

R.S.V.P. TO POTENTIAL DONORS

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How easy is it for someone to learn about your ministry?

Most ministries would respond, “It’s very easy. People can call us or write us. They can watch or listen to our program. We have all sorts of materials we can send them.”

But for a moment, take a closer look. Let’s say someone caught the tail end of your broadcast program, or was told about your ministry by a friend, or stumbled onto your site on the Internet. We’re not talking about committed viewers or listeners, but the first encounter that might lead to someone becoming a real friend of your ministry – if they’re treated right. How does your ministry respond to people who contact you with questions, but aren’t quite ready to write a check?

Rather than listening to what ministries would say, we decided to find out what they actually *do*. A randomly selected group of 28 ministries – many of whom have a broadcast presence – was contacted by phone or through e-mail (a complete list is shown below). Lest you be concerned that this exercise wasted the time and money of these deserving organizations, note that this contact actually led to a few of them receiving product orders or donations, when we were impressed enough to be interested in what the ministry had to say...just like real potential donors would react in the real world.

This article won’t identify which materials came from specific ministries. It’s not fair to the organizations, and the purpose of this exercise wasn’t to praise or criticize individual ministries. Rather, we hope you will evaluate how *your* organization would respond to people who are looking for more information.

Can people find you and make contact? Our initial contact with some ministries was a chore – they just weren’t prepared to take calls like this. Particularly problematic was the attempt to contact national ministries that also had local arms or churches associated with them. Often, the phone number we got (either through directory assistance, or from the ministry itself) led to the local organization, rather than the national ministry. The trouble was that the local organization often had no clue what to do with the call. In one case, we were even told to call back (a long-distance call) at a certain time, because “they’re all away and no one here can help you right now.” How many people would actually go through the time and expense to call back?

Would you respond at all? Probably the most amazing thing was that three of the 28 ministries contacted never sent us a thing. Here they had someone who was interested enough in their work to want more information, and they followed that up with... absolutely nothing. Not only did they fail to capitalize on the interest of a potential supporter, but it will most likely turn that person off from any future attempted contact.

How long will it take you to respond? It was also surprising how long it took to receive information from some organizations. A few ministries reacted right away; we received materials within three to five days. Others took a couple of weeks...a month...or even, in the case of some organizations, *two months* before sending out information. By this time, the initial interest of the potential donor is probably long gone, especially if that person contacted more than one ministry, and the others had already been working to establish a relationship with that person in the meantime.

What will you send? The greatest diversity was in *what* we received from different organizations. Some obviously had a well thought-out plan of how to deal with potential new donors. Others seemed to grab whatever was handy and stick it in the mail. Witness some examples:

- Ministry A: sent us just one mailing, which was a product catalog including books, tapes, and an entire section of clothing. No welcome letter, no description of the ministry, no request for financial support.
- Ministry B: started with a nice postcard thanking us for our interest. This was followed by a free subscription to their magazine, a welcome package with a personalized letter, a product catalog, and a brochure about the ministry, plus continuing updates and appeals as the weeks went by. This was a well-conceived welcome, with an obvious plan behind it.
- Ministry C: mailed a list of available products. All books and tapes were listed by title only, with no description or explanation. No appeal, no background about the ministry – just a list of titles and an order form.
- Ministry D: added us to their regular mailing list. Without welcome or introduction, we've been receiving appeals for support as though we already know all about their work.
- Ministry E: now sends their monthly magazine, with no other welcome, background information, or appeal.
- Ministry F: an evangelistic ministry, this organization welcomed us as new believers in Christ (all we did was ask for information on the ministry), and sent us a whole package of materials for brand-new Christians.
- Ministry G: sent a small photocopied slip of paper, cut unevenly by scissors, explaining the brief brochure they enclosed. Sent the exact same thing again a month later. Sent it *again* two months later.

In the first materials we received from the 25 ministries that responded to our request for information:

- only nine included a package or letter that "welcomed" us to the ministry

- eleven sent at least one issue of their magazine or newsletter
- twelve sent a brochure explaining more about the ministry and its work
- fifteen sent a catalog or product list
- seventeen included a letter of some type (sometimes an appeal letter)

In some cases, we were sent more than one item in our first mailing (accounting for the overlap, above).

How long will you keep me on your list if I don't donate? The number of mailings received from each ministry was fascinating. Seven ministries sent one thing in the mail, and we never heard from them again (including a couple that sent only a copy of a newsletter). Apparently if they don't receive a check right away, they have no interest in cultivating a relationship. Five more sent two mailings. Another five sent between three and five mailings. Eight ministries sent six or more separate mailings. One rather aggressive ministry has sent *nineteen* separate pieces of mail since November.

Do you sweat the small stuff? In today's world, image is important. That's why details count. Four of the ministries misspelled the name we gave them. One spelled "Phoenix" wrong (on a handwritten address). Believe it or not, one ministry sent us a letter in which *the name of their own ministry was misspelled* on their own printed letterhead (both the envelope and the letter)!

Other details make a difference, as well. Two ministries applied their mailing label upside down. Some organizations insisted on enclosing invoices (showing a balance due of \$0.00), or packing slips, even though nothing was ordered. One beautiful welcome package was marred by an invoice showing that they had sent their "Basic Inquiry Pack" (really depersonalizing the mailing). Another attached a receipt at the bottom of their first letter, showing our last gift of \$0.00 (along with thanks for that gift).

One ministry sent us three letters – using three different letterheads from three different people in the organization (not a way to build continuity in a relationship). Another sent a welcome letter telling us how they were looking forward to a long relationship of ministering to us, followed by a second letter mailed three days later, and then nothing else for the next four months.

Interestingly, just seven of the 25 organizations sent something that was personalized (e.g. the letter started with "Dear Doug," rather than "Dear Ministry Friend"). A couple enclosed letters that were signed by an individual. Some of the letters were photocopies, while others were obviously individually written and printed.

During this exercise, our experiences ran the gamut, from getting friendly welcomes to being completely ignored. The approaches taken by different organizations varied considerably. Even the effective approaches varied. So what should your organization do? How should you treat someone who wants to learn more about you? Think about some of these following suggestions.

Respond quickly. With overnight delivery, faxes, e-mail, and other technologies, information and products move rapidly today. People expect quick turnaround times. Unfortunately, ministries sometimes fail to realize the importance of responding quickly to inquiries, gifts, or product orders. A recent study conducted by Grey Matter Research for Casey Treat's [Christian Faith International](#) found that 24% of those who ordered products from this ministry expected the product to arrive within one week. Another 51% expected the product to arrive within two weeks. Only 5% expected to wait more than a month to receive their product (even though that was often our experience when we ordered from a ministry during this exercise). Treat's organization fulfills most product orders within 48 hours, to keep up with customer expectations.

Some of the ministries we contacted took up to eight weeks before sending material. This type of a delay can cause a potential donor to lose interest in the ministry, forget they requested information, or develop a negative image of the ministry due to the lack of responsiveness.

If your ministry is taking a long time to respond with information or product, you run the risk of disappointing much of your audience. You may also be hurting your chances of converting these people into donors. The most efficient ministries respond within 24 to 48 hours, and are sending material first class to expedite delivery. How long does it take for your materials to arrive?

Respond appropriately. When communicating with someone new to your ministry, it is important to respond appropriately. Don't rely on one form letter that attempts to cover all possible situations. We received initial letters that said, "Thank you for your gift of \$0. You are a main reason why this ministry is reaching the world for Christ." That approach will cost you credibility in the eyes of a prospective donor.

If someone gives a donation, send a letter acknowledging and thanking them for their gift. However, if someone only asks for information about the ministry, recognize this request in the letter, and send them the appropriate material.

Seek to develop a relationship. It is important to effectively and regularly communicate with a new ministry contact, and attempt to develop a relationship with that individual. You can't accomplish this with just one mailing. You need a plan.

Some ministries just dump all the new names into their regular monthly mailings to their supporters. It will be more productive to develop a "Welcome Series," which includes several contacts that are specifically designed to introduce you and your ministry, explain your cause, and communicate the reason why your ministry is worthy of a new contact's support.

Also, just because someone orders a product from you, don't assume this person has suddenly become a committed supporter. They may just want the product – you'll still have to work to convert them into a donor or a repeat buyer.

Some elements in your “Welcome Series” might include:

- A media guide, telling new contacts where and when they can catch your broadcasts locally (few broadcast ministries we contacted sent this out).
- A magazine that ministers to the reader and exposes them to your products and/or message.
- A brochure that describes the purpose of the ministry, the cause they would be supporting, and the results you have achieved.
- A video or audio cassette with a testimony, a teaching, or a presentation of your ministry and its cause.
- A phone call from the ministry to see if the person needs additional information, or if he or she has any prayer requests.
- A personalized card or letter with a handwritten note from someone in the ministry.
- A book written by you or related to your ministry.
- When appropriate, personal information about the head of the ministry (a personal letter, a biography, a photo of the family, etc.), so the new contact can connect with that individual on a more personal level.

Have a plan to build relationships. The goal of the “Welcome Series” is to develop a relationship with potential donors, with the ultimate objective of converting a percentage of them into active donors. Even with a “Welcome Series” in place, conversion from non-donor to donor can still be as low as 10%. However, the conversion rate will be even lower without such a process. In order to maximize conversions, make sure you address the following four issues in your initial communications:

- **Cause** - you must present a clear, identifiable, and motivating cause before a new contact will financially support your ministry.
- **Credibility** - people give to credible ministries. Make sure that everything you say or write is accurate and believable.
- **Results** - people want to be involved with a ministry that is making a difference. Don’t just tell me what you want to do – show me what you’ve done.
- **Benefits** - this is particularly important for a product purchase. If I buy your product, how will it benefit me in tangible ways? Even for a donation, there are personal benefits that will motivate donors (e.g. personal satisfaction, knowing they’re helping others, etc.).

Once these issues are addressed, develop a specific appeal designed to motivate the new contact into giving to the ministry or purchasing a product.

Track results. As a ministry, you must demonstrate stewardship with the finances entrusted to you. Therefore, you should track the results of each mailing, phone call, media airing, or other contact with new donors, to determine if the process is cost effective. For each mailing, include a reply envelope that is a different color or has a unique code. You can also establish separate P.O. boxes or have different phone numbers to track the results of each effort.

With a good tracking system, you can understand what elements in your approach are generating enough funds efficiently, as well as determine your overall effectiveness at converting non-donors into donors. Based on these results, you can decide at what point it is no longer financially viable to continue mailing to a non-donor.

Test, test, test. Every contact effort should test *something*. Experiment by changing copy, adding a new element to the mailing, or trying a different appeal style. Over time, you begin to see which elements motivate a new contact to give to your ministry or purchase your products. This is only effective, however, if you can accurately track results.

There is no 100% right way to turn contacts into donors. There are, however, many *wrong* ways to go about it. Consider the plan your organization has in place to accomplish this – making sure to see it through the eyes of the person who is interested in what you have to say, but still needs to understand why your ministry is a worthy place for their funds to serve God.

The following ministries were contacted for this article:

- The American Center for Law and Justice (Jay Sekulow)
- John Avanzini Ministries
- Breakthrough (World Harvest Church – Rod Parsley)
- Christ for the Nations, Inc.
- Christian Coalition
- Christian Financial Concepts, Inc. (Larry Burkett)
- Kenneth Copeland Ministries
- Cornerstone Credit Counselors
- Crown Ministries, Inc.
- Creflo Dollar Ministries
- Jesse Duplantis Ministries
- Eagle’s Nest Christian Fellowship (Rick Godwin)
- Focus on the Family (Dr. James Dobson)
- John Hagee Ministries
- Kenneth Hagin Ministries
- Harvest Ministries (Greg Laurie)
- Marilyn Hickey Ministries
- Benny Hinn Ministries
- T. D. Jakes Ministries
- Liberty Counsel
- Joyce Meyer Ministries
- Promise Keepers
- Samaritan’s Purse (Franklin Graham)
- Jerry Savelle Ministries
- The 700 Club (Pat Robertson)
- Jimmy Swaggart Ministries
- Jack Van Impe Ministries International

- Victory Christian Center (Billy Joe Daugherty)



“It is priceless to find a person who will take responsibility,
who will finish and follow through to the final detail.”
RICHARD EVANS, AUTHOR



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