

The Necessary Art of Making Amends

Mistakes happen. When they do, a tactfully written apology can restore trust—and may even deepen your relationship with loyal donors.

By Susan Sarver

You send a donor an acknowledgement letter for a gift in memory of his son—who happens to be alive and well. You mistakenly drop a longtime patron from the invitation list for a gala event. You send a donor a thank-you letter for a \$50 gift, but she gave \$50,000.

In the human enterprise of fundraising, despite our best efforts to establish foolproof processes, mistakes happen. In any of the situations mentioned above, a resounding “Oops!” from staffers just won’t suffice. A written apology letter in the wake of a gaffe is as fundamental as a thank-you letter following a gift.

Though it may seem like some of the toughest prose to compose, a written apology often becomes the defining gesture that soothes tension and restores trust when someone’s feelings are hurt as a result of an institutional error. An apology letter requires sincerity as its primary ingredient, but it also calls for responsibility, sensitivity to the person’s feelings, and a positive attitude.

Taking Responsibility

No matter who’s to blame for a mistake, someone must step forth on behalf of the organization and say, “I’m sorry.”

Though you may have done nothing to cause the mistake, apologizing means taking responsibility; in other words, don’t blame others and don’t make excuses.

The urge to point the finger at the new staff member who left off a digit while entering data might be overwhelming, but resist. Criticizing your staff in a letter of apology could shake the recipient’s confidence even more than the mistake itself. Accepting responsibility will go far in fostering that person’s sense of faith and trust in the institution.

Self-deprecation is just as inappropriate as blaming others. Statements such

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as, “We’ve made an unforgivable error,” or “You’ll probably never want to talk to us again,” are embarrassing exaggerations and don’t do anything to help rebuild the relationship. Simply say, “I’m sorry,” and mean it.

Whenever possible, an apology should provide reassurance that you have solved the problem that caused the error. For instance, “I am so sorry that we mistakenly forwarded your gift to the Department of Environmental Sciences. I want to assure you that we have redirected your contribution to the Department of Environmental Health, as you requested. Thank you for calling the mistake to our attention. Please know that we have taken measures to prevent such errors in the future.”

It’s Not About You

Even when the events that prompt an apology are beyond your control, it is important to put the other person’s feelings first. True, you might have missed a meeting with a donor because a blizzard diverted your flight from Iceland to Scotland, your luggage got lost, and a pothole snapped the heel from your shoe while you were hailing a taxi. You don’t need to spell all that out in your written apology, however.

It should provide a succinct explanation and place the donor’s feeling first, without spotlighting your own hardship: “I am deeply sorry that I was unable to attend our meeting due to the blizzard that prevented my plane from landing in Reykjavik. I apologize for any inconvenience I may have caused you. I will call you next week to reschedule.” If details of the untoward events are revealed in good humor in a future conversation, the fact that you put the donor’s feelings first will be both obvious and appreciated.

A Touch of “Lagniappe”

According to Kathleen S. Kelly, author of *Effective Fund Raising Management*, a letter of apology should include a commitment to make a follow-up phone call. “An apology is an important part of the stewardship step,” Kelly says. Of course, even the best apologies will be more effective when followed by what’s known in Louisiana as *lagniappe*, which means “a little something extra.”

One major gifts officer recalls a computer glitch that deleted names from an entire ZIP code on an invitation list for an important event that was 11 days

away. One of those omitted was not only a generous contributor, but also a member of the host committee. When a development officer discovered the problem, the advancement team sent invitations along with a brief apology and special RSVP instructions by overnight mail to the omitted invitees. The host committee member received a written apology with an explanation and a personal phone call in addition to the new invitation. These measures, along with a little special attention at the event, went far in soothing the host committee member's feelings.

Staying Positive

Kelly points out that a donor maybe offended by an error, but he or she generally acknowledges your initial good intentions. She recalls one donor who held an exceptionally positive view toward human error. He would preface his conversations with Kelly by asking her whether or not she had made her first mistake of the day. If she hadn't, he'd urge her to "get to it!"

While not all donors are so understanding, the good news is that giving and forgiving are closely related, and donors tend to be generous people. An apology allows the person to be generous in forgiving you without reaching for a checkbook. Even if you're not sure that the donor is ready to pardon the error, stay positive in your belief that forgiveness is forthcoming. Extending a simple "Thank you for your understanding" can help lead the person's feelings into the realm of forgiveness. In time, the care and concern you demonstrate through an apology might well lead to a deepening of a donor's relationship with the institution.

Recognizing Opportunity

Despite the embarrassment of an institutional faux pas, an apology presents an important opportunity to connect with a constituent on a human level and to demonstrate the responsibility and integrity of the institution and its people. The negative aura of a mistake has a greater chance of dissipating rapidly when followed with an apology that conveys sincerity, assumes institutional responsibility, keeps the person's feelings first, and takes a positive attitude.

To err might well be human, but the transforming power of a well crafted apology is nothing short of divine.

Susan Sarver is a senior editor at Tulane University Health Sciences Center in New Orleans. This article, reprinted with permission, originally appeared in the January 2001 issue of CURRENTS, published by the Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE). Copyright © 2001 CASE. All rights reserved. CASE is a membership organization for advancement professionals at colleges, universities and independent schools. For more information about CASE services and publications, including subscriptions to CURRENTS, visit the CASE Web site at www.case.org, or contact CASE, 1307 New York Ave., N.W., Suite 1000, Washington, DC 20005; tel. (202) 328-5900.