

Article 2:

CHARITIES, DONORS, AND THE ENDURING IMPACT OF DIRECT MAIL

In the not-for-profit sector, physical mail has long been a workhorse for fundraising, and recent data shows it's still delivering results for donor acquisition and retention.

Australian charities large and small continue to send appeal letters, newsletters, and thank-you cards via post, knowing that a tangible letter can forge a personal connection that digital outreach often struggles to match. In fact, an industry study in 2024 revealed that 25% of people across Australia and New Zealand received charity mail in the past 12 months, underscoring the significant reach of direct mail appeals (openuptomail.com.au). Many recipients don't just glance at these letters and toss them aside, about one-third report that they hang onto charity letters for an extended period, placing them in a "to-do" pile or keeping them alongside personal correspondence (ibid). This habit speaks to the staying power of mail:

A well-crafted appeal letter can physically sit on a kitchen counter or dining table as a gentle reminder to give, in a way that an email buried in an inbox cannot.

"It's always shocking to see the photos of the dog when it's first found but so heart-warming to see them looking healthy by the end. The photos really capture you and my daughter, and I like reading them together. It also keeps us reminded of the important work the RSPCA do,"

Jenny, RSPCA donor



Charities leverage direct mail for both donor acquisition (finding new supporters) and donor retention (keeping existing supporters engaged). The Smith Family, for example, is a major Australian charity that regularly runs mailed appeals (such as winter and Christmas campaigns) to support disadvantaged children. These mail-outs, often integrated with digital and print advertising, have proven highly effective – one recent Winter Appeal raised over \$7.5 million and brought in 4,600 new donors for The Smith Family, a record-breaking result for the organisation (thesmithfamily.com.au). Ongoing sponsor packs, letters and drawings keep the sponsor and child connected, all through the letterbox.

Internationally, the story is similar. A survey of 35 charities in Australia and New Zealand found that direct mail was the "workhorse" channel generating the most revenue in their 2024 year-end appeals, outpacing digital-only efforts (visualmediaassociation.org.au).

Globally these consumer behaviours are consistent, in North America, not-for-profits also report that mail campaigns drive a large share of donations, especially from older donors who are often the most generous with a higher disposable income. While email and social media play a growing role, direct mail continues to anchor annual giving, often producing higher response rates and average gifts (stephenthomasc.ca).



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Fundraising consultants note that the most successful campaigns tend to be multi-channel. For instance, a charity might send a postal appeal letter, follow up with an email or SMS reminder, and reinforce the message on social media. In this mix, the postal piece often acts as the emotional hook and trust-builder, with digital channels amplifying reach.

Why does physical mail remain so effective for charities?

One reason is trust and attention. Donors tend to view mail as more credible and less intrusive than email spam or online ads.

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of Australians say they concentrate more on promotional material in their hand than on email.

Research by Australia's Open Up to Mail campaign found that 54% of Australians say they concentrate more on promotional material in their hand than on email. The same study noted that the letterbox is seen as a more reliable source of information, with only 29% of Australians reported distrusting info received by mail, versus 38% who distrust information via email. This trust factor is vital when asking people to open their hearts and wallets. A fundraising appeal letter often carries stories of real people or causes in need. The tactile experience of holding a letter and seeing a heartfelt message on paper, can evoke empathy and seriousness that clicking an email might not.

Nearly 70% of people engage with charity letters received in the mail, whether by reading immediately or setting aside to review later. And importantly, a significant portion, around 39% of those who read a charity letter, will save it to revisit again (e.g. pinning it to a fridge or keeping it on a desk). This means the appeal isn't a one-and-done interaction; the physical reminder lingers, increasing the chance the person will respond with a donation when the time is right.

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Charities around the world also find that direct mail helps build long-term donor relationships. Organisations like World Vision, regularly mail personalised updates and handwritten notes from sponsored children to donors. These tangible letters often become cherished keepsakes for supporters, reinforcing the emotional bond to the cause and boosting donor retention. Similarly, environmental and humanitarian NGOs often mail out newsletters or impact reports to show donors how their contributions are making a difference.

Charity Letters

Informative - 27%

Caring - 26%

Trustworthy - 19%

Personal Letters

Trustworthy - 25%

Caring - 22%

Useful - 26%



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Greenpeace mailing a beautifully printed annual report with vivid photos of conservation projects, or the Red Cross sending thank-you letters describing how disaster relief funds were used are materials a donor can read in a quiet moment and feel appreciated. The Salvation Army has increased its mailing activities year on year to reach donors in a more meaningful and trusting way. Such mailings lead to an increase in donor loyalty and lifetime value.

Another advantage of physical mail is its accessibility and inclusivity. Not all potential donors are active online or want to talk with charities digitally, especially older philanthropists who may be more comfortable writing a cheque after reading a letter than entering credit card details on a website. Charities tapping into their donor base have learned not to abandon paper. In 2020–2023, during the COVID-19 pandemic, many not-for-profits actually leaned more on direct mail when in-person events and street fundraising were curtailed. Direct mail provided a way to reach supporters at home with timely appeals. For example, medical research charities sending letters about urgent vaccine research funding, or local food banks mailing emergency appeals to help those hit by the pandemic. The result in some cases was increased mail response as people felt a physical call-to-action delivered to their door.

We also see collaboration between postal services and charity sectors. In Australia, the printing and mail industry lobbied successfully for postage discounts for charity mailings, reducing costs for not-for-profits during the COVID pandemic to send appeal letters (visualmediaassociation.org.au). This reflects recognition that mail is a crucial channel for social good, not just commerce.

In conclusion, physical mail remains a cornerstone of charitable fundraising and communications. Its tangible, personal nature helps messages stand out in a time of digital overload. Donors often trust what comes in the mail more than what arrives in an email blast, and

they engage with it deeply, proven by the high readership and retention rates of charity letters. Charities that combine the emotional punch of a well-written letter with the efficiency of modern data targeting (sending the right ask to the right person) are seeing strong results. The letterbox enables organisations to reach into households with stories and appeals that tug at heartstrings, and then it lets those messages stick around in the home, serving as a physical reminder of a cause. From Australia to the UK to North America, charities are successfully marrying print and digital strategies, and the fundraising letter is a foundational element that isn't going away – it's evolving and, in many cases, driving more impact than ever.

For building donor relationships that last, it seems a stamp and envelope can still work magic in a way no social media campaign can quite replicate.



In Australia, thank-you letters or receipts sent by post are common after major appeals. These gestures, while traditional, have been shown to improve subsequent response rates. There is data suggesting that direct mail donors tend to give larger gifts on average than online-only donors, perhaps because the demographics skew older or because the format lends itself to thoughtful reflection (though exact figures vary by campaign).

