I’m a winter person. I love wearing layers of clothes, walking through snowdrifts, spying piles of the white stuff outside the window on a bright frosty morning. I love the smell of winter: the piercing pure crispness that wakes you up, finding your core in milliseconds. There’s a freshness and a splendor about winter that her verdant sister seasons can’t compete with—despite the fact winter marks a barren time. But the winter solstice on December 21 comes quickly, a day my ancient ancestors worshipped as the time when the dark half of the year begins to give way to the light, as winter starts to retract in anticipation of spring’s rebirth.

There’s another reason I like the winter: this time of year, giving to nonprofits and NGOs increases around the world. Many nonprofits raise a large proportion of their annual revenue in the fourth quarter. According to Blackbaud’s 2013 Charitable Giving Report, “The last three months of the year account for more than a third of the year’s overall giving (33.6% to be exact).”

Some grantors, especially family foundations, follow this pattern of giving. Many family foundations meet just once a year to review proposals and make funding decisions—and that meeting often occurs at the around the winter holidays. Vanguard Charitable recently posted a blog for their donor advised fund or private trust members with the opening line, “Year-end is a popular time to recommend grants to nonprofit organizations.” Furthermore, and this is my experience as well, Vanguard recommends their donors give “unrestricted grants to charity…Not only will a general operating expenses purpose allow for a faster review process, it also permits your favorite charity to use the funds in a way it deems most beneficial.” What a lovely statement.

Have you matched your fourth quarter grant strategy to your year-end appeal? Consider some tips for reaching out to small and family foundations at the end of the year as part of your annual giving campaign.

- Find the grant makers in your list who traditionally send grant checks (especially unsolicited) at the end of the year. In your proposal, increase your ask based on last year’s gift. Be purposeful in your approach, and it will yield bigger gifts.

- Segment grant makers by location, priority, amount, historic giving, etc., just as you do (or should be doing) with your annual campaign lists.

- Keep the proposal letter short, like 2-3 pages max. Mirror the annual appeal letter in layout, design, and graphics—keep it in the same family of publications.
Winter Gifts

By Heather Stombaugh, MBA, GPC

- Use a balance of emotion and statistics. Outcomes are still important in short proposal letters! Yes, people give to people, so don’t forget those personal stories. But pathos isn’t the only leg in the three-legged stool of persuasive argumentation.

- Focus on your grantors. There are parallels to the annual appeal letter here. According to Stacy Jones in a September 2013 article on Philanthropy Journal, “This letter should be about donors' impact. It should empower someone to give to you. Many organizations spend more time stressing all of the needs rather than showing the impact donors have. Being too needy can turn off donors who might feel overwhelmed if the need is too great and that their possibly small contribution won't make much of a difference.”

- Make the letter personal and authentic. Have your CEO sign it by hand. Add a personal handwritten note of holiday wishes or thanks.

- Remember: competition is high. Hone in on your alignment with the funder(s). And as always, cultivate!

- Integrate your annual appeal and fourth-quarter grant seeking with other communication activities, like social media campaigns and special webpages, to support giving. These efforts will reinforce your coordinated year-end appeal.

Winter has its flaws, sure, but it has its blessings: time with family, holiday parties, the Rudolph TV special, time off work (let’s be honest), comfort food. And it’s a time when we can help generous donors and grant makers understand the meaningful effect their gifts make in the lives of real people in our communities.

I wish all of many blessings and much joy this holiday season!