renewal rate overall as well as all that extra income.

WHY DO MULTIPLE APPEALS WORK?

Many groups are hesitant to send several appeals to their current donors because they have heard donors complain about being asked too often. In fact, even you may dislike being asked repeatedly for money from the same organization. So the fact that multiple appeals work is a little counter to our experience and bears exploring.

We need to remind ourselves at the outset that the purpose of fundraising is building relationships. Every year, an organization should have more donors, and every year its donors should be more loyal. This will occur if the donors are treated like whole people and not just ATM machines, if they are thanked in a timely fashion with a personalized note, and if they are invited to the organization from time to time through an open house or other event.

Obviously, most of the donors to any organization will simply send their donation and wish the group well and the organization will never meet them. But a donor should have the impression that if they were to want to meet staff or board members, or get more involved with the organization, they would be welcomed. In fact, as much as possible, donors should be integrated into the work of the organization by being invited to be volunteers or attend events.

With this principle in mind, if a donor calls to complain that their name has been spelled wrong or that they are getting two copies of the newsletter, their complaint is dealt with swiftly and they are treated respectfully. If a donor attaches a note to a donation that says, “Only ask me once a year because I will only give once a year,” then the organization complies with that request. The name of that donor will be coded accordingly in the database and suppressed for multiple mailings. Similarly, donors who write, “Don’t phone me,” should not be phoned. These are reasonable requests and a group can accommodate them.

In the absence of such a directive, however, donors should be asked for gifts several times a year. In addition to helping you raise more money, the requests help to educate the donor about the work of your group. Studies have shown that about 10% of donors will give each time they are asked. Some donors will give every time they are asked, and some may only give one or two extra times, but each time you send a letter you will have a response from at least 10% of the list. Interestingly, even donors who give only once a year are more likely to renew their gifts if they are asked several times during the year than if they are asked only once annually.

Multiple appeals are successful for any number of reasons. First, a person’s cash flow can vary a great deal from month to month. In one month a person may receive an appeal from a group she supports, but she had just replaced all the tires on her car and can’t afford it. Two months later, she may have gotten a raise and be able to make a donation in response to the appeal that comes then.

Second, sending only one or two appeals a year does not allow for much variety. Some people respond better to...
some types of appeals than to others. Organizations that send four or five appeals will discover that donors who regularly give $25 will give $50, $100, or more to a special appeal. They like the idea of buying something for the organization — media spots, an organizing drive, new computers, and the like.

We rarely know why people don’t respond to appeals, but we usually make the assumption that the donor doesn’t want to give when any of the following might be just as true: The donor has been away on vacation and mail has piled up, so he throws anything away that is not a bill or a personal letter, including your appeal; the donor is having personal problems and cannot think about anything else, even though she might be very committed to your group; the appeal is lost in the mail; though he meant to give, the donor loses the appeal in a pile of papers that got thrown away. Sometimes organizations report receiving donations for an appeal that is six months or a year old, showing that the donor has saved the appeal until he or she had some extra money, or misplaced it and decided to give when he or she saw it again.

Donors have a sense that a lot is going on with a group that sends several appeals a year. Multiple appeals keep your organization on the donor’s radar screen and ensure that your group will be taken into account as the donor makes his or her charitable gifts. Remember that your group is not the only one the donor gives to and may in fact be one of a dozen or more groups they support. The donor needs to know that your group continues to do good work throughout the membership year.

HOW DO MULTIPLE APPEALS WORK?

Once we have established that multiple appeals do work, we have to look at how they work. Clearly, if so many people dislike being asked many times a year, it is possible to overdo appeals or to do them badly. So how do you do them well?

When you make a donation to a large national organization that appeals to its donors a dozen or more times a year, which is not unusual, this is what will often happen: You send in your gift. You may or may not get a thank-you note; if you do, it will not be personal. But six weeks or so after your first gift, you will get a request for another gift. This request will not acknowledge your previous gift at all. Whether or not you send in another gift, you will get another appeal. This is what makes people dislike multiple appeals — the sense that whatever they send is not enough.

To counter this problem, always begin an extra appeal by thanking the person for their previous gift. This can be done even in a form letter by saying, “Dear Friend, Thank you so much for what you have given so far this year. We have used your donations to further our work. Now we have a chance to expand our work and need your help with an exciting project.” The letter explains what work you are going to do and asks the donor for an extra gift: “If you can help us with an extra gift of $35, $50, $100 or whatever you can afford, we will be able to….” The letter ends by thanking the donor again, “Thank you for your previous support, and thank you in advance for helping in whatever way you can now.”

HOW OFTEN SHOULD WE SEND APPEALS?

Grassroots organizations generally find that sending four appeals a year works well. The appeals can be sent quarterly, with a description of the exciting work coming up in the fall, winter, spring, or summer. Some groups plan to send three appeals and hold one appeal as a “floater.” The floater appeal will be sent whenever something really exciting is happening and may not be sent at all during a year when nothing lends itself to description in a mail appeal. Some groups send three appeal letters and one invitation to a special event, and some groups send two appeals, and an invitation to a special event, and call donors once a year.

What you do will depend on how widely scattered your donors are (national groups will hesitate to run up their long distance bills by calling and generally will not be inviting donors who live far away to a special event), how many volunteers you have to help you with the appeal, and how many donors you have. Incidentally, return envelopes put in newsletters, although a good idea, do not take the place of multiple appeals.

To find out what works best, you may want to segment your donors and try different methods on different donor segments over the course of the year.

WHAT SHOULD WE SAY IN OUR APPEALS?

Once an organization has accepted the idea of doing multiple appeals, they often wonder what they are going to say in each different appeal. The following list of 26 ideas with sample text should help you choose some approaches that will work for your organization. Some of these ideas will be better suited to one organization than another, but almost any organization should be able to find one or two ideas that they could modify and use for their group.

Seasonal Appeals

1. Beginning of Year (written as a testimonial): “One of my New Year’s resolutions is to give more money to
Verygood Group. I realized that, like many of my resolutions, this one could fade if I didn’t act now. So I sent an extra $35 on Jan. 5. Will you join me and act now? Verygood will put the money right to work, right in our community."

2. End of Summer: “This fall our organizing efforts in Southend are going to result in the cleanup of the now closed Foul Factory. Getting the factory closed was one of our most important victories, but we must keep the pressure on to make sure the site is properly and thoroughly cleaned. Will you help us get a head start on our fall fundraising with an extra gift right now? Knowing that we have the money for our organizing campaign to monitor the cleanup process will make planning for it much easier.”

3. End of Year: “If you are like many of us at Very Effective Group (VEG), you are gearing up for Hanukkah, Christmas, Kwanzaa, or the Winter Solstice. As you think about gifts for your loved ones, please think about VEG as well. This is your last chance to make a tax-deductible gift and count it against this year’s taxes. We appreciate all you have done and wish you all the best in this holiday season.”

4. Spring Appeal for New Members: “In the spring, everything seems to put on a new look — new leaves, new flowers. Everything starts growing again. Our organization is growing, too. You have been a big part of our growth and we thank you for that. This year we hope to recruit 500 new members — people like you. So, instead of asking you for a contribution, we would like you to send us the names of five people you think would be interested in joining our group.”

Holiday Appeals

5. Martin Luther King’s Birthday: “It is no secret that Dr. King would be both pleased and appalled at the progress America has made toward ending racism. Pleased, because much that is positive has happened. Appalled, because in some ways racism has gotten worse. We at Do Right Organization live and work by the principles of Dr. King and other civil rights leaders who gave their lives for their beliefs. Help us continue the legacy of Dr. King with a tribute gift to our organization in his memory.”

6. Lincoln’s Birthday: “President Lincoln was only one of the more famous people to be killed with a handgun. I know you want to end this senseless and continuing outrage of handgun violence. An extra donation from you, sent today, will give us the extra funds we need to work on a special program to stop the sale of handguns in our city.”

7. Valentine’s Day: “Do you often think of important people on Valentine’s Day? Do you remember them with flowers, candy, or cards? I know I do. This year, I thought of other important people in my life — the people at Working for Good Organization. They really depend on us, the members, for the financial support they need. Will you join me in sending an extra donation? You can send flowers or candy as well.”

8. April: “Taxes. That’s what’s on everyone’s mind right now. How much you owe. How you’re going to pay it. Whether you are getting a refund. And where the tax money is going. At People Against Military Waste, we try to stop wasteful spending on weapons no one will ever use and we question the size and scope of our military. This year, we are asking people who have supported our work in the past to consider sending us a donation equal to 10% of what you owe the government or what you will get back in a refund.”

9. Memorial Day: “We invite you to remember someone important to you with a gift to OurHospice Group. We will send a special card to the family of the person you are honoring and put the money right to work helping people cope with terminal illness.”

10. Flag Day: “Flag Day. Most of us don’t even own a flag anymore, but when I was a kid everyone put out a flag on June 14. At Center City Organizing Project, we were reminded by one of our senior members of the principles the flag stands for: freedom of speech, liberty, democracy, equality, pursuit of happiness. With your help, we will continue to work for these ideals. We aren’t putting out a flag, but we are putting out a request — will you help us with an extra gift? You cherish these ideals as much as we do, and with your help they can become reality for all people.”

11. July 4: “We are inviting all our members to a special July 4 barbecue at Phyllis Wheatley Park — the park we fought to save and worked to restore. Suggested donation: $15 a person, $25 for two; children under 12 are free. All you can eat, games, and fun! If you can’t come, be with us in spirit by sending a donation in the enclosed envelope.”

12. Mother’s Day/Father’s Day: “On this day, we remember our own parents and celebrate parents we know. For many people, these are fun times, surrounded by loving family. But what happens when this vision of a loving family turns sour, as it does for more than half of married women, who suffer from domestic abuse, or for the millions of children beaten, humiliated, or sexually assaulted by relatives? Mother’s Day/Father’s Day becomes a cruel irony. Mark this holiday in a different way this year — with an extra donation to the Abuse Prevention Project.”

13. Labor Day: “Labor Day is a wonderful day to rest from work. But what about all the people who want to work and can’t find jobs? For them, Labor Day is another reminder of their joblessness. We provide training to thousands of people so that they can get good jobs in areas
need workers. Help us make sure that we are able to provide training to everyone who wants it with your extra gift this Labor Day.

14. Columbus Day: "'Columbus discovered America.' This is one part of American history that nearly everyone knows. The problem is that this is a half-truth — Columbus discovered America for white people. There were already people here — our people. We are Native Americans. Yet our history since Columbus has been one of genocide, displacement, and oppression. Our latest project at Native American Advocacy Fund is free lesson plans, games, and plays for people who work with young children to teach them who Columbus really is and who we really are. Your donations in the past helped us develop this curriculum and your donation now will ensure that it is widely used."

15. Thanksgiving Day: "Your donation of $14.50 will provide a family with turkey and all the trimmings. Give whatever you can."

16. Any Holiday: As this holiday approaches, we are just $1,000 short of our goal to provide an important service to all the seniors in our community. Help us celebrate this holiday with your extra gift."

Old Stand-Bys

17. Anniversary: Our organization is now entering its ___ year of service to the community. Celebrate with us by sending $10 (or more or less) for every year we have existed. For your gift, we will be pleased to send you our special anniversary calendar. For those donating $1,000 or more, there will be a special reception with Famous Person at the home of Important Person."

18. Pledge: "Did you ever wish you could give more? Would you like to be a major donor, but can’t afford it? Now you can. By joining our Monthly Donor Club, you can give $10, $20, $50, or whatever you wish on a monthly basis. You can do this by automatic charges to your credit card or direct debit from your checking account, or we can send you convenient reminder envelopes."

19. Famous Person: "I’m _______. You may have seen me on television. In my personal life, I am very concerned about ______________. From your support of Good Work Organization, I know you are too. Will you join me in making an extra gift and ensuring that this important work continues?" (Famous Person can be truly famous, like Jimmy Smits or Oprah Winfrey, or it can be someone well known and well respected in your community.)

20. Another Member: "My name is Joe Murphy and I have been a member of Right On Group for five years. In that time, I have witnessed the malicious efforts of our elected leaders to deny us our rights. All that stands between us and them is Right On Group. In the past five years, Right On has succeeded in_______, ________, and ________. That’s why I am giving a little extra this year. My additional gift of $15 is not a lot for me, but if all our members gave at least that much, it would really add up."

21. The Story That Might Have Been Sad, but Ended Well Because of Your Group: "Ruthie is ten. Two years ago, she ran away from her violent stepfather. She was brought to our program from the streets of New York City, where she was found wandering alone, penniless and dazed. Today she is a good student and has found friendships with her classmates. She needs the support of our structured program, but with continued counseling, Ruthie can achieve her dream of becoming a judge. You have helped Ruthie and 500 children like her. Help us help more. Please send your extra donation today."

22. Urgent Need: "We have an urgent need to raise $2,000 to alert the public to the efforts of our city council to sell Vacant Lot to developers. We have been working for four years to have that lot turned into a community center. The developers want to make it into condos that no one in our neighborhood could afford. Help us stop this gentrification. Send your extra gift today."

23. Specific Project: "Our day care center is in desperate need of new playground equipment. The quality of day care is threatened by the dilapidated swing sets and slides that are all the children have to play on. To replace the whole playground will cost $5,000. Will you make an extra gift today toward that goal?"

Combination Appeals

24. Monthly Donor to a Specific Project: "Please join our Food for Thought Donor Club. For $10 a month minimum donation, you will help us keep serving 100 meals daily at our parish hall. In return, we will be pleased to send you our special newsletter, Food For Thought."

25. Request for Funds and New Members in Honor of an Anniversary: "In honor of our second anniversary, we are forming a 2 × 4 club. Send us any combination of money, as long as it has twos in it — $2, $2.22, $22, $22.22 — and send us the names of four people who you think will be interested in joining. To thank you, we have had a special anniversary pin designed by one of our members. It is a 2 × 4, in a shape that will surprise and delight you. Join today."

26. Any of the Above Appeals with a Premium: "If you send your special gift before ___ date, we will send you, with our thanks, an autographed copy of A Great Book by A. Famous Person."