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The Sound a "Thank You" Makes

by *Hildy Gottlieb*

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It was a crazy week - one of those weeks where I started working at 5am every morning, and fell into bed exhausted at 11pm every night, only to start at 5:00 the next morning.

As the founder of a tiny organization, when the Executive Director (our only full time employee) resigned, it was left to me to "mind the store" until a replacement could be found. So, for the first time since founding the Diaper Bank some years ago, I had become its Interim Executive Director. And as luck would have it, I stepped into the position at the most hectic time of year - the celebration of our 10th Annual December Diaper Drive, a month-long series of events to raise 1 million diapers for those in need.

With the turmoil of the ED's departure, we were 2 weeks late getting our annual mailing out. We were a week behind in arranging for our Big Event. There was a grant deadline we had just learned about. And of course, there were all the normal day-to-day things of running a nonprofit organization.

Friday afternoon at 4:00, I finished the last deadline. I let out the kind of breath that lets you know you haven't taken a real breath in quite some time.

With our part-time staff and our volunteers in the other room putting the finishing touches on the mailing, I couldn't live with myself if I simply said, "I'm exhausted. I'm going home!" After all, they had been working just as hard as I had all week.

So I started to sort the stack of mail that had accumulated on my desk during my week of insanity. Bills. Donations. Invitations. Junk.

And it is the next thing I did that saved my whole day, my whole week. It is that one simple action that I recommend to you - not just because it is the right thing to do, but because it feels so good.

I went through that stack of donation envelopes, and I called every person who gave, thanking them for their gift.

This is nothing new for me. Since stepping into this position, as soon as a donation arrives, I have called to thank every donor, no matter how small the gift. It takes a few minutes every day, and mostly I end up leaving messages, but that's ok. I've always felt it's just the right thing to do. If someone does something nice for you, you thank them. If nothing else, it's simply common courtesy.

It had been a whole week since I'd touched the mail - mail from our annual campaign. The stack was high. I started dialing.

Because the Diaper Drive gets a lot of publicity here in Tucson, many of the checks were for \$5 and \$10. You could tell from the names on the checks - Ella, Gertrude,

Olivia - and from the shaky writing, that these checks were from elderly folks, probably on fixed incomes. I know their \$5 is dear to them, and they are usually the first ones I call.

I had made a number of calls before I got to Mrs. Fontaine. Her phone rang and rang. When she finally picked up, it was clear she was having trouble breathing. I pictured her struggling to get to the phone, and I thought to myself, "Oh great. She has taken all her energy, thinking this is an important call, and it's just me calling to say thank you." I felt guilty for bothering her.

"Is this Mrs. Fontaine?" I said.
"Yes."

"Mrs. Fontaine, this is Hildy from the Diaper Bank. We received your donation, and I just wanted to thank you."

Mrs. Fontaine was not happy. Clearly she thought I was calling to solicit her, probably to ask for more money. I don't blame her - that's probably how I would react if any charity I ever gave to thought to call and thank me. (Hint - no charity I have ever given to has EVER called to thank me. Not one.)

I continued. "Your gift means a lot to us, and I really just wanted you to know that it will help a lot of people."

"But I only sent you \$5!" I could hear her move from anger to confusion, but clearly she was softening up.

"But every penny counts!" I told her. "We just really appreciate your helping out, and I just wanted you to know that."

Now her voice was positively warm, surprised, happy. "Well thank you. Really it is so nice of you to call. How very very nice!" They say you can hear a smile over the phone, and I heard hers, loud and clear.

Mrs. Fontaine put me on a roll. I dialed with a fever. I forgot about the week behind me, a week where the sheer size of the mountain of work had overshadowed the reasons we were doing the work in the first place. I listened to donor after donor tell me what amazing things we are doing, and how they wish they could give us more. I heard THEM thanking ME, telling me how they appreciated what we do, encouraging us to keep it up, telling me how important it is.

Finally, the last call - a \$200 VISA charge. From the sound of the voice at the other end of the phone, this was a professional woman my own age. And from the moment I started the call, she acted as if she had been chosen for the Publisher's Clearinghouse Sweepstakes! "I can't believe you are calling me! This is so nice, so unexpected! You have a wonderful weekend!" she told me over and over in the short time of the call.

I left the office with a smile on my face. Yes, I was exhausted, and yes, my bed felt great.

But I had found a joy I never expected as I thought about clearing my desk. It wasn't the joy of finishing the job, or getting through the pile. It wasn't even the joy of remembering why we do the work we do.

It was the joyful sound a Thank You makes when it lands.

***And so,
for the sake of your own organization's health,***

**and for the sake of finding a bit of joy in your own day,
pick up the phone.
Say "Thank You."
And listen to the sound that Thank You makes
when it lands in your donor's heart.**

Epilogue: December 2006

Tony Silbert, a strategic funding consultant in Los Angeles, is on the board of The Harmony Project, an organization that serves the cultural and artistic needs of underprivileged children in the Los Angeles area.

Founded in 2001, Harmony Project board members have been the primary fundraisers, until a recent article in People Magazine brought new, primarily small donors to this great organization. In the past, gifts were always personally acknowledged, as they had been solicited individually by those board members. But now, there was a new group of donors - individuals who believed in what they read in the magazine and wanted to help.

Tony handed this article - The Sound a "Thank You" Makes - to the ED of Harmony Project, and urged him to call all those first-time donors, to thank them personally. With the massive impact of their People Magazine publicity, it was no wonder the ED was feeling overwhelmed, and Tony admits the ED was not enthusiastic about this added chore. Finally, though, the calls were done, most of them simply voice messages to say, "Thanks!"

As luck would have it, though, one of those small, first-time donors had some connections to several local foundations. He had been so impressed with the fact that Harmony Project had called to thank even a "relatively small" donor, that he connected the group up with one of those foundations. And the end of the story? The group received a \$25,000 gift!

That donor was one who had received just a voice message. He later told Tony that that simple message not only gave him a sense of the ED's charisma, but it gave him the confidence that the group would handle money responsibly. When he spoke to the foundation president, he was able to speak on behalf of the Harmony Project as if he really knew them, conveying his confidence in their management.

We have been touched that Tony has shared this story with us. And he has also been quick to mention that the effect goes beyond just the money. It has to do with building those relationships, one at a time. We never know what relationships, what wisdom, what experience - what value - any of our supporters has until we make that connection, one on one.

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