

A GUIDE TO ASK STRINGS



1. HOW ASK STRINGS WORK

An appeal letter's job is to convince a donor to decide to give. The reply form is to help them decide how much to give. The ask string has a central role in that *how much?* decision.

Donors are five times more likely to give \$25, \$50 or \$100 than amounts in-between those numbers.

Ask strings are designed to move renewing donors up to the next, round number, level.

To learn which amounts donors are most likely to give, we compiled over 1.4 million anonymized annual fund gifts from more than 80 non-profits doing direct mail and online fundraising. We removed capital, event, legacy, corporate and public foundation gifts to model gifts normally made in response to direct mail and email.

We broke the data out into three ranges:

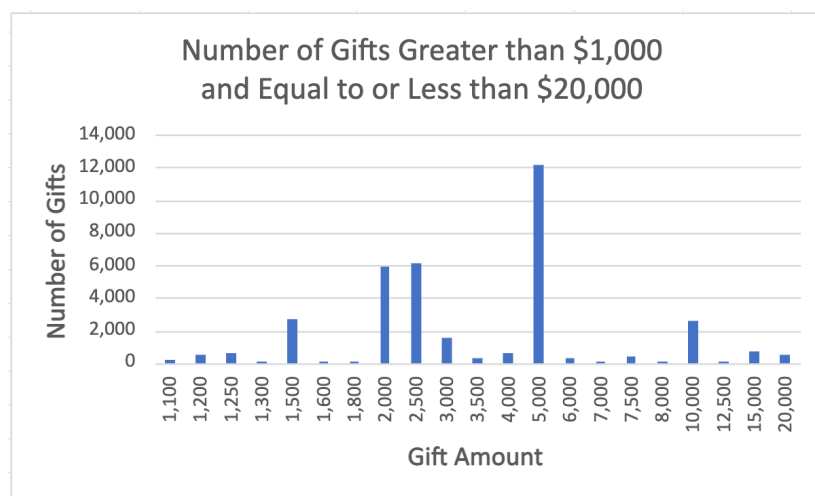
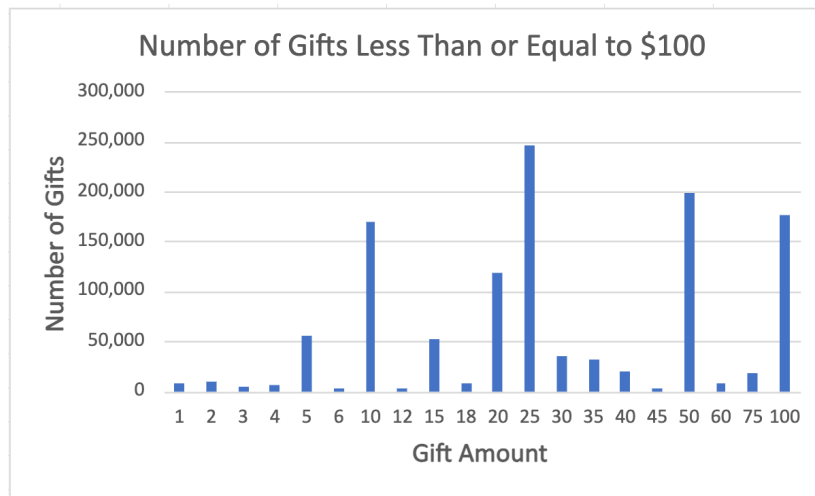
Gifts \$100 and under	All Amounts	Top 20 Amounts	%
How many Gift amounts used?	4,324	20	0.5%
How many Gifts?	1,231,180	1,172,726	95%
Value of Gifts?	\$ 67,158,294	64,332,052	96%

Gifts over \$100 to \$1,000	All Amounts	Top 20 Amounts	%
How many Gift amounts used?	5,516	20	0.4%
How many Gifts?	196,521	174,015	89%
Value of Gifts?	\$ 94,164,711	\$ 85,119,066	90%

Gifts over \$1,000 to \$20,000	All Amounts	Top 20 Amounts	%
How many Gift amounts used?	4,663	20	0.4%
How many Gifts?	43,617	35,733	82%
Value of Gifts?	\$ 205,669,935	\$ 164,875,453	80%



At all levels just a few gift amounts account for almost all the giving:



Our recommended ask string table is based on this analysis and on measuring over many mailings the way that donors make these jumps between round numbers.

Even at the highest levels of the annual fund, donors use just a few amounts. You might think that if a donor previously gave \$1,000 you should ask them to add another \$100 to that amount, a 10% increase. But donors don't think about percentages. If they move up they are going to jump from \$50 to \$100 and skip everything in between; or amazingly, right from \$1,000 to \$1,500, \$2,000 or \$2,500.

2. “PRIMING” HELPS

Ask1 of the ask string is an amount that is significantly higher than the donor’s last gift. This sets a higher expectation in the mind of the donor.

If a donor previously gave \$25, seeing an ask string of \$100, \$50 and \$25 makes \$50 look like a reasonable choice.

But, an ask string of \$25, \$50, \$100 makes \$25 look like the right choice.

3. THE MIDDLE IS THE LIKELY CHOICE

There is a tendency for people to **pick the middle** of three dollar numbers. Thus Ask2 is our target number for the next gift. Finally, Ask3 is at or near their current level. (If their last amount was an odd amount, we round it up).

These methods are not mental laws, but they are tendencies demonstrated in statistical studies by behavioral psychologists. They reflect how the subconscious mind works according to rules of thumb, or heuristics as a psychologist would put it.

Analysis of our clients’ annual fund results have confirmed that, properly done, ask strings increase the average annual fund gift.

ADDITIONAL ADVICE

1. Use an affirmation sentence like the one below.

Yes, Ann, I want to continue my support!

My previous support was \$25 in April of 2022.

Enclosed is my gift of: \$100 \$50 \$25 Other \$_____

2. Remind donors of their last gift amount and date. That improves renewal rates and gift amounts. Many donors are uncertain about when and how much they previously gave, and often think they gave more recently, which may result in postponing the giving decision. Letting them know their last gift amount and date removes that uncertainty and increases trust.

3. Use our recommended ask string table. The table on the next page condenses all this into a series of ask strings. You can add these into your list before sending it to us—or ask us to do it for you.

RECOMMENDED ASK STRING TABLE

Last Gift Amount		Ask String		
From	To	Ask1	Ask2	Ask3
\$0.00	— \$0.99	\$100	\$50	\$25
\$1.00	— \$10.00	\$50	\$25	\$10
\$10.01	— \$15.00	\$50	\$25	\$15
\$15.01	— \$20.00	\$50	\$25	\$20
\$20.01	— \$25.00	\$100	\$50	\$25
\$25.01	— \$30.00	\$100	\$50	\$30
\$30.01	— \$35.00	\$100	\$50	\$35
\$35.01	— \$40.00	\$100	\$50	\$40
\$40.01	— \$50.00	\$150	\$100	\$50
\$50.01	— \$60.00	\$150	\$100	\$60
\$60.01	— \$75.00	\$150	\$100	\$75
\$75.01	— \$100.00	\$150	\$125	\$100
\$100.01	— \$125.00	\$200	\$150	\$125
\$125.01	— \$150.00	\$250	\$200	\$150
\$150.01	— \$175.00	\$250	\$200	\$175
\$175.01	— \$200.00	\$500	\$250	\$200
\$200.01	— \$250.00	\$500	\$300	\$250
\$250.01	— \$300.00	\$500	\$400	\$300
\$300.01	— \$350.00	\$500	\$400	\$350
\$350.01	— \$400.00	\$750	\$500	\$400
\$400.01	— \$500.00	\$1,000	\$750	\$500
\$500.01	— \$600.00	\$1,000	\$750	\$600
\$600.01	— \$700.00	\$1,250	\$1,000	\$700
\$700.01	— \$750.00	\$1,250	\$1,000	\$750
\$750.01	— \$800.00	\$1,250	\$1,000	\$800
\$800.01	— \$900.00	\$1,250	\$1,000	\$900
\$900.01	— \$1,000.00	\$2,000	\$1,500	\$1,000
\$1,000.01	— \$1,100.00	\$2,000	\$1,500	\$1,100
\$1,100.01	— \$1,200.00	\$2,000	\$1,500	\$1,200
\$1,200.01	— \$1,250.00	\$2,000	\$1,500	\$1,250
\$1,250.01	— \$1,500.00	\$2,500	\$2,000	\$1,500
\$1,500.01	— \$1,600.00	\$2,500	\$2,000	\$1,600
\$1,600.01	— \$1,700.00	\$2,500	\$2,000	\$1,700
\$1,700.01	— \$1,800.00	\$2,500	\$2,000	\$1,800
\$1,800.01	— \$1,900.00	\$2,500	\$2,000	\$1,900
\$1,900.01	— \$2,000.00	\$5,000	\$2,500	\$2,000
\$2,000.01	— \$2,500.00	\$10,000	\$5,000	\$2,500
\$2,500.01	— \$3,000.00	\$10,000	\$5,000	\$3,000
\$3,000.01	— \$3,500.00	\$10,000	\$5,000	\$3,500
\$3,500.01	— \$4,000.00	\$10,000	\$5,000	\$4,000
\$4,000.01	— \$5,000.00	\$10,000	\$7,500	\$5,000
\$5,000.01	— \$6,000.00	\$10,000	\$7,500	\$6,000
\$6,000.01	— \$7,000.00	\$15,000	\$10,000	\$7,000
\$7,000.01	— \$8,000.00	\$15,000	\$10,000	\$8,000
\$8,000.01	— \$9,000.00	\$15,000	\$10,000	\$9,000
\$9,000.01	— \$9,999.99	\$15,000	\$12,500	\$10,000
\$10,000.00		\$20,000	\$15,000	\$10,000

ASK STRINGS IN PRACTICE

Evaluation of the Ask String Performance of Individual Mailings Confirms that These Ask Strings Typically Influence Giving Amounts with between 5% to 35% Increases

The gift size response to an appeal is of course dependent on many factors, including whether the appeal is more or less compelling, the time of year, economic conditions, organizational news and other factors.

Many donors will give the same as their last gift (Ask3), some will decrease their gift amount (less than Ask3) and some will increase (Ask1 or Ask2). Will more donors upgrade to the middle amount, Ask2, or even to the first, highest suggested amount, Ask1?

These tables from actual mailings are typical of results:

Was the gift amount:	# of Gifts	%	Gift Amount	%
>Ask1	75	5%	\$ 32,510	18.7%
=Ask1	62	4%	\$ 14,200	8.2%
Ask1><Ask2	28	2%	\$ 2,499	1.4%
=Ask2	174	11%	\$ 16,450	9.4%
Ask2><Ask3	76	5%	\$ 6,063	3.5%
=Ask3	909	56%	\$ 82,530	47.4%
<Ask3	286	18%	\$ 19,935	11.4%
Total	1,610		\$ 174,187	
Previous Total			\$ 150,887	
Improvement			\$ 23,300	15.4%

In Table 1 we see that 56% of donors gave the same as their last gift, while 18% reduced their gift. But we see that the number of donors that increased their gift was $5\% + 4\% + 2\% + 11\% + 5\% = 27\%$, and that these increased gifts in dollars were $18.7\% + 8.2\% + 1.4\% + 9.4\% + 3.5\% = 41.2\%$ more.

Thus, the total net increase over previous giving was 15.4%. This 15% increase is not unusual, as we generally see between a 5% and 35% improvement in the total giving amounts of donors who renew.

What is fascinating, but not unusual, is that 4% of donors skipped up to the Ask1 level, and 5% exceeded Ask1, even though Ask1 is a stretch amount, usually multiples of their last gift.

What ask strings should be used for non-donors?

In general, we advise being aggressive about acquisition ask strings; don't ask for too little. Our experience is that donors whose first gift is less than \$25 have a lower renewal rate than those who give \$25 or more, so we recommend using nothing less for acquisition than \$100, \$50, \$25, Other\$____, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Response of non-donors to a 3 amount ask string of \$100, \$50 and \$25, Other\$____					
Was the gift Amount:		# of Gifts	%	Total	%
>Ask1	Greater than \$100	7	14%	\$ 3,820	71.5%
=Ask1	Equal to \$100	3	6%	\$ 300	5.6%
Ask1><Ask2	Between \$50 and \$100	1	2%	\$ 75	1.4%
=Ask2	Equal to \$50	11	22%	\$ 550	10.3%
Ask2><Ask3	Between \$25 and \$50	1	2%	\$ 30	0.6%
=Ask3	Equal to \$25	18	35%	\$ 450	8.4%
<Ask3	Less than \$25	10	20%	\$ 118	2.2%
Total		51		\$ 5,343	

Organizations with a strong local presence can expect donors to be more responsive at higher levels of ask, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Response of non-donors to a 4 amount ask string of \$250, \$100, \$50, \$25, , Other\$____					
Was the gift Amount:		# of Gifts	%	Total	%
>Ask1	Greater than \$250	7	16%	\$ 7,900	74.6%
=Ask1	Equal to \$250	-	0%	\$ -	0.0%
Ask1><Ask2	Between \$100 and \$250	4	9%	\$ 550	5.2%
=Ask2	Equal to \$100	16	36%	\$ 1,600	15.1%
Ask2><Ask3	Between \$50 and \$100	-	0%	\$ -	0.0%
=Ask3	Equal to \$50	6	14%	\$ 300	2.8%
Ask3><Ask4	Between \$25 and \$50	-	0%	\$ -	0.0%
=Ask4	Equal to \$25	7	16%	\$ 175	1.7%
<Ask4	Less than \$25	4	9%	\$ 60	0.6%
Total		44		\$ 10,585	

And if the community is affluent, it may be wise to include a longer acquisition ask string with a higher Ask1, for example, a 5 amount ask string of \$500, \$250, \$100, \$50, \$25, or an even more ambitious ask string, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Response of non-donors to a 7 amount ask string of \$1,500, \$1,000, \$750, \$500, \$250, \$100 and \$50, Other\$_____

Was the gift Amount:		# of Gifts	%	Total	%
>Ask1	Greater than \$1,500	2	1%	\$ 20,000	29.4%
=Ask1	Equal to \$1,500	-	0%	\$ -	0.0%
Ask1><Ask2	Between \$1,000 and \$1,500	-	0%	\$ -	0.0%
=Ask2	Equal to \$1,000	7	2%	\$ 7,000	10.3%
Ask2><Ask3	Between \$750 and \$1,000	-	0%	\$ -	0.0%
=Ask3	Equal to \$750	2	1%	\$ 1,500	2.2%
Ask3><Ask4	Between \$500 and \$750	-	0%	\$ -	0.0%
=Ask4	Equal to \$500	18	5%	\$ 9,000	13.2%
Ask4><Ask5	Between \$250 and \$500	10	3%	\$ 3,522	5.2%
=Ask5	Equal to \$250	18	5%	\$ 4,500	6.6%
Ask5><Ask6	Between \$100 and \$250	44	12%	\$ 7,210	10.6%
=Ask6	Equal to \$100	79	21%	\$ 7,900	11.6%
Ask6><Ask7	Between \$50 and \$100	22	6%	\$ 1,450	2.1%
=Ask7	Equal to \$50	73	19%	\$ 3,650	5.4%
<Ask7	Less than \$50	100	27%	\$ 2,333	3.4%
Total		375		\$ 68,065	

MONTHLY GIVING

It is well known that when donors switch to monthly giving, they have higher rates of renewal and can give higher overall amounts. Adding variable monthly giving ask amounts on the reply card is an effective way to encourage this. Following is our recommended table for monthly giving ask amounts.

Recommended Monthly Giving Ask String Table

Last Gift Amount		Or Previous Monthly Gift Amount		Monthly Giving Ask String		
From	To	From	To	AskA	AskB	AskC
\$0.00	\$50.00	\$0.00	\$5.00	\$25	\$10	\$5
\$50.01	\$125.00	\$5.01	\$10.00	\$25	\$15	\$10
\$125.01	\$175.00	\$10.01	\$15.00	\$25	\$20	\$15
\$175.01	\$200.00	\$15.01	\$20.00	\$30	\$25	\$20
\$200.01	\$300.00	\$20.01	\$25.00	\$50	\$30	\$25
\$300.01	\$400.00	\$25.01	\$35.00	\$50	\$40	\$35
\$400.01	\$600.00	\$35.01	\$50.00	\$125	\$100	\$50
\$600.01	\$900.00	\$50.01	\$75.00	\$125	\$100	\$75
\$900.01	\$1,100.00	\$75.01	\$100.00	\$150	\$125	\$100
\$1,100.01	\$1,500.00	\$100.01	\$125.00	\$200	\$150	\$125
\$1,500.01	\$1,800.00	\$125.01	\$150.00	\$250	\$200	\$150
\$1,800.01	\$2,000.00	\$150.01	\$200.00	\$300	\$250	\$200
\$2,000.01	\$3,000.00	\$200.01	\$250.00	\$500	\$300	\$250
\$3,000.01	\$3,500.00	\$250.01	\$300.00	\$750	\$500	\$300
\$3,500.01	\$6,000.00	\$300.01	\$500.00	\$1,000	\$750	\$500
\$6,000.01	\$7,000.00	\$500.01	\$600.00	\$1,000	\$750	\$600
\$7,000.01	\$8,000.00	\$600.01	\$700.00	\$1,000	\$750	\$700
\$8,000.01	\$9,000.00	\$700.01	\$800.00	\$1,250	\$1,000	\$800
\$9,000.01	\$10,000.00	\$800.01	\$1,000.00	\$1,500	\$1,250	\$1,000



78 River Road South, Putney, VT 05346



800.437.7780



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