



# Show Me The Impact: Improving Stewardship Communications

By: Dan Lowman

# Introduction

Donors overwhelmingly report that they are not seeing the impact of their giving. The GG+A Survey Lab analyzed data from their Donor Experience Scorecard, which includes responses from over 15,000 donors across a range of nonprofit organizations, and found that **only about half of donors, on average, clearly understand the impact of their gift.**

Though results vary widely across donor levels, it remains an issue even among major donors: just sixty-five percent (65%) say they see the impact of their gifts. Among donors who gave less than \$1,000 over three years, fewer than a third say they understand the impact.

However, most donors (74%) say they are satisfied with the gift acknowledgments they receive, and more than 80% say they received a prompt and accurate gift receipt. Herein lies the disconnect: donors appreciate what most organizations do for them, but they don't understand how their gifts are being used. As a result, donors may be less inclined to increase their gift support.

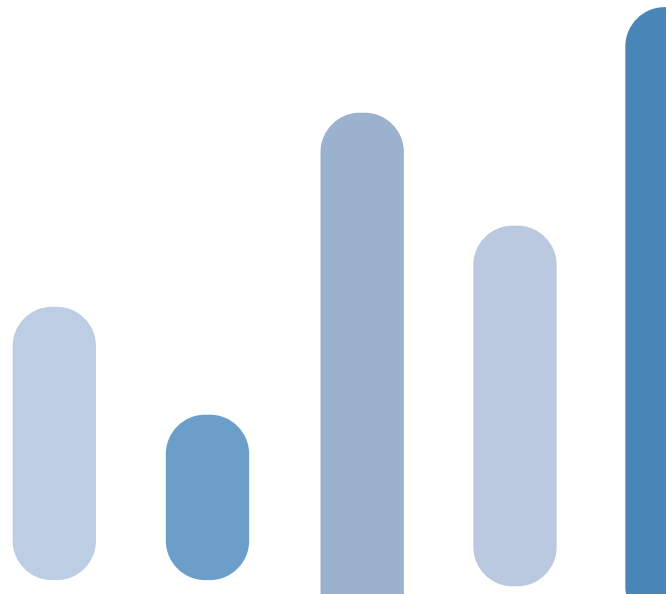


# Specifics Tend To Be Trends

“Evidence of gift impact tends to be the same across colleges and universities. It’s not distinctive,” explains Suzanne Hilser-Wiles, President of GG+A. “Many gift-impact stories are about a student or young alumnus from a disadvantaged background whose scholarship was life-changing. That’s an important story, but virtually all institutions can tell it.” Hilser-Wiles adds that because many organizations tell one story, it becomes matter-of-course for others to do the same. This leads to complacency: though funds are raised, most institutions are satisfied with only a 1% or 2% growth in annual funding and a 4% to 6% growth in total private support.

## Impact Storytelling

Impact storytelling, on the other hand, conveys a distinctive story. Melinda Church, a consultant in GG+A’s Strategic Communication Practice, explains that to create impact an organization’s writers “need permission” to engage in creative nonfiction writing. Effective donor communications include a relatable character and an element of tension. She says that this is akin to a fictional short story or novel rather than a news article. This includes donor profiles or the spotlight piece that profiles, for example, the work of a specific faculty member, or how research work affects the professional work of alumni. Also important are stories about how charitable giving can affect an entire community.



# The 3 Successful Elements of Impact Storytelling

The best donor communications are specific, urgent, and clear. Whether they are solicitations, stewardship pieces, or website items, organizations should make sure they can pinpoint where a communication shows those three factors.

For example, Charity Water, a New York-based organization, clearly describes on their website water projects in specific communities. They convey urgency with a statistic and a call to action that is prominently displayed on their homepage: “1 in 10 people lack access to clean water. We’re on a mission to change that. Here’s how.” They also provide maps and photos of each project and even allow website visitors to log in and see real-time sensor data about water flow at project sites.

Comprehensive universities often struggle to explain impact, especially for annual gifts that may be applied to a wide array of projects and program areas. But while it may be more difficult to convey the impact of these gifts, it is no less important. King’s College London, for example, describes the potential impact of gifts as small as £10. There is no explicit promise that funds will go to something as specific as “provid[ing] five hours of training to medical students,” but the College makes clear the kind of benefit even a small gift will have.

While making clear the benefits of small gifts is effective, GG+A’s annual/regular giving expert Adrian Salmon believes organizations will need to take this one step further. “One day, this will all have to be personal and customized,” explains Salmon. “For now, I’d settle for acknowledging impact at the department or unit level, but eventually it will have to be unique to the donor if we expect to compete for dollars with companies using complex algorithms.” That said, surely the most unrestricted of annual funds spends its money somewhere. Much of it may not be glamorous, but highlighting even a small part of those expenditures is good practice.



# Other Strategies to Help Show Donor Impact

- **Conduct a survey.** Donors and potential donors can guide you in terms of what they would like to see, the channels through which they want to engage with you, and if they are satisfied (or not) with how you thank them and acknowledge their giving as well as their view on how you explain gift impact.
- **Create a Donor Newsletter.** Make it attractive with color printing and pack it with stories of gift impact. Note the language there—it's not about donors but it is for donors so they can see the wide-ranging impact of philanthropy. Add more value by sending it just before the next solicitation rather than as part of a solicitation.
- **Develop a Donor Welcome Packet.** Newly acquired donors at low giving levels often get the least attention from development communications offices. Up your game and market their gift impact from the start.
- **Don't make people click-thru.** Send emails with the full story embedded in the email itself. People are more likely to read stories when they don't have to click on another link to get to it. This practice may make technical measurements like click-thru rates harder to measure, but this type of communication is for the donor and not the organization, so don't make donors work harder than they have to.
- **Don't be bound by the house style.** Experiment with design and always do A/B testing (i.e., preference testing) with varying styles and content. (Think of A/B testing like an eye exam: "Is this better, or is this better?")
- **Make the mission part and parcel of the donor experience.** Link gift stories to how philanthropy supports the mission of your organization. Be explicit about this: "Our mission is X, and Jane's gift of Y helped us fulfill our mission by doing Z."
- **Your Deans, Curators, and other leaders may be better at telling impact stories than your development department.** People who regularly deliver on the mission may be able to tell the story better or point out what the story is.
- **Keep trying.** This isn't a flip-the-switch improvement, and some things you try won't work. But the effort is worthwhile. The alternative is that your story sounds the same as a thousand other organizations' stories. As such, you run the risk of boring and—even worse—losing donors.



# About the Author

Dan Lowman is a Senior Vice President and Director of GG+A Survey Lab. His clients span the nonprofit sector and include hundreds of colleges, universities, hospitals, and social service, advocacy, and cultural organizations. His work with client organizations includes survey and market research, campaign planning, prospect identification and prospect management, analytics implementation, metrics, and annual giving programs.

Since 1961, Grenzebach Glier and Associates has been dedicated to helping clients harness the power of philanthropy to fulfill their diverse missions. GG+A has provided philanthropic consulting services to more than 2,000 nonprofits in five arenas: higher education, independent schools, healthcare and academic medicine, arts and culture, and civic organizations. Our vision is to be the first-choice partner globally for nonprofits seeking substantial and sustainable growth in outreach and engagement, and in the philanthropic support of their missions.

