

The Way We Write is All Wrong A Profile and Prescription for Fixing The Broken Discourse of Fundraising

By Frank C. Dickerson, Ph.D.

A new kind of data mining from the scholarship of linguistics and rhetoric has uncovered disturbing artifacts in the discourse of fund raising. These artifacts were the product of my doctoral studies at The Peter Drucker Management Center and Claremont Graduate University.

My research discovered that the discourse of fund-raising is fractured.

Like a linguistic MRI, my computer-based corpus analysis revealed surprising linguistic and rhetorical patterns in fund-raising texts. These underlying patterns profiled a discourse focused more on *transferring information* than *creating interpersonal involvement*. Rather than sounding *warm and friendly* like personal conversations, fund-raising texts sounded *cold and detached* like dissertations. Rather than gaining reader attention with *emotionally rich human-interest stories*, these texts *contained less narrative than academic prose*. They had even *less narrative than official documents*.

Is this characterization severe? Probably. Is it accurate? Unfortunately . . . *yes*.

These counterintuitive conclusions grew out of research that mined 1.5 million words of online and printed fund-raising texts from America's largest charities. Of the 880 organizations represented, 735 reported direct support of \$20 million or more on IRS form 990. I analyzed 2,412 web- and print-based documents across nine philanthropic sectors. The largest study of its kind to date, my research offers insights that can help improve communication among fund raisers at all levels—from direct mail to major gifts.

My study was based on a factor analysis that had identified among 67 linguistic features, sets of features that tend to occur together to achieve specific communicative aims. For instance, personal pronouns, contractions and private verbs (e.g. *I think, I feel*) tend to create interpersonal involvement in personal letters and conversation—genres located on one pole of a continuum between high involvement and high information. Conversely, on the high information pole of the same continuum, long words and nominalizations that transform verbs and adjectives into nouns by adding *ion* or *ive* (e.g. evaluate becoming *evaluation* or intense becoming *intensity*) were often used to create densely packed informational content in genres like academic prose and official documents.

A total of seven linguistic scales were established to measure how other sets of linguistic features work together to achieve still other communicative aims in 23 genres of written and spoken English. My research profiled 2,412 fund-raising texts and then compared their scores to these 23 genres in four steps: 1.) First I tagged and tallied counts

of linguistic features; 2.) next, to avoid text-length skewing I normalized these frequency counts to their occurrence per 1,000 words; 3.) then I translated these averages to units of standard deviation; finally, 4.) I compared my texts' scores to those of the other 23 genres.

In addition to profiling texts, I surveyed those who wrote them. My goal was to learn what factors these executives believe help make a fund-raising text effective. To this end, I asked respondents to score the importance of using an argument-centric (expository) writing style on a 1 to 5 scale (with 5 being high). Only 5.04 percent rated exposition high.

I then asked them to score the importance of using an emotional, human-interest narrative style of writing. Those rating narrative high grew by a ratio of nine-to-one over those rating exposition high. But despite the increase of those favoring narrative to 45.21 percent, the linguistic evidence of their writing revealed a wide gap between what they *believed* about writing, and what they actually *wrote*. Belief did not match practice.

In addition to the study of *linguistic* factors, I conducted several tests to measure differences in direct mail response attributable to *paratextual* (non-language) factors. In TEST 1, PANEL A was sent mail addressed and personalized with P.S. notes *printed* in computer-simulated handwriting. PANEL B was an equivalent list segment that had been sent the same package, but addressed and personalized with P.S. notes *written* by human hand. Surprisingly, PANEL B using Computer HandScript simulated handwriting won on four key measures: 1.) response rate, 2.) average gift, 3.) gross income, and 4.) net income.

Two more tests compared the impact of 1.) varying the kinds of stamps affixed and 2.) canceling stamps not usually postmarked. In TEST 2, PANEL A used *full-rate* first class stamps and PANEL B used *presort* first class stamps that had been *canceled* with a mailer's postmark. Then in TEST 3, PANEL A used nonprofit stamps that were mailed *naked* (not canceled) and PANEL B used nonprofit stamps that had been mailed *canceled*.

In TEST 2, there was no statistically significant difference in the response rates of the *full-rate* (PANEL A) and *presort* and *canceled* first class (PANEL B) segments. But the *presort* and *canceled* segment's gift average was up 5 percent. In TEST 3, response was 27.27 percent higher for PANEL B (the segment using *canceled* nonprofit stamps).

The significance of these results is expressed in the Latin phrase: *conditio sine qua non*. The rough translation of this legal term is: *the condition without which, not*. In plain English: ***it really doesn't matter how brilliant your copy, elegant your art, or targeted your list . . . nothing else really matters if your envelope doesn't get opened.***

Using a number 10 window envelope, preprinting an indicia, or mailing a naked nonprofit stamp is like serving the elegant culinary craftsmanship of a five-star chef on a flimsy paper plate. All the hard work and cost that goes into a direct mail package deserves better. For more information on the topics surveyed above you can download two articles:

Editor's note: Dr. Frank Dickerson is the head of High Touch Direct Mail and can be contacted at hightouch@msn.com You can download the full dissertation containing this research at www.TheWrittenVoice.org