

# HOW TO TREAT YOUR DIRECT MAIL DONORS DURING A DISASTER



By Steve Maggio  
President/Chief Creative Officer  
DaVinci Direct

HURRICANE HARVEY slammed into the Gulf Coast on August 25 with all the fury that was predicted of this Category 4 storm. Entire communities, including most of Houston, were swallowed by the surging torrent. Along with the heartbreak of shattered families and horrible loss of life come dire long-term economic consequences.

Now, hot on the heels of Harvey, comes Hurricane Irma, which could make landfall this weekend in South Florida as a Category 5 storm. The area is bracing for the worst, but depending on the storm's path, could leave an even greater human toll, and billions of dollars of additional damage.



As always in time of disaster, Americans are responding generously – and will continue to respond – not only with money, but also by opening their hearts, homes and communities to those who have suddenly become homeless.

Our best hope is that communities can be rebuilt, individuals and families can recover in mind, body and spirit – and that, as a nation, we can continue to improve upon the shortcomings in disaster preparedness that were so tragically brought to light when Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans in 2005, and caused a catastrophic loss of more than 1,800 souls.



But for those of us engaged in fundraising for missions that do not involve disaster relief, at the end of it all – indeed, in the midst of it all – comes the inevitable question:

How will these massive national disasters affect my own fundraising program?

## STAY THE COURSE

The advice we've given to our clients at DaVinci Direct is to keep doing what you do best. Focus on your core donors – and after all is said and done, they will be with you through the worst of it.

Unfortunately, those of us in fundraising have learned some hard lessons over the years. We



experienced the destructive effects of Hurricane Katrina, the tsunamis in South Asia and Japan – and “Superstorm Sandy.” Prior to that, the 9/11 terrorist attacks and anthrax contaminations kept average Americans in fear in their own communities – and wary of their own mailboxes.

So what have we learned from recent history?

These catastrophes hurt several “non-disaster relief” mailers. For some, the initial impact on fundraising performance seemed devastating. But by the end of the year, many found their faithful donors stepping up to the plate. People still gave that year – but they did so later in the year.

When disasters hit, some decide to “wait out the storm” by delaying drops. In some cases this makes sense. But if you mail frequently, you cannot afford to wait long. If you miss a donor mailing, you are sure to lose revenue. And what happens when another disaster – like Irma, occurs?

In the wake of Hurricane Harvey, some of our clients suppressed zip codes impacted by the storm.





## TO THINE OWN SELF BE TRUE

One thing we learned in the aftermath of 9/11 is that donors resent the idea of a charity “capitalizing” on a disaster. We saw a great deal of “patriotic” offers after 9/11 from charities whose central missions had nothing to do with patriotism. In many cases, these approaches backfired.

I had a few clients who were eager to add inserts to address 9/11 in

their mailings. They did it with the best of intentions. They felt that they needed to express their horror and solidarity at a time when our nation’s very psyche was shaken to the core. But each time we tested it, we found that the insert depressed response.

So if your organization has nothing to do with hurricane relief, don’t dwell on it. However, in your year-end mailings, you may mention that, due to the outpouring of support for relief efforts, you are “coming up short of year-end goals, and need help from our most loyal friends to continue serving those who need us.”

If your organization does play a supporting role in disaster relief, your social media, e-appeals and website provide the perfect platforms to express the part you play in recovery. But don’t

drastically change your donor mail strategy in response to disaster. Of course, you won’t mail into affected areas. But depending on how often you mail and where your donors are, it may not be wise to change anything, without running the risk of making a bad situation worse.

Sure, you may have to take your lumps. Better prepare staff and board members for the worst. But don’t lose faith in the people who have been loyal to you, time and again. Communicate with them, nurture them, but stay true to your central mission — and they will stay with you.

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**DAVINCI**  
DIRECT



Steve Maggio  
508-746-2555, ext. 511  
steve@davinci-direct.com  
[davinci-direct.com](http://davinci-direct.com)