



# What Aretha Franklin Can Teach Fundraisers About Direct-Mail Response and Online Giving

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Online giving, specifically in response to your direct-mail appeals, is a quickly evolving phenomenon that can no longer be ignored. In fact, it's a big part of the reason we've been hearing over the past couple of years that direct-mail fundraising results are declining.

If your prospects, donors and members respond to your mail by donating, joining and renewing online (and they are, more and more each day), and your organization has no commitment to tracking these responses and crediting them as "mail response" — then yes, you will see a decline in your direct-mail results. Online gifts are perhaps simply tracked as and credited to "online fundraising," and your mail appeals — as well as your mail program overall — become a victim of circumstance.

[Aretha Franklin](#) would be appalled. This evolution of how people are responding to mail is getting very little [R-E-S-P-E-C-T](#). Most nonprofit organizations are committed to tracking mail responses to their direct-mail appeals. They are equally committed to tracking online responses to online appeals. But when it comes to results analysis and reporting, these online responses to direct-mail appeals often, and unfortunately, remain in the "online" column.

Now, before we get into how to fix this issue, consider these four facts:

1. Direct mail generated almost \$8 of every \$10 donated to nonprofits in 2009.
2. Your donors and members have come to expect that anything they can do offline, they should be able to do online.
3. One in three donors who give online say that a direct-mail piece triggers her to visit the charity's website to make a gift.
4. Online gifts are typically 25 percent to 35 percent higher than gifts by mail.

The main reason online gifts in response to direct mail go into cyberspace is that most organizations simply do not have ... a) a viable tracking field on their online-giving forms and b) a system in place so donors can simply type in the source code printed on their reply devices. Why is this so difficult? It seems relatively simple to add a message and (at least) a radio button field on the online-giving form that reads:

What brought you here?

I received a mail piece. If convenient, please enter the code printed above your name on the

response form here: [                    ]

An e-mail.

I was just visiting the site.

A friend's/relative's recommendation.

I attended an event.

At [DMW Direct Fundraising](#), we have seen a few organizations do this well — [Rochester Institute of Technology](#) (RIT) is one example. The [annual-fund online-giving site](#) asks, “What prompted you to give online?” This data-collection feature is strategically placed at the bottom of the form, right before the “submit” button, because at this point it is less of a deterrent.

At this point, you may be saying to yourself, “Well, of course. RIT is a technology school. It’s a lot easier for it to get something like that implemented than it is for me!”

It’s no secret that for many development professionals, getting the IT department to make edits to any portion of the website can be as difficult as getting a budget increase. But frankly, folks, this is 2011 — it should not be that difficult. Continuous improvements to your website and online-giving forms must become standard practice within your organization.

So, assuming you agree that tracking online gifts in response to your mail appeals is important, here are five best practices for making this happen:

1. Get senior management on your side — perhaps from both development and operations. Invest some time in educating management about the importance of your desired edits to the online-giving form or in building a separate landing page for you (and doing it today). Remind the higher-ups that accurate results tracking is critical to the success of to your fundraising program.
2. Mimic RIT's giving site by ensuring you have a good process in place to download that data and, if it is not already in place, adding that “Method of Giving” field to your database.
3. Create a simple, separate URL and online-giving form that incorporates your organization's website and the name of the mail appeal (e.g., mynonprofit.org/fallappeal), and drive people there, with several prominent mentions of it on every element within your mail packages.
4. Use a pURL site. Taking the above dedicated landing page idea one step further, a personalized URL brings your donor/member/prospect to her very own, prepopulated online-giving form. Use something like the donor's name followed by your organization's website, e.g., mary.donor/mynonprofit.org. A pURL provides not only fool-proof tracking, but the element of personalization may garner as much as a 400 percent lift in response as well!

5. Last but not least, use the track-back method. Every 15 days or so after the first response to your appeal, download a list of gifts via online response and run it against the final mailing list. If the names match, these responses — in most cases — belong in the “Mail Responses” column or tab of your response report.

There is no question that the choice to give and join online in response to direct-mail appeals will continue to grow. Some organizations have had sophisticated landing pages and tracking systems in place for a few years now, and online gifts account for 25 percent or more of their overall responses. Considering online gifts are about 30 percent higher, it behooves you to revamp your site/landing page, alter your creative to drive your constituents online to respond, and watch your net revenue grow.

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