A RESEARCH PROJECT BY DOUGLAS SHAW & ASSOCIATES

2024 Year-End Digital Fundraising Guide

Focusing in on the top adjustments you can make in your communications to improve results in December, the most critical fundraising month of the year.

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FUNDRAISING COUNSEL

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Overview

Perhaps it is because some of us are a bit nerdy over here, but we can't go into the month of December without a few *Lord of the Rings* references running through our heads. December is the month we've been building to all year. It's the "one month to rule them all, one month to find them, one month to bring them all, and to your organization bind them."

Okay so the quote is a bit of a stretch, particularly at the end there. But for fundraisers, the month of December represents the pinnacle of the saga. After all your hard work throughout the year, you'll discover whether you had the *right* things and people, in the *right* place, at the *right* time.

All days are not created equal, however. If they were, every day of the year, your organization would raise 0.27% of what you would make online for the entire calendar year—*but that's not how it works*. **The month of December often accounts for 26% of what an organization raises for the year online. The last week of the year accounts for 13% of that amount. And one single day, December 31, represents an average of 5% of your total online revenue for the entire year.***

Let's swap those percentages with numbers: if your organization raises $5,000,000 in the course of a year online, $1,300,000 of that would come in the month of December. $650,000 would come in the last week of the year, and $250,000 would come through the website on December 31 alone!

You've worked hard all year thus far—branching out to new networks, growing awareness and a following, regularly communicating to keep people engaged. And now—back to *Lord of the Rings*—we are deep within Modor at the foot of Mount Doom and ready to finish the quest. And just like Frodo, you cannot simply sit back and watch. There's much left to do … from now until the very last second of the year!
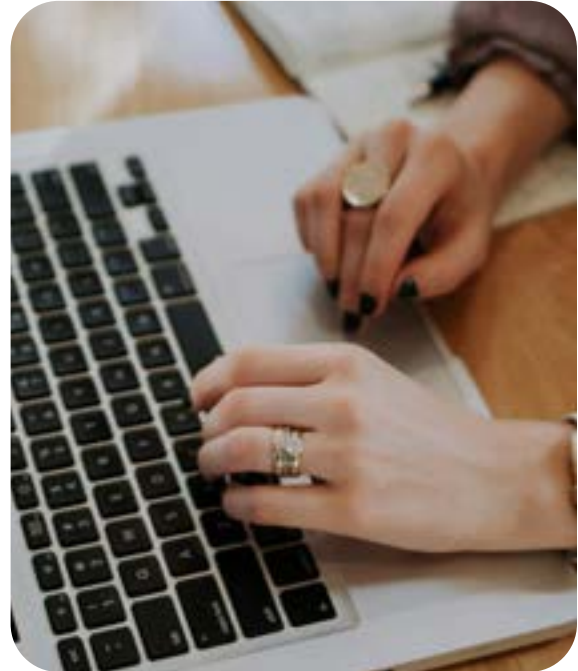
So that's where we find ourselves in this report. There's still work to do, despite feelings of fatigue from the journey. And **the decisions you make now will determine the results you see at the end of the day.**

It is with that in mind that we've dug into the data and organized the key insights, tools, and strategic approaches organizations have used to effectively engage donors during this critical time of the fundraising year. And it's through this analysis that you can begin to see patterns emerge in what organizations can do to drive results. This guide is designed to equip you with the information you need to help you maximize year-end revenue, helping your organization be a part of what is right with the world in the years to come.

*According to the 2024 M+R Benchmark Report

About the Guide

2023 was a difficult year for online fundraising. Most organizations saw a 1% decline in overall online revenue. While 1% may not seem like a lot, after a couple years of many organizations seeing significant double digit growth, that 1% decline caught the majority off guard. In addition, 2023 also showed a 12% increase in overall email volume and a 13% increase in digital advertising investment. What this means is organizations were investing more and getting back less. It also means the online space was becoming congested.

2024 is a political fundraising year, which does mean donor fatigue may increase—even though the election will take place a month prior to the peak year-end giving season.

So how can your organization stand out and get your message read?

It starts with recognizing how you're different. Politics, war, famine, hunger—we constantly hear stories of pain, conflict, and heartache. It weighs on donors. However, YOU are a part of the solution. Your donors are a part of what is good and hopeful, actively helping you make progress against the difficulties of the world. And that's a message that inspires hearts, makes people eager to hear more from you, and keeps them wanting to do more for your organization.

A big part of fundraising success in the month of December will be telling this story of high impact in the months building up to December to lay the

foundation and ensure your donors are excited to open your messages. Then moving into December, it's time to start doing everything you can to stand out.

For this report, we've primarily zeroed in on email communication because email remains the backbone of most digital fundraising programs. It's consistent and, on average, accounts for about 16% of online fundraising revenue—which, for most organizations, is one of the largest single, directly trackable sources of revenue online.

We observed the communications of 75 nonprofit organizations in December 2023, specifically tracking what they sent, when, and the tactics they tried to make their messages stand out online. Then, we compared these findings with revenue results to help identify the strategies that work well, pinpointing innovative approaches that can genuinely improve fundraising results for the year ahead.

And now, it's time to share those findings with you!

Note: In 2023, GivingTuesday fell in November, so it doesn't factor into the results and data that are displayed in the following charts. In 2024, this will not be the case as GivingTuesday falls in the first week of December. If you're interested in learning more about GivingTuesday, you can find more on our blog.

We've also set December 31 data into its own part of this report because it is such a unique day.

For more information on optimizing your omnichannel communications throughout the year, be sure to see our recent research release, *The Donor Experience Scorecard.*

Getting Your Message Opened

The best email in the world cannot be successful if the donor doesn't open it. So for our study, we start here—at specific strategies that can get more donors into your messages.

Although our study focuses on strategies specific to December, there are also a few general guidelines worth mentioning that can help you year-round:

1 **Focus on your subject lines:** The subject line is the first thing recipients see, so make it catchy, concise, and relevant to encourage the donor to open it. The subject line's only job is to get someone into the message, so do not provide the full donation ask in the subject or reveal too clearly that it is an appeal for funds.

2 **Start with Testing:** Senders, subject lines, and preheaders are the only elements a donor sees before they open your message. Before December is the best time to do 50/50 tests in these areas so you can see how your specific email audience responds, helping you identify which tests on these elements can lift performance.

3 **Include personalization:** Adding the donor's name or catering subject lines to their areas of interest can make them feel more like the message inside is just for them.

4 **Optimize for mobile:** With a significant portion of email opens occurring on mobile devices, it's crucial to ensure your emails are mobile-friendly. Part of achieving this is implementing shorter subject lines, as most mobile devices only show a max of 5 words.

5 **Adjust send times:** Test different send times to determine when your audience is most active and likely to engage with your emails.

These areas are a great place to start and can improve your learnings with every message you send. We recommend you **test as much as possible before December**, then roll out your learnings during the last month of the year.

The elements above are all within your control. You decide what the subject lines are, who your senders are, and when you send. But what is harder to know is what else will be in a donor's inbox. What is your competition for a donor's attention? To know the answer to this, we will spend the next few sections looking at the send history and strategies of other nonprofit organizations so you can help find those quiet moments when your donors are more likely to see your message.

Send Day

The data below highlights when the organizations surveyed were sending their messages. Once again, Tuesday and Thursday continue to be the main send dates in terms of the quantity of messages sent, which is likely the result of the old best practice that these are the best send days of the week.

The main exception is that last year, we saw a big spike on Sunday. This was driven by the fact that December 31 fell on a Sunday in 2023. For the purposes of the charts below, we set that day aside, and sends primarily fell in the middle of the week.

Messages by Day of Week
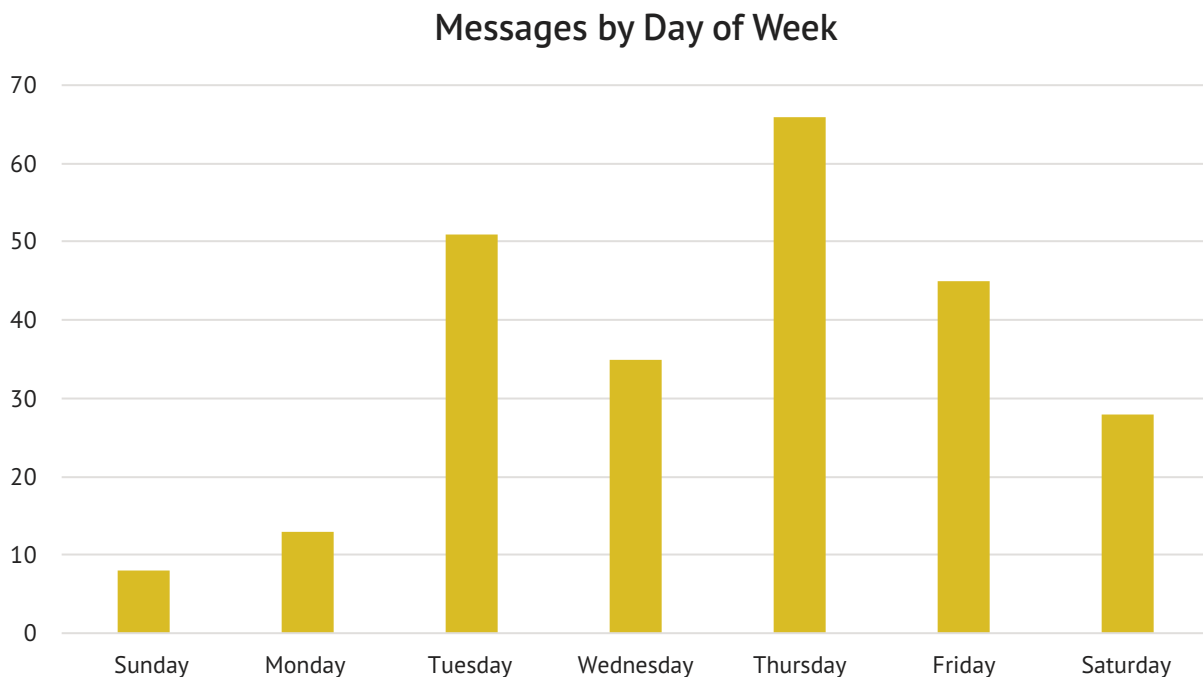
*Sunday, December 31 has been removed from the data above*

Send Time

Selecting the optimal send time for your email is a crucial yet often overlooked aspect of effective communication. The timing of your email can significantly influence its open and response rates, making the difference between a message that gets lost in a crowded inbox and one that captures your recipient's attention.

Understanding when your audience is most likely to engage with their email can enhance the likelihood of your message being read and acted upon. By strategically timing your emails, you not only improve the efficiency of your communication efforts but also foster better connections with your audience, ultimately driving higher engagement and achieving your communication goals more effectively.

For most organizations observed last year, send times fell between 6 and 10 AM. But for the organizations we serve, we've found good success with sending around noon or around 3 PM. Within the hour itself, it can also be a good idea to set your send to a more random time—like 6:12 instead of 6:00—to help ensure your email arrives at a slightly different pace than others.

Number of Messages Sent by Time
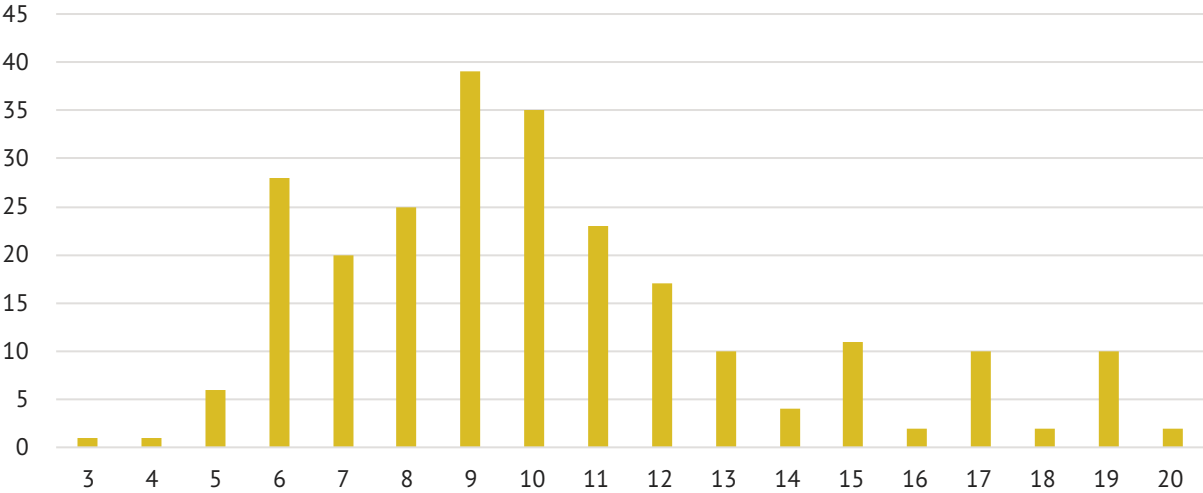
Send Date

The chosen send date for an email can greatly affect its visibility and the donor's likelihood of engaging with your content. Different days of the week, and even specific dates within the month, can impact open rates and response times. So by carefully selecting the send date, you can maximize the effectiveness of your email campaigns, ensuring your message reaches your audience at a time when they are most receptive.

Selecting the optimal send date for your email in December is particularly important due to the unique challenges and opportunities this month presents. December is a period marked by holiday preparations, year-end activities, and varied schedules, which can significantly impact email open and response rates. Amidst the holiday rush, people's attention is fragmented, and their inboxes are inundated with promotional offers and seasonal greetings. By understanding and leveraging the specific patterns, you can ensure your message is timely, relevant, and impactful during this busy month.

Although most of the smaller send days in the chart below are on weekends, it stands out to us that Wednesdays continue to be a lower volume day for messages and would be worth trying for an organization that wants to increase their chance of being seen.

Number of Messages Sent by Day of the Month
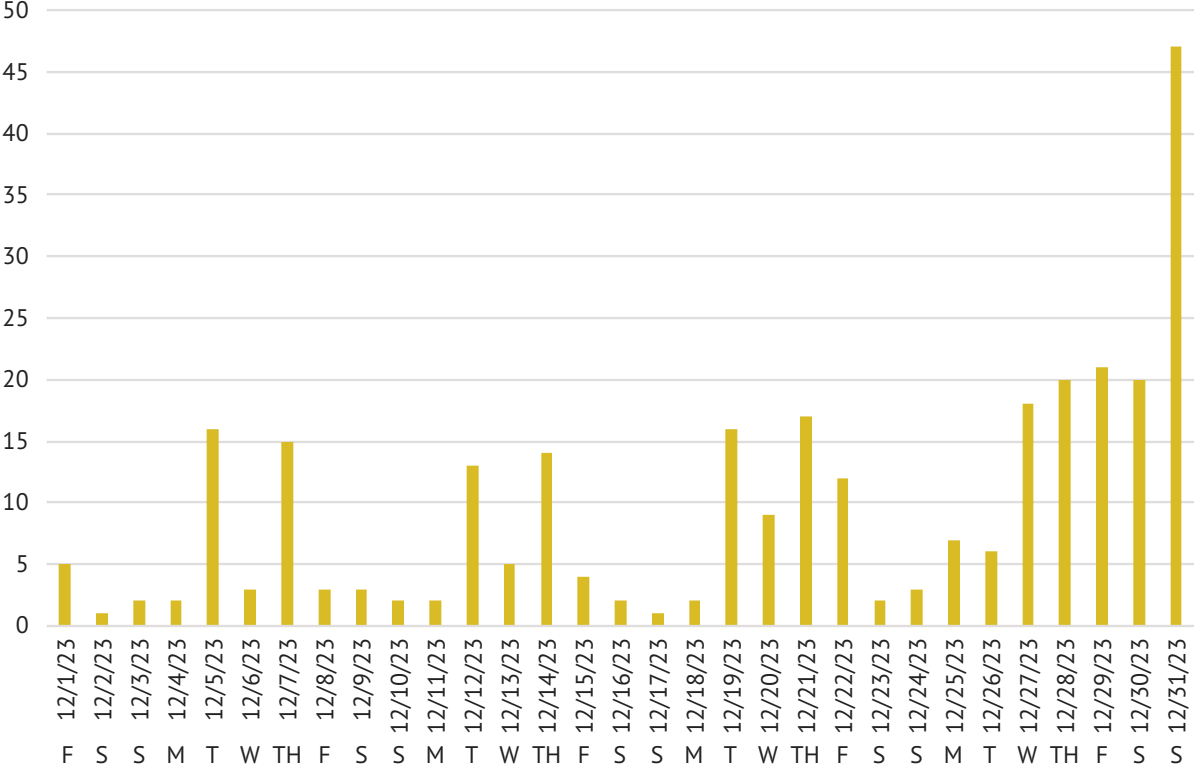
Your Message Is Opened, Now What?

Enhancing email engagement through various interactive and visually appealing tactics can significantly boost click and conversion rates.

A few effective tactics that we saw used last year are:

1 **Animations.** Animated elements, such as GIFs, capture the donor's attention quickly and make the email content more dynamic. These visual cues can highlight important messages or calls to action (CTAs), making them stand out in a way that static images or text might not.

2 **Countdowns.** Countdown clocks are another powerful engagement tool, especially effective in creating a sense of urgency. By incorporating a real-time countdown to the end of the month or a match, recipients are more likely to act promptly. This urgency can lead to quicker decision making and a notable increase in conversions.

3

Thermometers or progress meters. Thermometers visually represent progress towards a goal, such as a donation target. This tactic not only keeps donors informed but also motivates them to contribute by showing the collective impact of their contributions. As the thermometer fills up, it creates a sense of accomplishment and community, encouraging more donations as supporters strive to reach the goal.

4

Matches. Donation matches are another compelling tactic to boost engagement in charitable emails. Promoting a donation match—where a sponsor agrees to match every dollar donated—can double the impact of a donor's contribution, making it a powerful motivator. This not only increases the perceived value of each donation but also encourages immediate participation.
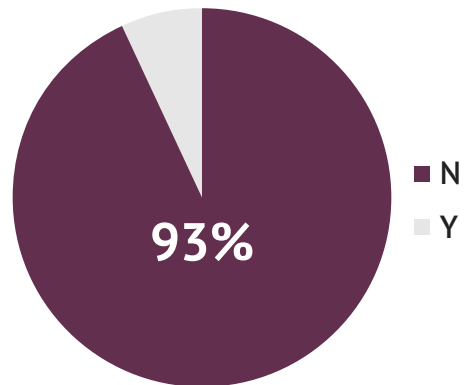
5

Forwards. In our last year-end study, we talked about how forwarding a previously sent message is a great way to grab attention and drive revenue. In 2023, we saw this tactic more widely used with organizations putting an additional message at the top of a previously sent message to draw more attention.
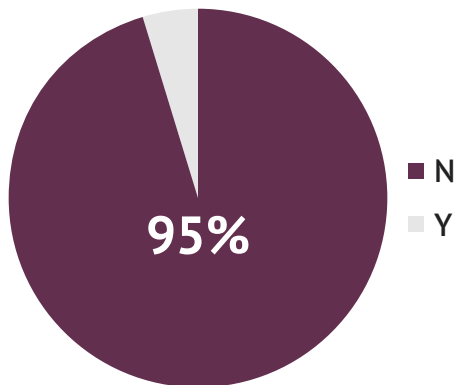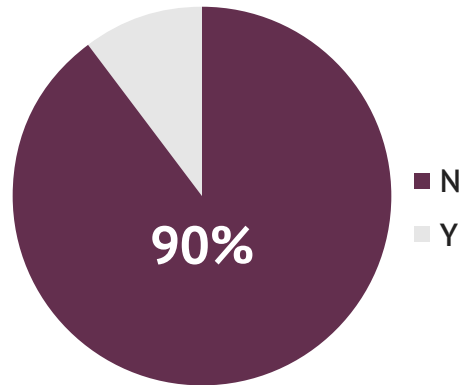
% of Messages Containing a Match
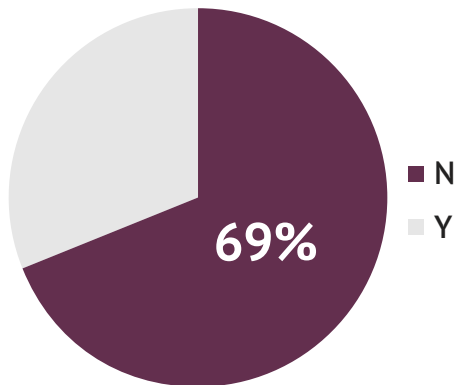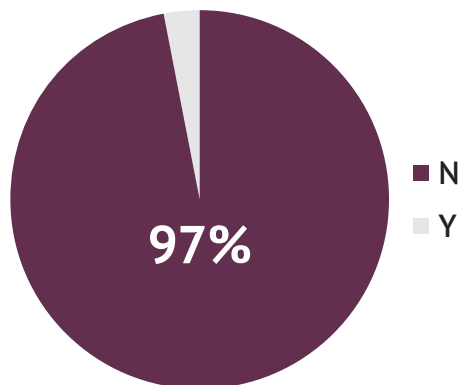
69%
- N
- Y

% of Messages Containing a Countdown

93%
- N
- Y

% of Messages Containing a Forward

95%
- N
- Y

% of Messages Containing Animation

90%
- N
- Y

% of Messages Containing a Thermometer

97%
- N
- Y

Last Day of the Year

December 31 marks the culmination of year-end giving. Whether driven by an end date from your organization or their potential tax benefits, many donors are already motivated to make their contributions before the calendar turns. The urgency of the deadline can also prompt supporters who may have delayed their donations to finally take action, resulting in a significant surge in donations on this day.

Additionally, December 31 is a pivotal moment for nonprofits to engage with their supporters and reinforce the importance of their shared mission. End-of-year appeals can highlight what donors have helped the organization achieve over the past year and outline the critical need for continued support to sustain and expand their impact. This narrative not only inspires confidence in the organization's effectiveness but also strengthens the emotional connection with the donors.

The combination of tax incentives, deadline urgency, strategic appeals, and matching gift opportunities creates a powerful environment for maximizing donations. By effectively leveraging these elements, nonprofits can capitalize on this pivotal day to significantly boost their year-end fundraising outcomes, ensuring they have the resources needed to continue their vital work in the coming year.

When Do Email Communications Send?

Selecting a good send time for your email communications on December 31 is crucial to ensuring your message stands out in a crowded inbox. On this day, inboxes are flooded with year-end appeals, promotional offers, and personal messages, making it easy for your email to get lost in the shuffle.

Timing your email strategically can increase the likelihood that your message will be seen <u>and</u> opened. Looking at the chart below, you can see a few key times of the day that aren't quite as full of messages—particularly 10 AM and noon. These times could present increased opportunity for you to stand out and get in front of your donor file.

### Number of Messages Sent by Time of Day Sent on December 31
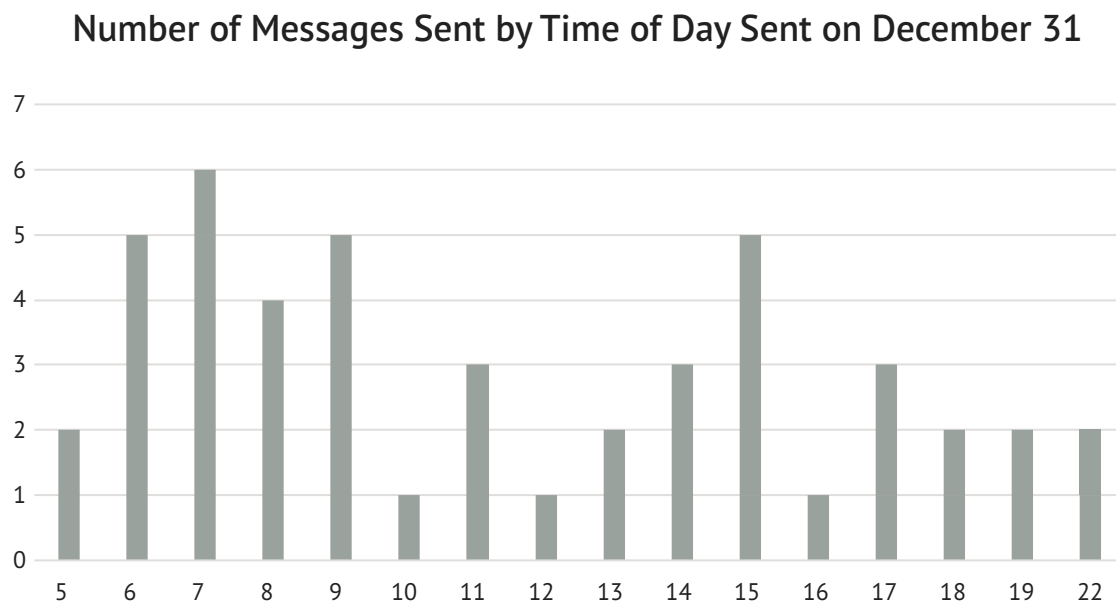
How Many Emails Do Organizations Send on December 31?

Determining the ideal number of email messages to send on December 31 is a delicate balance that can significantly impact the success of your year-end fundraising campaign. As the final day for charitable donations in the calendar year, you definitely need to communicate. However, sending too many emails can overwhelm recipients and lead to fatigue, while too few may result in missed opportunities. Striking the right balance is essential to maintaining donor engagement and maximizing donations without causing irritation.

Most organizations land on two messages—one earlier in the day and one follow up—as that comfortable balance of communication.

### Number of Messages Sent by Time of Day Sent on December 31
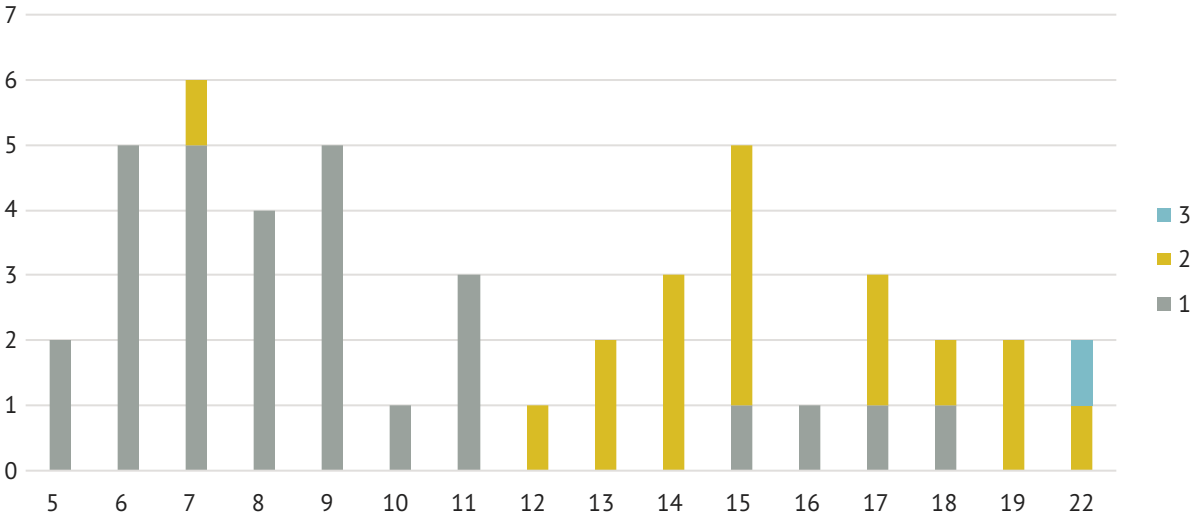
Engagement Tactics

Once your message is opened, there is still fierce competition in the inbox to get a donor to stay, read, and act. To stand out, it's crucial for organizations to employ key engagement tactics in their emails. These tactics not only make emails more visually appealing and interactive, but also create a sense of urgency and community impact that resonate with potential donors. This section delves into the essential engagement techniques that can help your emails rise above the clutter on this critical fundraising day, ensuring your message is seen and is compelling enough to drive donations.
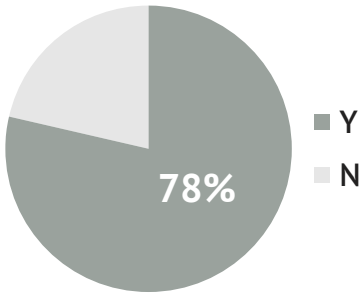
% of Messages Containing a Match
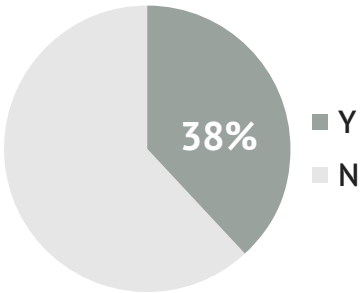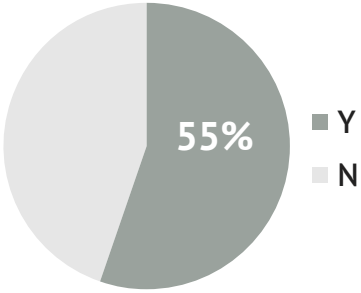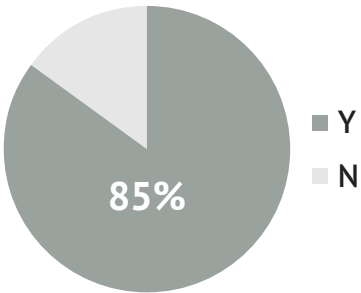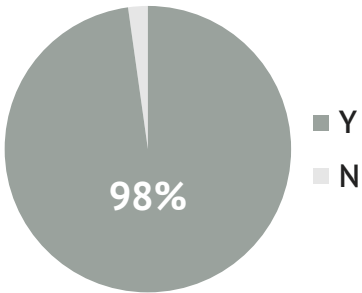
38%
■ Y
■ N

% of Messages Containing a Countdown

55%
■ Y
■ N

% of Messages Containing a Forward

78%
■ Y
■ N

% of Messages Containing Animation

85%
■ Y
■ N

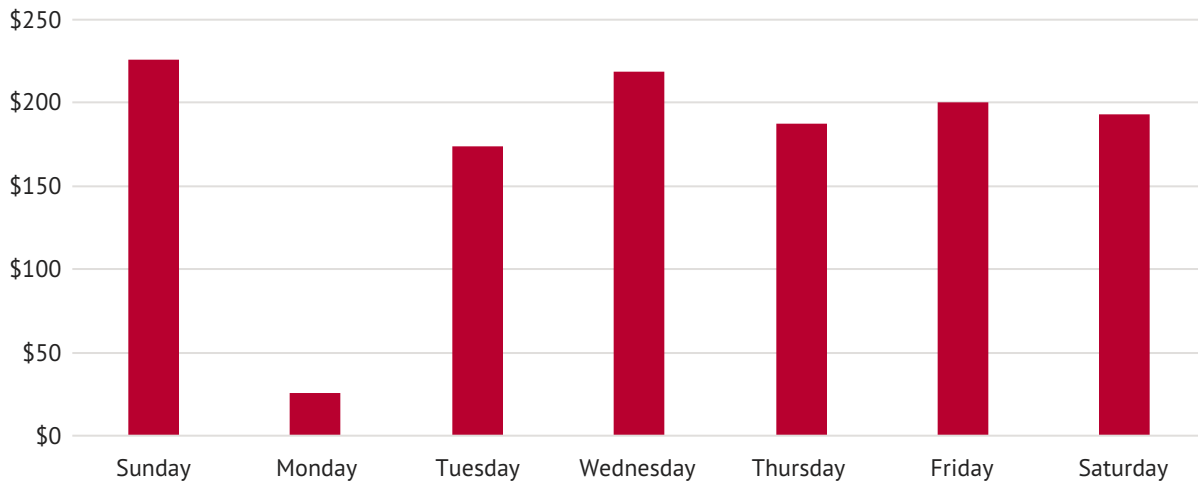**% of Messages Containing a Thermometer**

98%
■ Y
■ N

A Look at the Revenue

And now for our favorite part, the revenue! It's good to discuss effective ways to get your emails opened, but if the send times, tactics, and send days highlighted above are also less effective, then it's not good strategy—for *your* organization. To determine the effectiveness of the strategies and tactics described in this study, we reviewed our clients' revenue—paired with these various metrics above—to find a balance between the methods used and their ability to generate funds.

All revenue charts focus on revenue for 1,000 emails sent. This allows us to normalize data across clients, particularly when some have very robust digital programs and others don't.

Consider this! Based on the metrics, Wednesdays could be a good send day for your organization this year. Last year, Wednesdays fell on December 6, 13, 20, and 27. According to the chart above, Wednesdays are also typically good performers in terms of revenue. The combination of less sends and good revenue means great opportunity for your messages to be read and responded to.

Revenue Per 1,000 by Day of the Week

A bar chart titled "Revenue Per 1,000 by Day of the Week" with a y-axis from $0 to $250. Bars: Sunday ~$225, Monday ~$25, Tuesday ~$173, Wednesday ~$218, Thursday ~$188, Friday ~$200, Saturday ~$193.

Revenue Per 1,000 by Day of Month

A bar chart titled "Revenue Per 1,000 by Day of Month" with a y-axis from $0 to $6000. Bars by date: 1-Dec ~$400, 4-Dec ~$0, 5-Dec ~$700, 6-Dec ~$1300, 7-Dec ~$400, 11-Dec ~$0, 12-Dec ~$150, 13-Dec ~$1300, 14-Dec ~$1700, 15-Dec ~$300, 16-Dec ~$0, 19-Dec ~$2600, 20-Dec ~$1450, 21-Dec ~$150, 22-Dec ~$3200, 24-Dec ~$200, 26-Dec ~$200, 27-Dec ~$3800, 28-Dec ~$600, 29-Dec ~$2400, 30-Dec ~$1050, 31-Dec ~$5200.

A question that frequently arises is whether we can "go too far" in the number of engagement tactics used in a single message: *Will it feel spammy? Will donors perceive it as disingenuous?* Well, let's look at the data! The revenue numbers above show that the most tactics any one message from an organization had was three, and that message performed significantly higher than the others in terms of revenue.

Revenue Per 1,000 by Number of Tactics Used
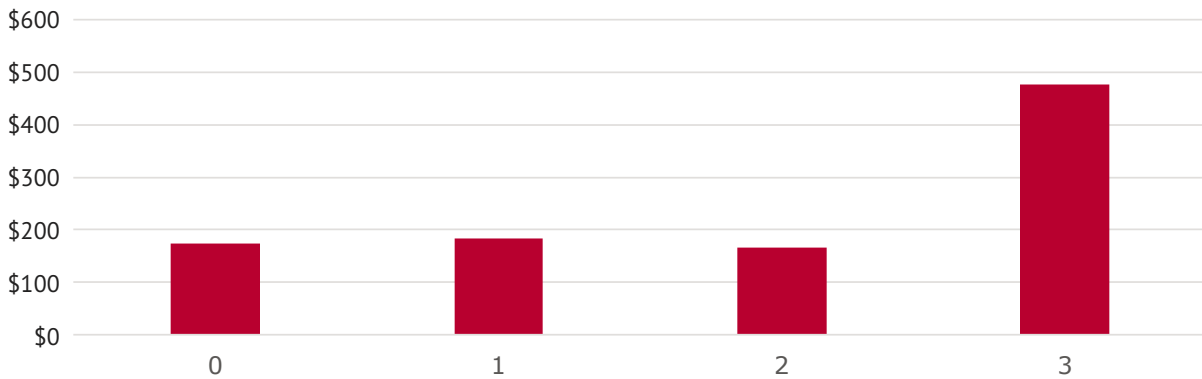
For our clients, another engagement tactic used this year was what we call the Outlook-style message. This means a completely plain email, text only with possibly one donate button at the bottom. This plain message is meant to feel more personal—like someone sat down and wrote it—instead of the more traditional, fully designed message.

In the revenue breakdown by tactic used (see below), you can see that this message type was one of the better performers. It was only beat out by a forwarded Outlook message and a message that included a countdown, match, and forward. The main takeaway here is not to commit to one single tactic for these key messages. Try some that have several engagement metrics, and try others that are stripped down to just text. This variability helps in the overall performance of the campaign.

Revenue Per 1,000 by Tactics Used
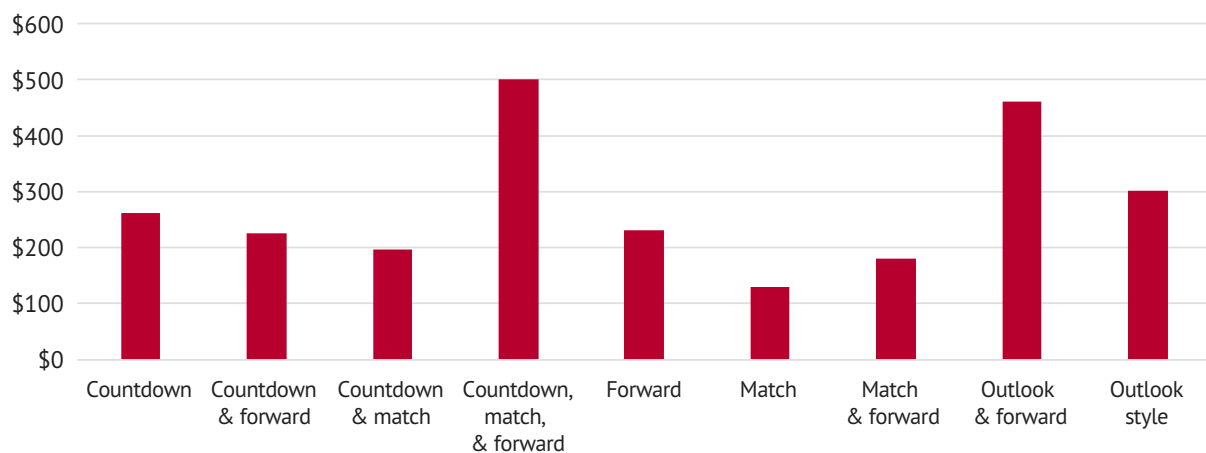
Conclusion

Testing is a crucial component in enhancing online fundraising efforts. By systematically experimenting with various elements of your campaign, such as email subject lines, senders, engagement tactics, or send times and days, you gain valuable insights into what resonates most with your audience. This data-driven approach allows you to fine-tune your strategies, ensuring each aspect of your campaign is optimized for maximum engagement and conversion. As a result, you can make informed decisions that drive higher donation rates and improve overall campaign performance.

Continuous testing also helps you stay agile and responsive in a rapidly changing digital landscape. Online behaviors and preferences can shift quickly, influenced by technological advancements and cultural trends. Regularly testing your fundraising tactics ensures that you remain relevant

and effective, adapting to these changes rather than falling behind. This ongoing process of evaluation and adjustment is essential for maintaining a competitive edge and sustaining donor interest over time.

As December approaches, it is imperative for nonprofits to leverage the insights gained from tests and messaging strategies employed throughout the year and apply those learnings to the days ahead.

This December, there are many challenges ahead—being in the wake of a political season, as well as increased holiday or year-end driven marketing or fundraising that's competing for donor attention. But your organization is doing great work, and your donors still have a heart for your mission and a desire to help.

It is our hope that the information in this guide will help you as you make strategic decisions in the weeks ahead. We also hope you use this December to share your impact, inspire hearts, and maximize your revenue so you can become a greater part of what is right with the world.

About Us

Douglas Shaw & Associates is a team of more than 50 dedicated direct response fundraising professionals who strive to be a part of what's right with the world.

Serving nonprofits for 30 years with robust data and analytics, compelling creative, disciplined execution, and an innovative team—we use our fundraising expertise to help you identify, attract, and retain donors to support the important work you do, allowing you to fulfill your mission.

Through collaborative consulting, we craft a comprehensive strategic fundraising communication plan that focuses on inspiring donors to be a part of the good your organization is doing.

Our omnichannel fundraising strategies are created and executed just for you, utilizing a custom mix of print, online, and media channels for donor acquisition, retention, and reactivation of your individual donors.

If you're looking for a strategic fundraising partner who listens, collaborates, and gets results, please reach out to us today. We look forward to connecting with you.

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