



DON'T BE FOOLED BY... DIRECT MAIL

The NRA knows where you live—but it's not gunning for you; it's after your money. So are the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence, the Humane Society, the Sierra Club, and Save the Children. You can only be glad that you are probably too young for AARP to take an interest in you yet. Our mailboxes, once a repository for letters from mom and a handful of bills, have become a battleground for interest groups after our hard-earned cash, and now our email inboxes are filling fast, too. Welcome to the age of direct-mail solicitations.

If it hasn't happened to you yet, no doubt as you become gainfully employed, give money to a cause or two you admire, and become integrated into your community, you too will become the target of "personalized" written requests from interest groups for the donations that they need to keep financially afloat. Direct mail is big business, run by professionals whose job it is to design the impassioned pleas that encourage you to open your wallet or write that check. Because interest groups have so much at stake in their direct-mail solicitations (in many cases, their very survival depends on it), they pull out all the stops in their letters to you. How can you evaluate these dramatic requests so that you can in fact support the legitimate groups whose causes you believe in, but not fall (as they hope you will) for over-the-top exaggeration and provocatively embellished prose? When presented with a plea for funds, it is worth doing a little homework before you part with any cash.

WHAT TO WATCH OUT FOR

- **Hidden agendas.** Always ask yourself, "What is this group? What does it stand for?" Sometimes direct-mail writers spend the majority of their time telling you what they are against, or whom they oppose, in the hopes that you will share their animosities and therefore support them. Many groups give a web address. Check them out, but remember that the web content is also written by supporters and may not give you a full or unbiased view. Look up the group in a newspaper archive and get some objective information (that is, information not written by the group itself!).
- **Vague connections.** A letter might address you as though you were a long-lost friend, but it pays to take a little time to figure out exactly how the organization came to think of you as a potential donor. Often a group will buy a mailing list from some other group. You can occasionally trace your name by the particular spelling (or misspelling), use of a maiden name or nickname, or some other characteristic that does not appear on your standard mailing address. Knowing how a group got your name can sometimes tell you what its connections are and what it is about. A simple mail order purchase of hiking boots can get you on the mailing lists of sports outfitters, and a short step later onto the lists of the NRA or the Sierra Club, both of which hope that outdoorsy people support their causes. In addition, as mailing techniques get more sophisticated, interest groups are able to personalize their requests for support. If you belong to the local Humane Society and other groups that would indicate your love for animals, and if the interest group got your name from their lists, it can target you with a fundraising letter that plays on your concern for animal life. If the letter seems to be directed to your deepest values, harden your heart until you have checked out the group independently.
- **Unverified claims.** Direct mail is designed to make you sit down and write a check now. From some letters, you get the sense that Armageddon is at hand and the world will soon self-destruct without your donation. Do not believe everything you read in a fundraising letter. Verify the facts before you send any money. The more persuasive and amazing the claim appears to be, the more it requires verification!
- **Check out their record.** Be clear about what you are being asked for—it is almost always money, but a group may also ask you to write your congressperson, make a phone call, wear a ribbon, or otherwise show support for a cause. Make sure you know what you are committing to do. If possible, check out the interest group's record for effective action. If most of the money it gets goes to administrative costs, you won't be furthering your cause much by contributing your dollars.
- **What's in it for you?** What material benefits does the group offer? Do you receive a newsletter? Discounts on products or services? Special offers for the group? We are not advising free ridership here, but it is wise to know exactly what you are getting before you part with your cash.