

CRISIS STORYTELLING

How to Communicate with Donors
When Things Aren't Fine



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Crisis doesn't wait.

Neither should your message.

When disaster strikes—like losing government funding, facing a natural emergency, or seeing a sudden spike in need—nonprofits are often unsure what to say or how to say it.

Some soften the message so much that donors don't realize there's a problem. Others share everything all at once, which can leave donors overwhelmed and unsure how to help.

That's where **crisis storytelling** comes in.

It helps you tell the truth about what's happening—without panic. And it gives your donors a clear way to step in and make a difference.

This short guide gives you ready-to-use templates, proven examples, and simple formulas. So you can communicate with confidence, even in the hardest moments—and move your donors to action.

Let's start with the core framework that will guide everything you say in a crisis.

Crisis Storytelling Formula: “The Pivot Framework”

Use this framework to craft a donor communication in a crisis. It consists of four key parts:

1. **State the Crisis Clearly and Urgently** – Tell donors what is happening, don't sugarcoat it or use vague language.
2. **Illustrate the Impact on Real People** – Show how the crisis is affecting the people, animals, or communities your nonprofit serves.
3. **Position the Donor as the Solution** – Make it clear that their action is the key to making a difference.
4. **Offer a Simple, Immediate Call to Action** – Donors need a clear, specific way to help right now.

Now let's put the framework into action with a ready-to-send message. On the next page is a simple template you can customize and send right away.

Template: The “Crisis Letter”

This is a plug-and-play crisis appeal template that you can send via email or direct mail.

SUBJECT LINE: Emergency: [Crisis Impact] is Happening Right Now

Dear [Donor’s First Name],

I wish I were writing with better news, but the truth is, we’re in crisis.

[Describe the crisis clearly in one or two sentences. Example: “Government funding that helped feed 10,000 families just disappeared overnight. Without urgent support, families who rely on us will go hungry.” - see examples below for different nonprofit types.]

We can’t do this alone. But we know you care.

[Describe what the donor’s gift will accomplish. Example: “With \$50, you can provide a week’s worth of groceries to a family in crisis.”]

Please, don’t wait - the need is urgent.

[CALL TO ACTION: Example: “Donate \$50 now and help a family get the food they need this week.”]

[DONATE NOW BUTTON]

Thank you for acting in this moment of crisis.

[Your Name]

[Your Nonprofit’s Name]

Not sure how to describe the crisis in your own context? Use one of these ready-made lines based on your nonprofit type.

Plug-and-Play Impact Lines for Different Nonprofit Types

Use the examples on the next page to replace the following bracketed section in the email template above:

[Describe the immediate impact in your context: see examples in the “Plug-and-Play Impact Lines” section.]

Health Organizations

- “Patients are showing up who need urgent care, but we’re out of supplies - and running out of time.”
- “We’ve had to turn away two people already this morning. We never want to do that again.”

Education Nonprofits

- “Our students are logging in to empty virtual classrooms - we had to pause the program until we can restore funding.”
- “We’ve run out of basic school supplies, and the after-school program is at risk of shutting down next week.”

Environmental Groups

- “Oil is spreading through the wetlands faster than we can contain it. Our team is on the ground, but resources are running thin.”
- “The cleanup is stalled - without emergency support, we can’t protect this fragile habitat.”

Animal Welfare

- “Our kennels are full, and the phones won’t stop ringing. We don’t have the space or staff to keep up.”
- “Emergency calls for injured animals are coming in daily - but we’re out of vet supplies.”

Arts & Culture

- “The exhibit is mid-installation - but our core funding was pulled, and we may have to cancel opening night.”
- “We had to furlough our teaching artists - students across the city are now left without arts education.”

Housing & Homelessness

- “We’ve had to turn away five families in the last 48 hours. We simply don’t have enough shelter beds.”
- “Temperatures are dropping, but we don’t have enough blankets or warm meals to get everyone through the night.”

Religious or Faith-Based

- “Our doors have always been open, but now we face the painful possibility of having to close them - at a time when people need spiritual and emotional support more than ever.”
- “Requests for help have doubled, and our ministry team is stretched to the limit.”

Higher Education

- “Scholarship funds are frozen - students who’ve worked so hard may have to drop out.”
- “Departments are being cut. Faculty are worried. Students are scared. We need immediate help to protect what matters most.”

International Aid

- “The flood destroyed entire villages. Families are stranded and in need of food, water, and shelter - now.”
- “Our team is ready, but shipments are delayed due to lack of funding. Lives are at risk.”

The way you describe the crisis makes all the difference.

Here’s a quick example to show how small changes in language can move donors from passive to passionate.

Before & After Example: How to Transform Vague Messaging into a Powerful Appeal

This section shows you how to transform a weak, vague crisis message into a clear, emotionally compelling appeal that drives donor action. Use it as a reference when you're revising your own copy. Compare the "before" and "after" to see what works - and why.

Before (Unclear & Passive Messaging)

"Our organization is facing funding challenges, and we hope that donors like you will consider supporting us in these difficult times. With your generosity, we can continue to provide services to those in need."

What’s wrong?

- Vague crisis description (“funding challenges”)
- No urgent call to action
- Doesn’t create an emotional connection
- Leaves the donor uncertain about their role

After (Clear, Urgent, and Donor-Centric Messaging)

"The shelter's funding was cut yesterday, and we are out of food by the end of the week. Families are showing up at our door with nowhere else to go. But YOU can change that - \$50 provides a week of food for a hungry family. Please, don't wait. We need you now."

What works?

- Clear crisis statement (funding cut, out of food)
- Emotional impact (families showing up desperate for help)
- Donor is the solution (\$50 = a week of food)
- Urgency is clear ("don't wait, we need you now")

Dos & Don'ts of Crisis Storytelling

Here's a quick-reference list of best practices to guide your messaging during a crisis.

Use these dos and don'ts to double-check your appeal, email, or social media post before it goes out. These tips help you stay focused, avoid common pitfalls, and keep the donor at the center of your story.

As you write, use this checklist to make sure your message is clear, compelling, and donor-focused.

DO:

- Be clear & specific** – Avoid vague statements like "things are tough." Spell out exactly what's happening.
- Focus on the people impacted** – Make it personal. Numbers alone don't move people - stories do.
- Use urgency, not panic** – "We need your help today" is different from "All hope is lost."
- Make the donor the hero** – Show them exactly how they can change the situation.

DON'T:

- **Be vague or soft-pedal the crisis** – If donors don't understand the seriousness, they won't feel the need to act.
- **Overwhelm donors with doom & gloom** – If donors feel powerless, they'll disengage.
- **Make the ask too vague** – Tell them exactly how they can help. Instead of "support us," say "Your \$50 provides a week of food."

Even the best message won't help if donors don't open your email. That's why your subject line needs to grab attention fast.

Subject Line Swipe File for Crisis Emails

Subject lines are the first - and sometimes only - chance you have to capture a donor's attention in a moment of crisis. Use this swipe file as a starting point for writing your own subject lines.

Subject Line Formulas to Try:

- **[Time-Based Urgency] + [Specific Impact]**

Example: "72 hours left to help families evacuate safely"

- **[Trigger Word] + Colon + [Crisis Summary]**

Example: "Emergency: Local families have no water"

- **[Emotional Hook] + [Immediate Call to Action]**

Example: "She's out of options - will you step in today?"

Use the swipe lines below as plug-and-play options, or adapt them using the formulas above:

- We're running out of time - help is needed now
- Families are desperate - your action today can save them
- URGENT: This crisis just hit [Community Name]
- This just happened - and we need your help
- We never expected this - but now, we need you

Want to get your message out fast on social media? Use the quick post formula on the next page to share your crisis appeal in real time.

Crisis Social Media Post Formula

Use this structure for urgent social media posts:

HEADLINE: (The crisis in 1 sentence)

- "Disaster just struck - thousands need help now."

What's happening: (Describe the situation in 2-3 sentences)

- "A wildfire ripped through our community last night. Families lost everything. We're rushing to provide emergency shelter, but supplies are running out."

How donors can help:

“\$25 provides emergency food for a family tonight. Please act now.”

Call to Action - CTA: (Urgent action statement + link)

“Donate now to help families recover: [link]”

Crisis fundraising isn't just about money - it's about trust and connection.

Final Thoughts: Crisis Storytelling is About Trust

When a crisis hits, donors look to your nonprofit for honesty, leadership, and clear ways to help. If you communicate effectively:

- More donors will respond because they understand the urgency.
- You'll maintain donor trust by being transparent, even when things are hard.
- You'll raise more funds quickly, allowing your nonprofit to keep serving those in need.

Want to get better at crafting powerful donor messages - even in moments of crisis?

Join us at the Nonprofit Storytelling Conference, where top fundraising professionals share real-world strategies that drive results.

Learn more and register here: <https://nonprofitstorytellingconference.com>

If you found this booklet helpful, please forward it to a friend who could also benefit from it.

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