Just Say Yes! The Rhetoric of Charitable- Contribution Reply Forms

Deborah Schaffer

Introduction

There can be little doubt that direct-mail solicitation is a booming industry, whether for mail-order businesses or fundraising for charitable or political organizations. Bessie Thibodeaux (abstract) claimed in 1999 that up to 70% of a fundraising campaign’s income may be obtained through direct mail, and other statistics are available to show the impact this practice has on the flow of money in the US (at the least). Even though 2001’s anthrax scares put a dent in mail advertising (see Foust 14; Harrison Y7), there can be little doubt that this industry remains a pervasive presence in our lives.

Given the power of direct mail, it is also no wonder that much has been written, both descriptively and prescriptively, about the graphic and linguistic features of successful mailings, with journals like Fund Raising Management and Direct Marketing devoting much of their space to this topic. While the history of solicitation or dunning letters evidently goes back centuries (see, for example, Kitty Locker’s article analyzing dunning letters from the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries), the art and analysis of direct marketing can be argued to have reached its peak in the past two decades, at least if the proliferation of how-to articles is any indication. Some authors clearly place great importance on the total package—James Rosenfield (“Re-thinking”), for instance, offers advice on the graphics and language of everything from envelope surfaces to brochures, letters, and response cards (see also Carol Enters, Robert Hemmings, Chuck Muth, and Edward Nash)—while others concentrate on more specific elements. Thus, William Vartorella points out common mistakes made in direct-mail packaging; Mal Warwick focuses on 11 copywriting rules for direct mailings; and Jeffrey Dobkin discusses the features of the solicitation letter itself (“The Art”; “Hot Tips”), as does Dean Rieck. But how many recipients of junk mail (to be brutally honest about this form of correspondence) actually take the time to read, or even look at, the letters enclosed?

If I am at all typical, most people who even bother to open direct mailings will simply flip through the contents to identify the sender (surprisingly often uncertain from the outside of the envelope), see if any goodies have been enclosed (coins, bumper stickers, return-address labels, etc.), and—if any item is read at all—look over the reply form for further information to weigh in deciding whether a donation or response is called for (most importantly for me, whether an annual renewal of a membership or donation is due).

Alan Douglas believes that “reply cards are the ugly ducklings in the magazine publishing family” (70), and one suspects this is probably true in fundraising and other forms of direct mail, as well; the letters and brochures are what writers find more challenging and so more rewarding to design for maximum sales impact. And yet, Douglas argues, “…who really gets revved up about reply cards? Nobody important—just the readers and advertisers” (70), while Con Squires states that “the reply slip is the key factor in how much the donor decides to give—rather than the letter.”

Whether or not marketers agree that response forms are the key to their success, it is certainly true that considerable attention is paid to the form and its content. For general impact, Squires and Rosenfield (“Re-thinking”) both provide advice about attaching the card to the soliciting letter, and Squires also presents in some detail a sequence of suggested donation amounts, with accompanying language, designed to entice would-be donors into giving more than they might have originally been planning on.

Hemmings recommends writing the reply card first, even before the letter, and making sure the card summarizes the key appeal from the letter, including the desired action and donor benefits (38), to help recipients “cut through the clutter” (Dobkin, “Hot Tips”) and perhaps by itself spur a donation (Hemmings 38). His advice for response-device content is similar to that offered by Dobkin (“Hot Tips”) for direct-mail copy writing in general, as well as to Douglas’ suggestions for magazine-subscription
reply cards, as the latter also feels that “cards must demand action and include an immediate motivator” such as free goods (posters, hats)—an incentive Dobkin (“Hot Tips”) also agrees with—or “some other tangible reward” (70) for returning a filled-out form (in the case of solicitations, no doubt accompanied by a check).

Rosenfield (“Re-thinking”), whose general focus is on maximizing the use of icons in direct mailings, also points out that the prospective donor’s/customer’s name (a verbal icon) should appear on the reply card, since “personalized response devices almost always outperform nonpersonalized ones,” and argues for the prominent placement on the card of a “big ‘YES!’” (incorporating both verbal and punctuation icons) accompanied by an empty (unprechecked) box. He also pushes for maximizing “response channels”—e.g., donating by phone or e-mail instead of by print mail—in keeping with Dobkin’s (“Hot Tips”) recommendations for facilitating recipients’ responses through such devices as 800 numbers.

And Warwick’s general copywriting advice includes several relevant recommendations, some of which match suggestions made by Hemmings and Enters. While Warwick argues for “us[ing] ‘I’ and ‘you’ (but mostly ‘you’)” (20) and “ask[ing] for money, not for ‘support.’ ... clearly, explicitly and repeatedly” (20) in the case of fundraising, both Warwick and Hemmings agree on the importance of stressing donor benefits—in Warwick’s case, rather than the requesting organization’s needs unless real urgency can be demonstrated (20)—and on certain other general writing characteristics. Here, Warwick says, “Write in American English. Use compact, powerful words and short, punchy sentences,” and strive to “convey emotions” rather than “thoughts” (21), in accord with Hemmings’ advice to choose short, “Anglo-Saxon” words and “keep it simple” (39), as well as to emphasize clarity and conciseness (38), and in agreement with Enters’ recommendations to keep the solicitation letter “simple, direct, easy to read. State exactly what you want, why you want it and what will be done with the money that’s given” (23). Enters (23) also warns against asking a question which could be answered negatively (“Would you consider sending a gift?” ... “No!”), while Hemmings stresses use of active voice along with conveying believability (38) and serenity: “You can still talk about crises, emergencies and children who are dying. But do it serenely” (39). Hemmings’ bottom line is “the criterion for any letter is that it be interesting. ... No letter is too long. Only too boring” (40).

These recommendations as a whole present a straightforward survey of visual and written characteristics presumed to contribute to a successful reply card. Fair enough. Two questions might then logically follow: What proportion of fundraising response forms actually incorporate some or all of these features, specifically, the language ones? And, are there other linguistic characteristics beyond those cited in these articles which might also be frequently observed? Answering these questions is the goal of this study.

**Procedure**

My database consists of one reply card from each of 150 different soliciting organizations (while more than one card was collected from a number of groups, it was decided to restrict the number examined for time reasons). The nature of these groups’ causes varies from environmental and medical to religious and political (though excluding individual campaign solicitations), and from local and state to national and international, providing a wide range of needs and goals to be presented to prospective donors, but all having in common the desire to obtain financial donations from recipients of the organizations’ literature.

I started my analysis of reply-card language by looking for those features that had been mentioned in the direct-mail literature I examined. But I also observed a number of recurrent features in the response forms that had not been noted in those articles, and these I also recorded. I then determined percentages of occurrence for each feature over my entire corpus.

**Analysis**

**Features Observed in the Literature**

Of the language features recommended for or applicable to reply cards in the marketing literature I reviewed—see Table I.A.—all of them appear on at least one response form, but some are much more frequent than others.

On the low end, as seen in Table I.A., a request for a donation increase only occurs on four reply cards out of 150 (3%). While it is true that only five cards in my corpus (3%) request membership renewals, such a low number still suggests that this appeal is actually rarely used, especially as none of the increase requests actually appears on renewal cards and I do belong or donate to many of the groups whose cards I analyzed.
Other language features appearing on fewer than half of the reply forms are:

- short sentences (36, 24%);
- explicit money or gift requests (39, 26%);
- urgent-need declarations (47, 31%); and
- offers of goods (59, 39%).

And it might be noted that Enters’ warning against questions answerable in the negative is certainly
heeded here, as no response form in my corpus actually poses any questions to begin with.

At the other end, however, several features do appear on more than half of the cards:

- offers of other response channels, including 800 numbers and e-mail addresses (77, 51%);
- statements of donation benefits to the donor (87, 58%);
- use of “yes” to open the appeal to the donor (95, 63%), with 27 of those cards—18% of the total corpus—also including an exclamation point, as recommended by Rosenfield (“Re-thinking”);
- emotionally connotative or evocative language (96, 64%), including such buzz words as “urgent,” “outrage,” “crisis,” “desperately,” “advocacy,” “cure,” “magnificent,” and “sanctuary”;
- use of second person (135, 90%);
- demands or requests for donor action (135, 90%);
- use of first person (141, 94%);
- name and address printed on the card (143, 95%)—though only 13 cards (9%) actually use the donor’s name in a salutation or some other form of direct address;
- use of compact (including Anglo-Saxon) vocabulary (150, 100%); and
- use of American English (150, 100%).

Additional Features Not Discussed in the Literature

However, in addition to the literature-based features just covered, I also observed other language and rhetoric devices on a substantial number of reply cards, as listed in Table I.B.

First, several features, while actually rare, are noteworthy when they appear:

- five cards (3%) offer privacy assurances to donors regarding their personal information;
- seven cards (5%) assign labels to different gift amounts (e.g., “Basic” for $25, “Supporter” for $250, etc., on an American Wildlands reply card);
- seven cards (5%) announce the use of recycled paper (only three of which were for environmental groups);
- 10 cards (7%) request name and/or address corrections;
- 10 cards (7%) include statements that donations are not tax deductible;
- 13 cards (9%) include an option to decline contributing, with a check box; and
- 14 cards (9%) include matching-gift information.

Other features appear on over 10% of the response forms, but still under half of them:

- 21 cards (14%) mention the donor’s generosity (either acknowledging it or appealing for it);
- 22 (15%) include directions to peel or detach the reply portion from the material it is attached to—or not to separate the parts;
- 28 (19%) provide a statement and check box to request more information (about the organization, other giving opportunities, or the problem focused on by the organization);
- 32 (21%) include the organization’s motto on the card itself;
- 33 (22%) recommend a specific donation amount;
- 37 (25%) specify a minimum gift amount to receive gifts in return (everything from organization magazines, newsletters and special publications—mostly books on the subject of concern to the organization—to tote bags, stuffed animals, posters, and other items, in contrast to gifts that are frequently enclosed right with the solicitation materials as come-ons: return-address labels, note cards and pads, calendars, postcards, coins, and other small items);
- 52 (35%) mention an enclosed return envelope; and
- 56 (37%) include a statement of thanks or appreciation, with or without an accompanying acknowledgment of generosity.

And a number of additional language features appear on more than 50% of the reply forms examined:

- 86 cards (57%) include information on donating by credit card;
- 98 (65%) carry the requesting organization’s logo, a potent icon evidently considered more attention-getting than the group’s motto, since only 32 cards—21%—include the latter;
- 103 (69%) provide instructions for making out donation checks;
• 105 (70%) mention the tax-deductible nature of the donation (vs. 10—7%—that explicitly point out the donation’s non-tax-deductible status);

• 119 (79%) specify the benefits of the donation for the organization and/or its beneficiaries (contrary to Warwick’s urging to avoid dwelling on the organization’s needs except in case of a true emergency [20], though in keeping with his recommendation to stress the “human needs” addressed by the soliciting group [21]);

• 132 (88%) include what I have elsewhere called a *pseudo-quote* (Schaffer 32), where the card offers a statement purported to be the donor’s own sentiments or intention to help the organization or to take some course of action (e.g., Food for the Poor, Inc.’s statement: “Yes! I want to help a poor mother whose children are hungry. My gift for milk is: . . .”); and

• 144 (96%) list options for donation amounts (from just a single possibility, offered only on one card, up to nine amount categories, specified on three forms), though none in the exact order recommended by Squires.

**Conclusion**

So of the 15 language-specific features recommended in the marketing literature I surveyed for use either on reply cards or in direct-mail language in general (but applicable to the cards), ten of them (two-thirds) do appear on over half of the forms I examined, as shown in Table I.A. Another three features (20%)—offers of goods, urgent-need statements, and money or gift requests—appear on at least a quarter of response forms, as well, while only short sentences, names used in direct address, and requests for donation increases were used under 25% of the time.

But in addition, seven other features not reported in the literature I reviewed are in fact also observed in over half of the reply cards I analyzed, as represented in Table I.B., while three more features (thanks or gratitude statements, enclosed-envelope statements, and minimum-donation-for-perks statements) appear on a quarter to a half of them.

The resulting picture of reply-card language strategies, given those features which appear most frequently, certainly matches quite well with that drawn by the direct-marketing experts’ published advice. This is true especially in the use of icons like “yes,” donor’s name, and, incidentally, organization logos to catch the eye (Rosenfield, “Re-thinking”); the use of first and second person and donor’s name to establish personal contact; and the use of familiar but persuasive language (simple vocabulary and American English, but with connotatively loaded words packed in) to sell the message. Other recommended language strategies, however, were simply quite rare, very possibly because they were suggested for or considered more effective for different kinds of cards (the notable example of such a feature being the membership renewal or increased-donation strategy), or because, in the case of short sentences, soliciting groups have more faith in the public’s ability or willingness to process denser prose on response forms than do the marketing gurus (or perhaps they feel the need to present information as compactly and concisely as possible and simply hope recipients will read the card’s denser text).

But it also appears that a number of organizations have additional ideas about what will persuade prospective donors to make a commitment. In particular, a few of the features I observed, as well as some of the reported ones, suggest to me that soliciting groups are trying to build empathy with donors, put a human face on their organizations and those helped by them, and in general come across as active and productive, but also polite, caring, considerate, and grateful. Hence, we find frequent expressions of thanks and gratitude; the response-channel, credit-card, enclosed-envelope, and check statements, which try to make it as easy and convenient as possible to give; and pseudo-quotes, which, along with urgent appeals, emotional language, and descriptions of benefits to those being helped, both try to reach into the donors’ minds and hearts and show the group’s own altruistic goals, desires, and sense of responsibility (the last characteristic probably also being the motivation for those few groups proclaiming their environmental consciousness through recycled-paper statements and assuring the confidentiality of personal information). The tax-deductibility and minimum-donation-for-perks statements, on the other hand, look like straightforward enticements or incentives to donate, quite in keeping with direct-mail strategies discussed for commercial marketers (see Douglas; Dobkin, “Hot Tips”), while the requests for address corrections and the options to decline to give by so marking the card—and then, obviously, returning it—though rare, to me are obviously ploys to get even non-donors to respond in some form and so perhaps feel involved with, even
committed to, the organization at some level (as Rosenfield seems to suggest in his discussion in “Great Expectations” of tactile devices encouraging recipient response). Recipients might not give this time, but next time, who knows?

What’s certain is that charitable-organization reply cards, just like any other form of advertising, are written strategically to persuade the public to buy a product—in this case, the worthiness of a group’s cause and benefits of supporting it—and as such, they are also worth examining for their linguistic, social, and economic impact on consumers in particular and society in general. In fact, they provide compact and convenient data for studies of advertising propaganda; when teachers like Robert Perrin have their students analyze the language and persuasive appeals found in their junk mail, response forms can usefully be included. And if it is true that many recipients of direct mail only look at the reply cards, then their linguistic characteristics and impact are all the more important for advertisers, language analysts, and consumers alike to identify and understand.

Works Cited


Douglas, Alan. “Play Your Cards Right, Without the Decks; Reply Cards Lack the Glamour of Other Advertising Forms, but They Can Do Wonders for You and Your Advertisers.” Folio: The Magazine for Magazine Management 26.6 (15 April 1997): 70.


Deborah Schaffer received her Ph.D. in linguistics from The Ohio State University and is currently Professor of English at Montana State University-Billings, where she teaches linguistics, composition, and genre literature. She has been the chair of the Language Attitudes and Popular Linguistics area of the Popular Culture Association since 1991, and has had articles published in English Today, the Journal of Popular Culture, ETC.: A Review of General Semantics, and in a previous existence, the Journal of Phonetics.