



# 2022 Donor Lifecycle Report

How to maximize engagement with your donors for a successful year-end campaign





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# Introduction and Methodology

01



# Introduction

Want to know the secret to a successful year-end campaign? So did we! That's why CauseMic evaluated nonprofit supporter email communications from 204 organizations before, during, and after their year-end fundraising.

It turns out there is a method to maximizing engagement, and it begins with understanding the Donor Lifecycle.

## The Donor Lifecycle

People are naturally wired for relationships. We seek to be known and understood by the folks around us.

The same is true for the organizations we follow and support in 2022.

With continued reliance on mobile devices to stay connected, ongoing relationships can easily be built with donors that care about your cause – if you put in the work.

This is where the Donor Lifecycle comes in. It can be broken into three key phases: cultivation, solicitation, and stewardship.

Cultivation refers to the act of connecting with your donors to build trust and credibility before you ask them to take an action. Solicitation is the hard ask you make for them to donate. And lastly, stewardship is the communication with your donors to maintain a relationship through gratitude and ongoing care.



# Methodology

While the Donor Lifecycle is ongoing, we wanted to look at a contained period of time where each phase could be individually evaluated.

We made sure to sign up for all 204 organization's email newsletters by the end of July to see what their donor engagement looked like over the course of the following 9 months. While email isn't the only revenue generating channel for nonprofits, year after year studies show it remains firmly at the top.

For this report, CauseMic defined each phase as the following:

## Cultivation

Looking at the three months prior to the launch of their year-end campaigns, we observed how many organizations sent emails before the giving period.

## Solicitation

Next, we analyzed the total revenue and number of donors that gave to each organization during November and December 2021 to uncover any correlation between cultivation and conversion.

*Note: for an in-depth analysis of emails sent during this season, and to read some of our best tips for email communication, check out our [Email Impact Guide for Nonprofits](#) released earlier this year!*

## Stewardship

Last but not least, we observed how many organizations continued communicating with their donors during the three months after their year-end campaigns ended.

Continuous care and engagement can keep the Donor Lifecycle recurring and encourage repeat donations.

# Cultivation

02



## Why It Matters

Cultivation is the foundation of the Donor Lifecycle, and it begins the moment a supporter subscribes to your email list. As we look at the year-end season, the three months prior present an opportunity to build a relationship, introduce key programs and facets of your mission, and demonstrate impact to grow empathy, trust, and interest in your cause.

Ultimately, if done right, cultivation matters because it can result in more supporters donating. But don’t take our word for it. Look at the data below.

## What We Found

**Cultivation leads to better fundraising results.**

Only 89 of the 204 organizations we studied sent communications during the three months before their year-end campaigns kicked off.

By Revenue	# of Orgs Who Sent Emails 3 Mos. Prior	Total Number of Orgs per category	Percentage of orgs from their respective category
Less than \$500,000	21	66	32%
\$501,000 - \$999,999	11	28	39%
\$1.1M - \$3M	34	65	52%
\$3.1M - \$10M	11	22	50%
\$10M - \$50M	12	19	63%
\$50M+	0	4	0%

The organizations with revenue ranging from \$3M and below sent a total of 74% of the emails.

It’s unclear why organizations with less revenue seemed to engage more, but it did make us wonder if larger organizations are facing deliverability challenges. This can occur for a variety of reasons such as sender reputation, engagement, the volume of your email sends, blacklisting, etc. The larger your list grows, the more important it is to ensure you’re following best practices for email sending, as well as using an email service provider that helps you avoid these pitfalls. A great example is HubSpot – they’ll automatically flag which email contacts are unengaged so you don’t oversend to them, as well as ensure your emails are sent in smaller batches so that they’re less likely to get flagged as spam.

Ahead of year-end, each participating organization identified a goal amount to fundraise toward. Out of the 204 organizations we studied in 2021, there were 44 nonprofits that both didn't meet their goals and didn't send any emails in the three months before. Of these 44 organizations, 38 not only failed to meet their goal, they failed to meet it by 10% or more.

**Bottom line – if nonprofits did not prioritize cultivation, then they were less likely to reach their fundraising goals.**

## Personalization wins every time

If cultivation emails are all about relationship building, then we want to ensure both what we send and how we send it reflects this.

### Message Type

There are three major approaches to communication:

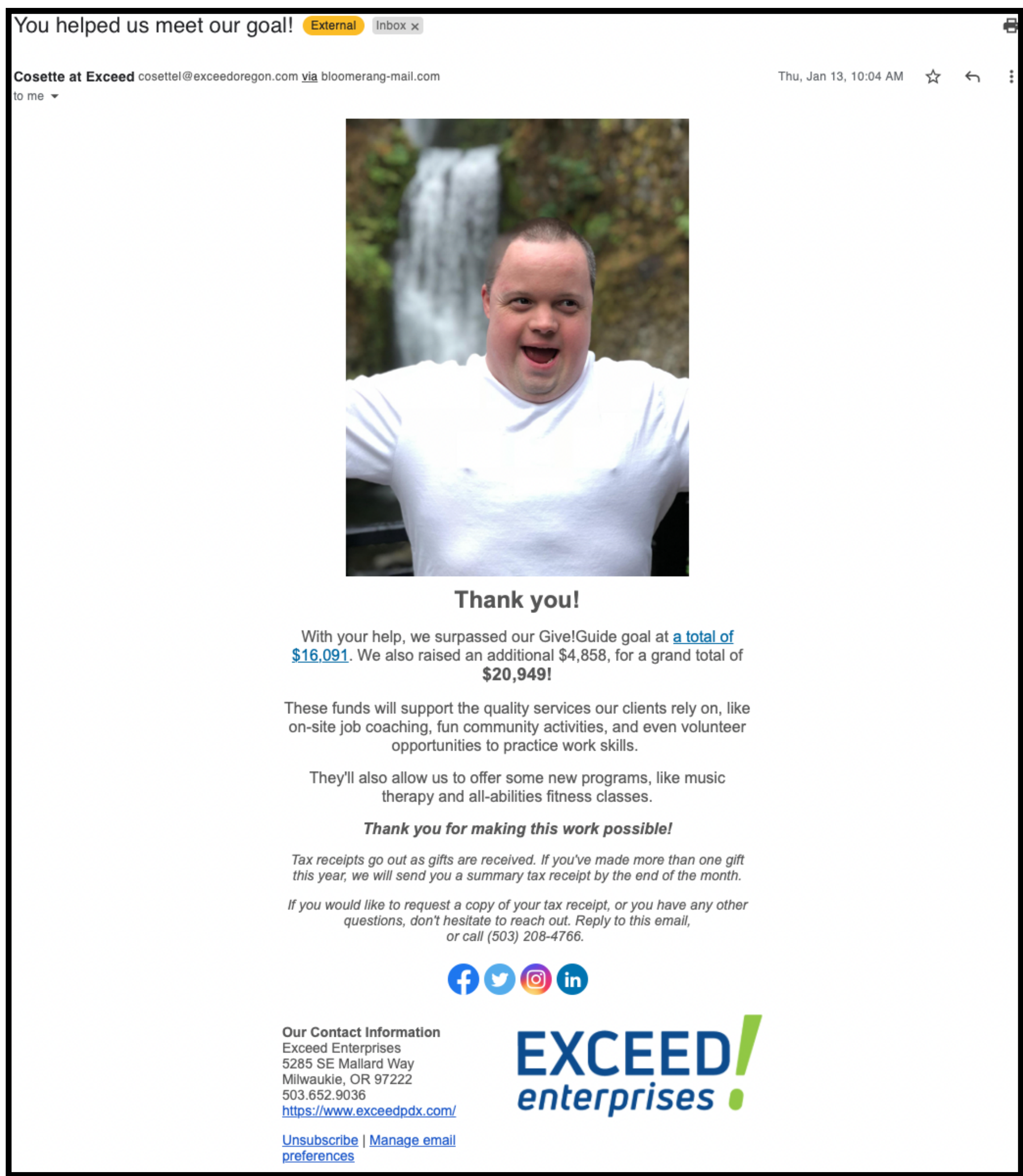
1. ***Heroism*** – Centers the donor in the communication, helping them understand the impact they can make.
2. ***Kinship*** – Invites the donor into greater community, leveraging shared values and interests.
3. ***Empathy*** – Helps the donor better understand and develop care and concern for the cause.

We talk about these in some more detail in our [Email Impact Guide for Nonprofits](#), but let's see these in action outside of a solicitation season.



## Heroism

Exceed Enterprises serves Oregonians of diverse abilities through a variety of different services. We think they're pretty rad. In this simple thank you email, they center their supporters in the celebration and point them to the impact those dollars will make.





## Kinship

Check out this example of an awesome kinship email. They do a great job in their newsletter of highlighting the community of volunteers who are invested in the health and well-being of the Columbia Gorge.

Friends volunteers stewards through all seasons

External

Inbox x

Friends of the Columbia Gorge

friends@corgefriends.org via mailchimpapp.net

to me ▾

Tue, Jan 18, 3:14 PM


☆

↶

⋮


View this email in your browser

FRIENDS OF THE COLUMBIA GORGE



January 2022 eNews

Volunteers Steward Through All Seasons



Stewardship volunteers work to remove fencing from Friends of the Columbia Gorge's Cape Horn preserve. (photo: Sarah Skelly)

Last year, through spring and summer, rain or heat, Friends volunteers equipped with gloves, tools, sanitizer, and masks have sustained stewardship progress in the Gorge. Invasive weeds never seem to take a pause, but the hard work of committed volunteers has helped us keep pace, despite limits on in-person engagement.

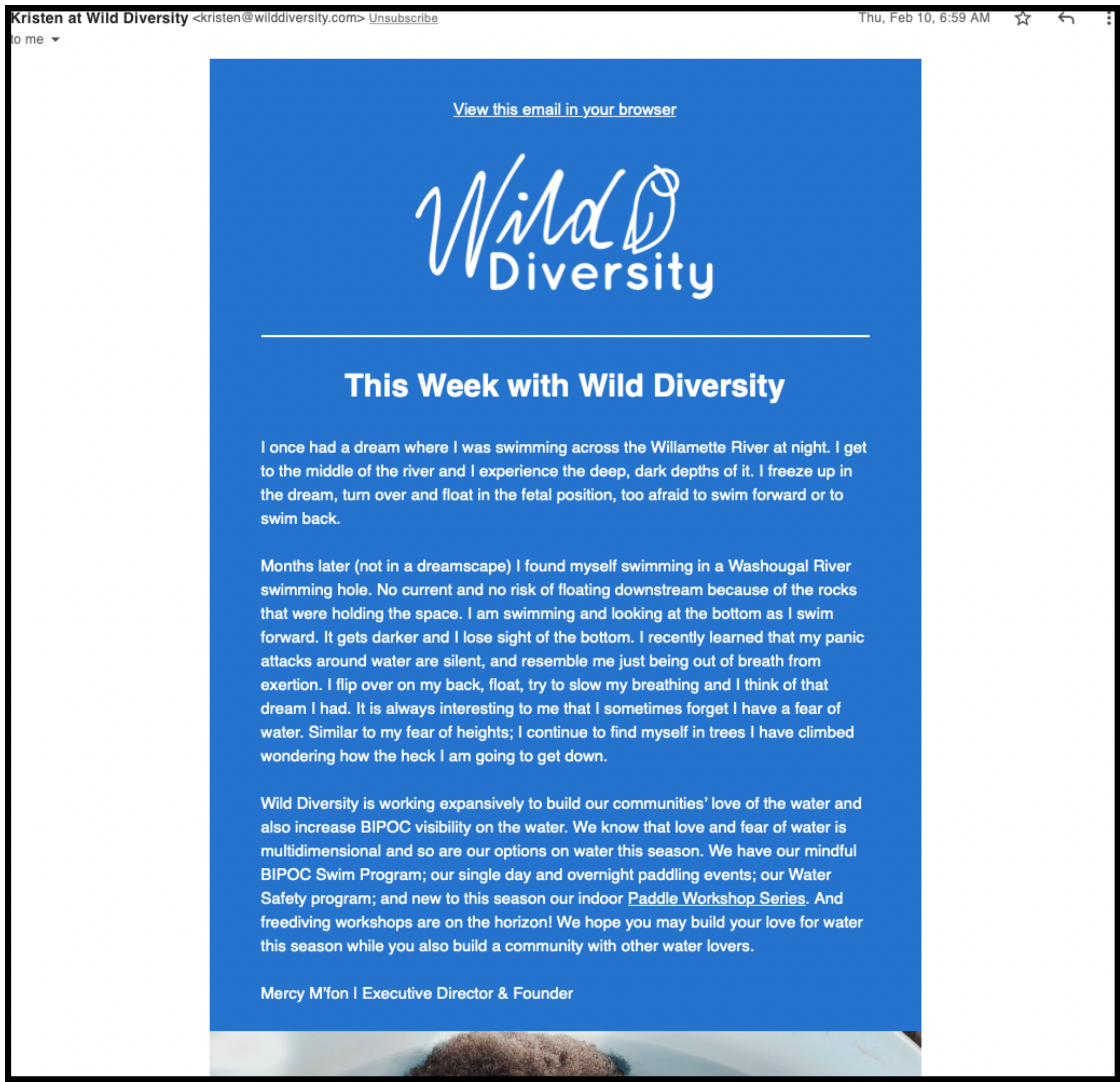
Our volunteer crews have been pulling and planting at a dozen sites, from

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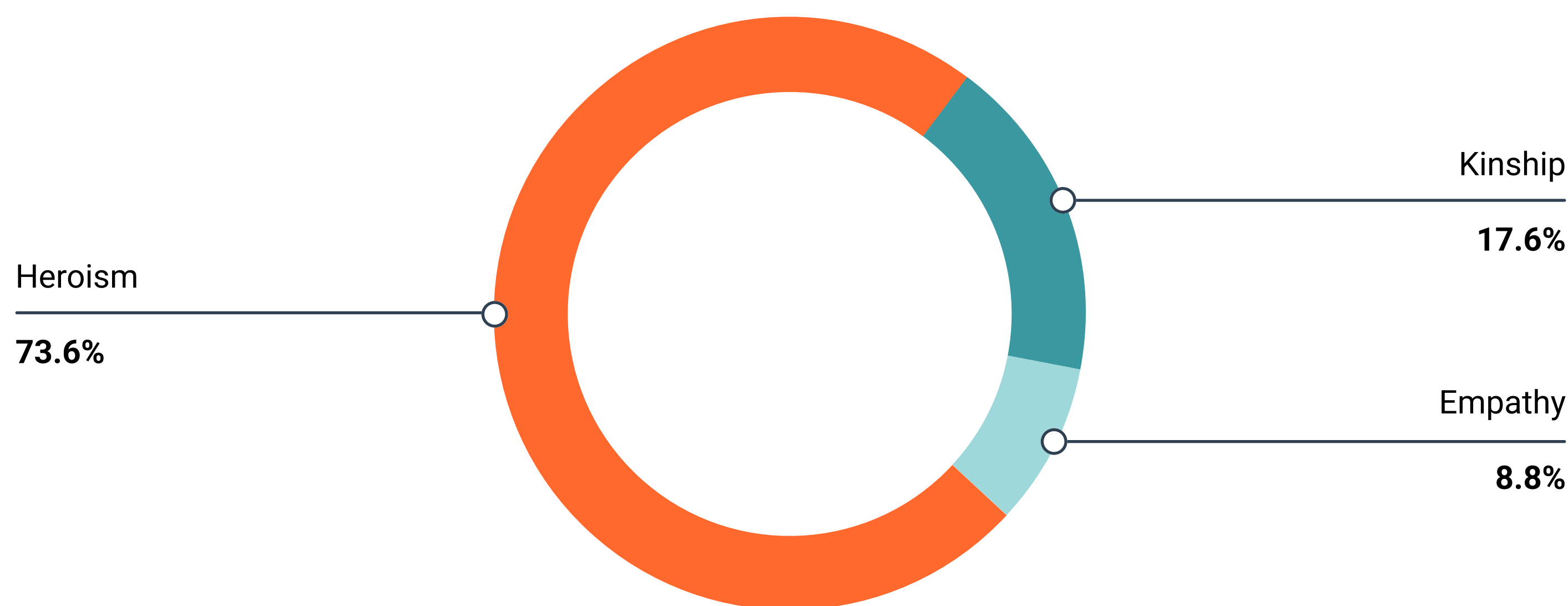
## Empathy

We love our friends at Wild Diversity and the amazing work they do to help create a personal connection to the outdoors for Black, Indigenous, all People of Color (BIPOC) & the LGBTQ2S+ communities. In this newsletter, their Executive Director and Founder shares their personal experience with water as a way to help supporters deepen their empathy for why Wild Diversity’s work in outdoor adventures and education is so important.



All three are impactful, but for cultivation emails, we definitely want to ensure a healthy number of kinship and empathy focused messages.

What we found, however, is that out of the 447 emails sent, 74% used heroism.



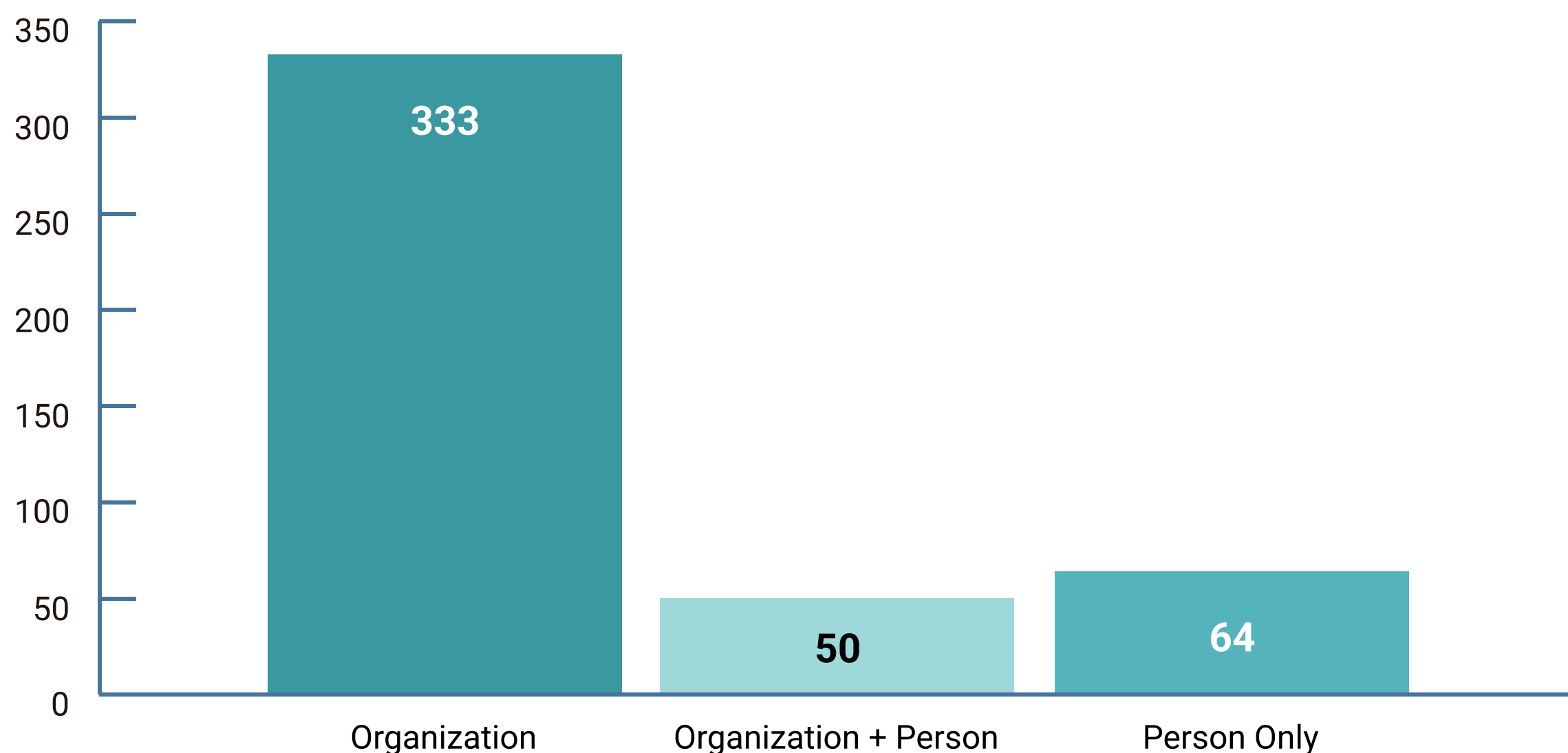
Did this hurt organizations as they prepared for a big fundraising season? Not necessarily, but we'd definitely recommend not overlooking the longer-term value of creating more kinship and empathy focused messages. As the relationship with your donors and prospective donors deepens, the likelihood of their response to any ask you make grows.

### Sender of Email

Only 14% of emails came addressed from an actual person. The overwhelming majority came from the organization's name itself.

There are moments when sending from the organization makes sense, but sending from a person is an overlooked opportunity that can help get more eyes on your messages and deepen the connection folks have with your organization.

### Number of emails sent by sender type



Things like a newsletter make sense to come from your organization. If you're sending specific updates about a single subject, however, consider sending your next one from a person and crafting it as a note from you to a specific individual on the other end to see how it performs!

### **Designed vs. Plain-Text Email**

Most organizations preferred using a designed email during the cultivation stage – 98% of the nearly 450 emails we looked at in fact. And that makes sense – visually interesting content can be an effective engagement tool to get a supporter interested in learning more.

But there's also a case to be made for increasing some of the plain text emails we send – that is, emails that are stripped down to essentially just be text, with maybe just a small logo at the top or in your signature. These emails feel more personal because they're just like the ones you send between coworkers and friends – no frills, just a core message delivered with warmth.

Plain text can be a great way to share information about a specific subject, or perhaps even something timely or of greater importance. Make sure to not overuse this approach, but even increasing by 5% should be safe based on what we saw come through.



## Cultivation Recommendations

1. **Start early.** There is a huge value in establishing meaningful relationships with your supporters ahead of a campaign or asking period. Three months is a great amount of time to cultivate credibility and trust. This helps to demonstrate that you care as much about the individual as the donation.
2. **Increase the number of emails that come from a person's name** instead of the organization.
3. Find a few more places to **leverage plain-text emails**, but in the meantime, be sure to leverage stories of impact that center real people, including photos where appropriate.
4. **The content in the emails matters.** Emails should be personalized, personable, and vary between asking for help/donations, informing people about the cause, and asking donors/subscribers more about them.

It isn't enough to send tons and tons of emails before you ask someone for money.

**The emails must also be informative, serve a purpose, and be relatable/personalized towards each potential donor or subscriber**, or else no one is going to read them or pay attention to what they say.



# Solicitation

03



## Why It Matters

Months of planning and preparation led to an amazing couple months of generosity for those we studied to the tune of \$7.8 million\* in online revenue!

Unlike the Cultivation and Stewardship sections of this report, we’re going to focus this section on the performance of the asks made during year-end itself. As shared earlier, to learn more about what email communication looked like over these two months, be sure to check out our [Email Impact Guide for Nonprofits](#).

As you take a look at these results, consider how your organization compares to these benchmarks and what goals it can help you set looking forward to the 2022 season or in setting other goals!

## What We Found

### Fundraising Results by Category

Nonprofit Category	Total Online Revenue Raised	Average Gift Amount	Average # of Gifts Per Org
Animals	\$651,425.23	\$120.57	540
Civil & Human Rights	\$743,302.94	\$92.50	335
Community	\$580,739.99	\$96.63	286
Creative Expression	\$532,694.13	\$97.38	219
Education	\$656,049.28	\$126.33	289
Environment	\$968,456.63	\$102.62	377
Health	\$520,781.75	\$123.97	263
Home	\$637,364.01	\$146.08	242
Human Services	\$1,205,170.86	\$140.41	268
Hunger	\$740,741.40	\$125.00	395
Oregon Cultural Trust	\$608,770.75	\$254.18	n/a
Grand Total	\$7,845,496.97	\$120.67	

Orange highlights indicate top performers in each category.

\* Giving was tracked through organizations’ participation in Willamette Week’s 2021 Give!Guide campaign



Let’s first zoom out.

Four categories saw above average total revenue – Human Services, Environment, Civil & Human Rights, and Hunger. There’s a lot that could factor in here though. Some categories were likely of particular interest due to current events – things like the Covid-19 pandemic and national and local politics.

Each category also had a different number of organizations, impacting the total amount each could raise – but maybe not as much as you'd think. The Animals category had 10 organizations in it total and raised just as much as Education with nearly double the number of participating organizations.

But something else that stood out?

The three categories of nonprofits that sent the highest number of cultivation emails also raised the most money.

- 1. Human Services accounted for 17% of emails sent before year-end
- 2. Environment accounted for 17% of emails sent before year-end
- 3. Civil and Human Rights accounted for 18% of emails sent before year-end

By Category:	Number of organizations in each category that sent cultivation emails	Percentage of organizations out of those 89 that sent cultivation emails
Animals	4	4%
Civil and Human Rights	16	18%
Community	8	9%
Creative Expression	13	15%
Education	5	6%
Environment	15	17%
Health	4	4%
Home	4	4%
Human Services	15	17%
Hunger	5	6%
Total	89	

Of course, we can't fully attribute their success to cultivation emails. The other factors we've already mentioned played a big role too. But we can be confident that building and maintaining ongoing relationships with your donors and subscribers makes a big difference when it comes time to make an ask.

It's also important to take a look at average gift amounts and average number of gifts.

Several top performing categories had lower average gift amounts, but collectively saw the greatest revenue due to the volume of gifts. It's a good reminder that while we should be mindful about how much effort we put toward procuring smaller gifts – we shouldn't ever underestimate them!

## Solicitation Recommendations

### **Give before you ask.**

Cultivation is essential and makes your solicitation campaign more impactful as donors will have already developed a connection with you and your mission.

### **Stay updated on trending topics in the news and world.**

These can and will most likely affect the results of your campaign, so it is important to know what other external factors you are competing with and to adjust your effort and expectations accordingly.

### **Benchmark against these numbers carefully.**

There are a lot of factors at play that you can't see in each of these categories, and there's a lot happening in your organization too! In setting goals, be thoughtful about things like age of your organization, current donor and subscriber numbers, consistency of communication in recent months, etc. Your fundraising revenue is unlikely to jump overnight, but you can certainly make some great progress in building momentum!

# Stewardship

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## Why It Matters

Alright, we're not done just yet! The solicitation period is over – whether during year-end or any other time of year – and now it's time to steward the relationship being built and the gift that was given.

As someone who works in a nonprofit setting, we're sure that you give generously to your organization and others. When you make a gift, what do you expect to happen after?

It's likely that you'll want to know more about how your gift is making an impact, how the organization is doing as a whole, and the organization's vision for the future, both short and long term.

This is the expectation of most donors, which necessitates our continued investment in ongoing communication. As we continue to build relationships, we not only have the ability to continue making asks, but we can also grow someone's investment in our cause through increased giving amounts and monthly donations.

## What We Found

We found that in the three months after year-end, only 84 of the 204 participants sent follow-up emails.

Once again, the three categories of organizations that raised the most total dollars – Environment, Human Services, and Civil & Human Rights – also sent the most follow-up communication through email. While there's no guarantee of how many donors they'll retain or upgrade because of this, we can say with confidence that they stand the best chance to accomplish this compared to their peers from other categories.



By Category:	# of organizations	Percentage of organizations that sent an email within 3 months after the year-end campaign concluded
Animals	3	4%
Civil and Human Rights	12	14%
Community	12	14%
Creative Expression	12	14%
Education	5	6%
Environment	12	14%
Health	4	5%
Home	7	8%
Human Services	14	17%
Hunger	3	4%
Total	84	

Just as during the cultivation period, it’s wise to consider different approaches to communication, including email type, design, and message type.

Email Type

At this point we’ve used the word cultivation a lot – and while it’s certainly a season or approach to caring for your donors, it’s also a description of a type of email. Rightfully so, half of the emails we got in the three months after year-end focused on relationship-building without making any kind of ask.



The other half of emails focused on making an ask for either a general one-time gift, a one-time gift toward a specific campaign, or an ongoing, monthly gift. While we certainly want to be mindful to prioritize cultivation type emails, making an ask following a giving season is totally appropriate!

When you’ve completed a big giving campaign like year-end, our recommendation would be to focus your solicitation emails toward those who gave as an opportunity to upgrade their support by becoming a monthly giver, and take care to not overdo your general one-time asks.

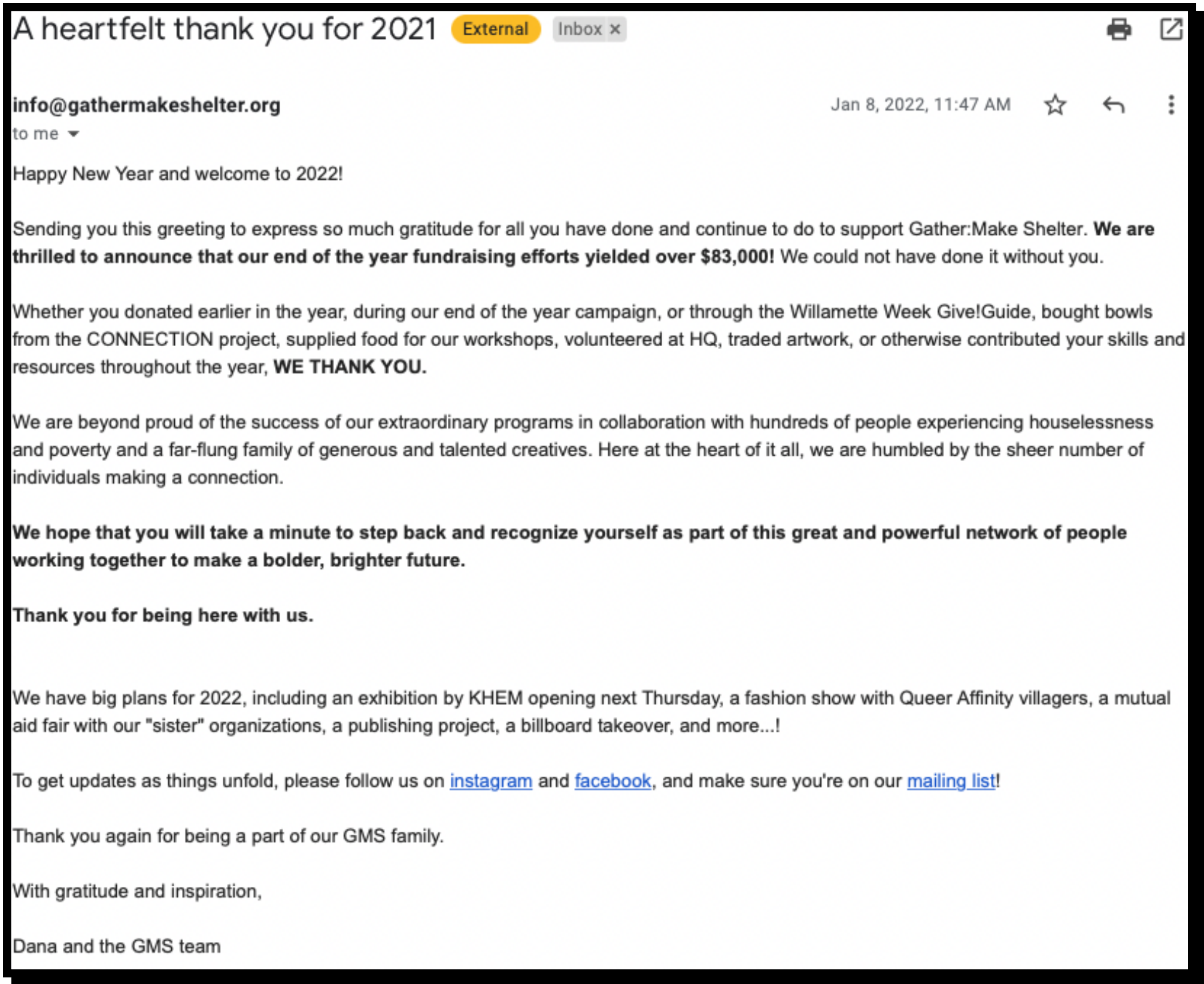
Confirmation emails acknowledge gifts that were given. For this report, this included notes that included giving statements from the prior calendar year. These types of messages are typically automated by your donation platform. Our primary recommendation here is to ensure they’re as personalized as possible. Also consider linking donors to places where they can see their gifts at work on your website.

### Design

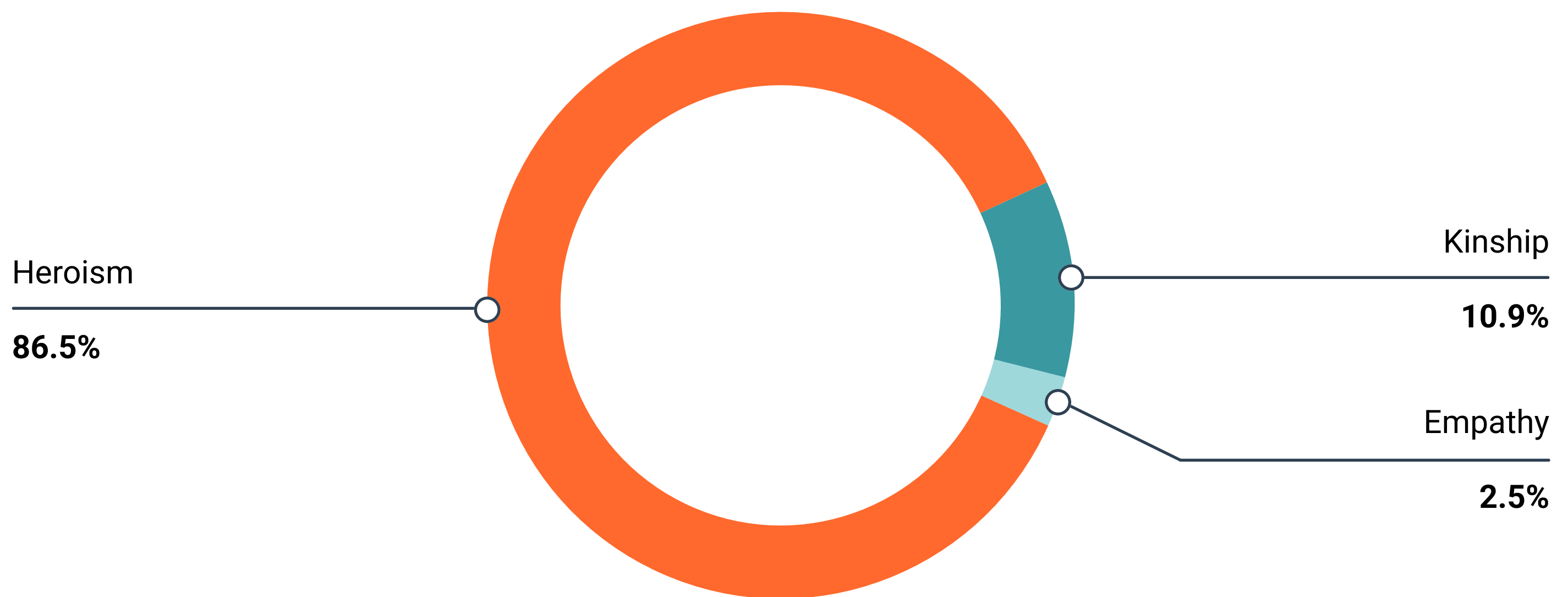
Just as during the cultivation period, we found only a small handful of emails that were plain text during the stewardship period.

As we shared before, plain text is particularly helpful in making key asks, but there are some cultivation opportunities as well. Consider using it for special thank you notes from key leaders in your organization, as well as part of an upgrade strategy to inspire your one-time donors to become monthly givers.

Check out this awesome example from Gather:Make:Shelter as they say thank you to supporters after a successful year-end fundraising season:



## Message Type



In the three months post-year-end, we saw an increase in the number of emails utilizing heroism messaging, that is, communication that centers the donor as the hero making impact possible.

This approach makes sense in crafting a thank you, but be mindful how you pivot toward more community and care for the cause building. Our goal is to build a long-term relationship with these donors, and overuse of heroism eventually becomes noise. Visualize this pivot as more of an arc – start by expressing gratitude for their individual contribution, move toward explaining the collective impact of all donors, then really drive home the transformation happening in specific situations, whether that’s individual people, animals, or the environment.

By taking your donors on a journey, you’ll help them better understand and be able to advocate for your cause.

## Stewardship Recommendations

### **Continue ongoing communications after your campaign ends and/or a donor gives.**

Increase your chances at potential future relationships as well as potential future investments by continuing to engage. Not only will this help your donors prioritize you for financial support, but it will also empower them to advocate to others on your behalf.

### **There is no better time than now to ask donors to become more involved – either through additional one-time gifts or giving monthly.**

Continue to cultivate the relationship, and consider implementing an upgrade strategy to retain these donors. This can be done through an automated email series on most email service providers, or at minimum, through ongoing communication with key incentives that make it clear why they should donate or choose to support you on an ongoing basis.

### **After a monetary ask, express gratitude.**

This feels like a given, but consider the appropriate number of thank yous from individuals in your organization to let donors know you appreciate them and that you are dedicated to stewarding their gift with great care. Just like above, this can encourage donors to give again in the future or even become monthly donors!



# Key Takeaways

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**1** Keep up the communication before, during, and after your year-end campaign!

**2** Diversify email content, senders, and design. This will help to make the message more engaging and personalized for your donors.

**3** Stay up to date with trending topics in the world and pay attention to how they might affect your campaign.

**4** Express gratitude to donors.





## About CauseMic

Founded in 2013, CauseMic is a Portland-based consultancy, built of a closely-knit crew of skilled strategists, specialists, and project managers, working collaboratively to create the best possible technology and marketing solutions for our mission-driven clients.

We are proud to work with incredible nonprofits and social impact organizations all over the country, supporting veterans, the environment, social justice, and more.

Since 2019, CauseMic has been proud to serve as the official nonprofit training and education partner for Willamette Week's Give!Guide to help participating organizations maximize their year-end fundraising efforts. All 204 organizations we studied participated in the 2021 season.

To learn more, visit [causemic.com](https://causemic.com) or email us at [crew@causemic.com](mailto:crew@causemic.com).