Don't transactionalize your donors!

Why CRM automation is quietly costing your charity its best supporters

The $1,000 email I'll never forget

A few years ago I made a $1,000 donation to a charity I admired. The work they were doing in their community mattered to me, and I was glad to contribute.

Then the auto-reply hit my inbox. *"Thank you very much for your generous donation, Mr. Farr. Would you consider supporting us monthly for $5, $10, or $15 a month?"*

I was heartbroken.

What that charity didn't realize: they had a sophisticated CRM that fired an automated drip campaign the second any donation came in. The system was streamlined and efficient. It also told me, the donor, exactly how the charity saw me — as a transaction, a budget line item. I had given them something they could process, not someone they actually knew.

I never gave to that charity again.

The trap most charities don't see

Charities work hard. The people running them are doing more than most outsiders realize, on less than they should have to. To get more done with less, charities adopt the same digital tools businesses use: marketing automation, drip campaigns, CRM-driven sequences.

The problem is that those tools were built for a sales funnel — a deliberately constricting pathway that drips donor dollars out the bottom. The whole shape of the system assumes the relationship is transactional.

> *"When people feel squeezed and used as a commodity, a transaction line item, they end up distancing from the charity. I don't want that for you."*

When that shape gets pointed at a donor who just gave from their surplus to a mission they care about, the donor feels it. They feel squeezed. They feel like a commodity. Then they leave — usually without telling you why.

What's actually going on

The donor's question after they give is not *"Will you ask me for more?"* It's *"Did this matter?"*

Automated systems can't answer that question. By their nature, they treat every donor the same — same template, same follow-up, same call to action. The donor reads *"Dear donor, would you like to give again?"* and concludes (correctly) that the charity doesn't actually know who they are or what their gift accomplished.

Personalization at the human level is what donors are looking for. Not *{first_name}* merge tags — actual recognition that a specific gift came from a specific person who chose this charity, on purpose.

What asking again should look like

I'm not saying never ask for more. Charities need recurring donors; the math doesn't work otherwise. The problem isn't the ask. The problem is the ask *without context*, the ask that comes before any acknowledgment of what just happened.

Here's the contrast. If I had donated $20 and a charity wrote back with *"thanks for the $20 — would you consider $20 a month?"* — I would feel seen. The amount makes sense for what I gave. The charity knows roughly who I am and is asking from that knowledge.

What I got instead, after donating $1,000, was a templated $15/month ask fired by an automation that didn't know me at all. It was cheaper than what I had given, and it told me the charity hadn't paused for even one human moment between my gift and their next ask.

Asking again works when the ask is grounded in what actually happened between you and that specific donor. It fails when it's the same ask you send to everyone, on the same day they gave.

The fix

- **Audit your CRM-driven email automation.** Anything that asks for more money in the same email that thanks a donor for giving — turn it off. That's the single biggest source of *"why did they leave?"* without explanation.
- **Decouple gratitude from the next ask.** Send the receipt. Send a thank you. Then wait. The next thing the donor hears from you should be about *their* gift, not your next campaign.
- **Personalize the response with specific impact.** Within a few days, follow up with a note that does one thing: tells the donor what their specific gift accomplished. *"Your $1,000 provided 850 meals to 27 families this month."*
- **Mind the cumulative view.** For larger or recurring donors, add the stacking total — *"Over the past three years, your gifts have helped fund X."* The compound impact is often why they keep giving.
- **When you do ask again, ground it.** Reference their last gift, what it did, and ask in a way that respects the relationship rather than the system's funnel logic.
- The point isn't to do less work. It's to do work that keeps donors close — instead of work that processes them and watches them drift.

Brandon Farr is the founder of Goodfinity (www.goodfinity.ca, www.goodfinity.com), software that helps charities stop losing donors by automating personalized impact reports. After 18 years as a charity donor through his construction company, Brandon built the tool he wished his charities had used with him.