# Words that Work: Fundraising Edition



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Founded in 1905 to stop the use of exotic feathers in the millinery industry.

Oversees 23 state & regional offices, 41 nature centers, 405 chapters.

We protect birds and the places they need.

Audubon




Full-service fundraising and communications group co-located in DC and New Orleans.

Unique in its use of research to inform strategies and messaging.

Partnered with National Audubon Society since 2018.

# Session Agenda

**What you can expect from your time investment.**

## 01

**Text as a Data Source**

One of your most valuable data sources doesn't look like you expect.

## 02

**Comparative Linguistics**

What it is and how it works.

## 03

**Practical Applications**

Some use cases for text analysis and comparative linguistics.

## 04

**Audubon Case Study**

Audubon's work to tackle connection, inclusion, and engagement through text analysis.

## 05

**2-Year Direct Mail Study**

OG's study of words and phrases that work – and don't- in direct mail campaigns.

## 06

**What You Can Use Today**

Some clear tips you can take back to your shop and use today.




Every organization has boat loads of unstructured text data that goes unexamined.

What if we could harness that data to provide qualitative insights that improve our metrics?

# AI technology can help us create new data inputs for fundraising.

Applied AI turns unstructured text into a new quantifiable stream of information.

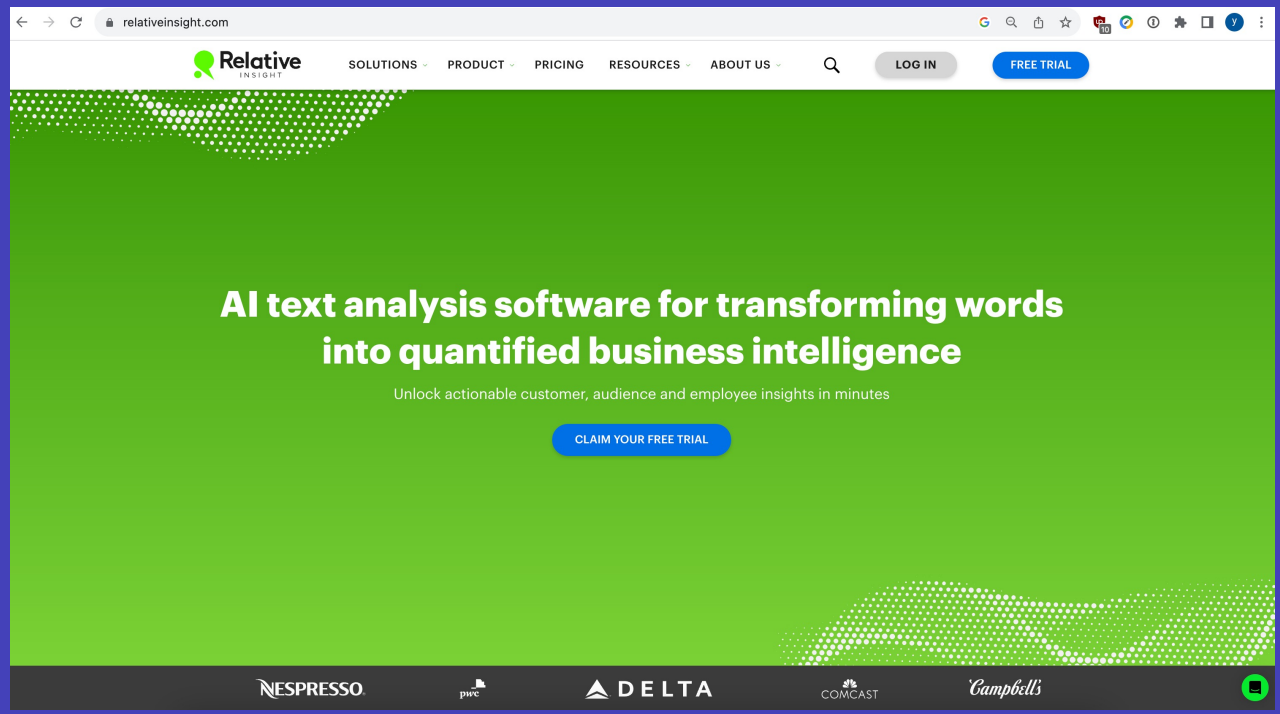
Section Two

# Comparative Linguistics

# Comparative Linguistics

The fundamental technique of comparative linguistics is to compare phonological systems, morphological systems, syntax, and the lexicon of two or more language sets using the comparative method.

Relative
INSIGHT






## Cocaine Bear vs Ant-Man: Analyzing opening weekend audience reactions

27 Feb 2023



## Pumpkin spice wars: Starbucks vs. Dunkin’ Donuts

Section Three

# Practical Applications

# What fundraising problems could comparative linguistics help us solve?

- Quantify the gap between how supporters talk about your work and your organization talks about that same work.
- Quantify themes in donor services conversations and match them to outcomes.
- Compare our own consistency over types of communications.
- Analyze our communications against an REI filter.
- Analyze why our efforts work- or don't- and what language may be predictive.



# National Audubon Society Case Study

# Audubon's linguistics study had three clear fundraising goals.

1. **How do we quantify the language supporters use to talk about birds and Audubon vs. Audubon's own language?**
2. **Can we identify language, topics, or phrases that predict fundraising success?**
3. **Can we find any gap between what engages supporters and what Audubon chooses to focus on?**

# Six different text datasets were used for Audubon's study – half were Audubon-generated and half were supporter-generated.



# 19x

Supporters use the term “love of birds” 19x more than Audubon does in its web copy.

# Finding #1:

## Love of birds

Audubon supporters speak passionately about their **love for birds**, and the part birds play in their daily lives.

They tell **detailed and emotional stories** about their connections with birds, while the website is less likely to engage them in emotional terms.

*...there were loads of Gambel's Quails scooting about, and I was particularly excited to photograph the males with their beautiful patterns and whimsical feather cap. A male was proudly strutting by when I noticed this beautiful female perched atop a cholla cactus skeleton. She appeared to be presenting for the male and splayed her feathers out across the top of the cactus. The combination of textures, patterns, and subtle tones against the vibrant green background showed off her subtle beauty.*

**Audubon donor**

# 28x

Direct marketing efforts that discussed specific birds (most notably hummingbirds) were 28x more likely to be successful than those focusing on birds in general.

# Finding #2:

## Specificity

Talking about **specific birds** is a predictor of greater engagement across any channel – mail, digital, or social.

# Specificity

**Common birds** drive even higher levels of interest, but specificity is key.











# Specificity : Web vs. Mail

*A recent study by Audubon scientists shows that climate change has affected the distribution of birds of all kinds over the last century – but for some birds that depend on certain habitat, like wetland and grassland birds, habitat loss has a bigger impact.*

*The Allen's Hummingbird has had its population cut by half in the last 50 years. And if conservation efforts do not improve, they are expected to face another 50 percent decline.*

# 6x

Supporters were 6x more likely to mention specific actions they take to protect the environment.

## Finding #3:

## Everyday actions to fight climate change

Supporters talk about their **individual actions** to combat impacts of climate change.

Audubon's language on website around **climate is broad** and not active.

# 4.5x

Supporters were 4.5x more likely to use emotional language to discuss their passion for birds.

## Finding #4:

## Emotional Misalignment

Audubon is more likely to discuss our **mission and initiatives**.

Supporters are coming from a more **emotional**, nurturing place and **values driven** place.

# 2.6x

Mail campaigns that focused on specific impacts rather than broad policy were more successful.

# Finding #5:

## Specific Impacts

Being **specific about impacts of climate change** and how we are protecting birds and the environment drive engagement.

Communications that talk more broadly about climate crisis are less successful

# Specific Impact

**Successful campaigns** are more likely to mention issues like extreme climate events, but not climate change or climate crisis which are not well received**.**





# 34x

Supporters are 34x more likely to use the words “political” or “politician” when discussing bird protection than the Audubon website.

# Finding #6:

## Political Engagement

Supporters are **deeply engaged in political movements** to protect the environment and nature.

*“...I think about the power that Audubon has for political change...”*

*“I go to rallies...I’m a green card holder...I’m excited to use to use that vote for pro environment candidates...I’ll sign petitions...”*

**Focus Group Transcripts**



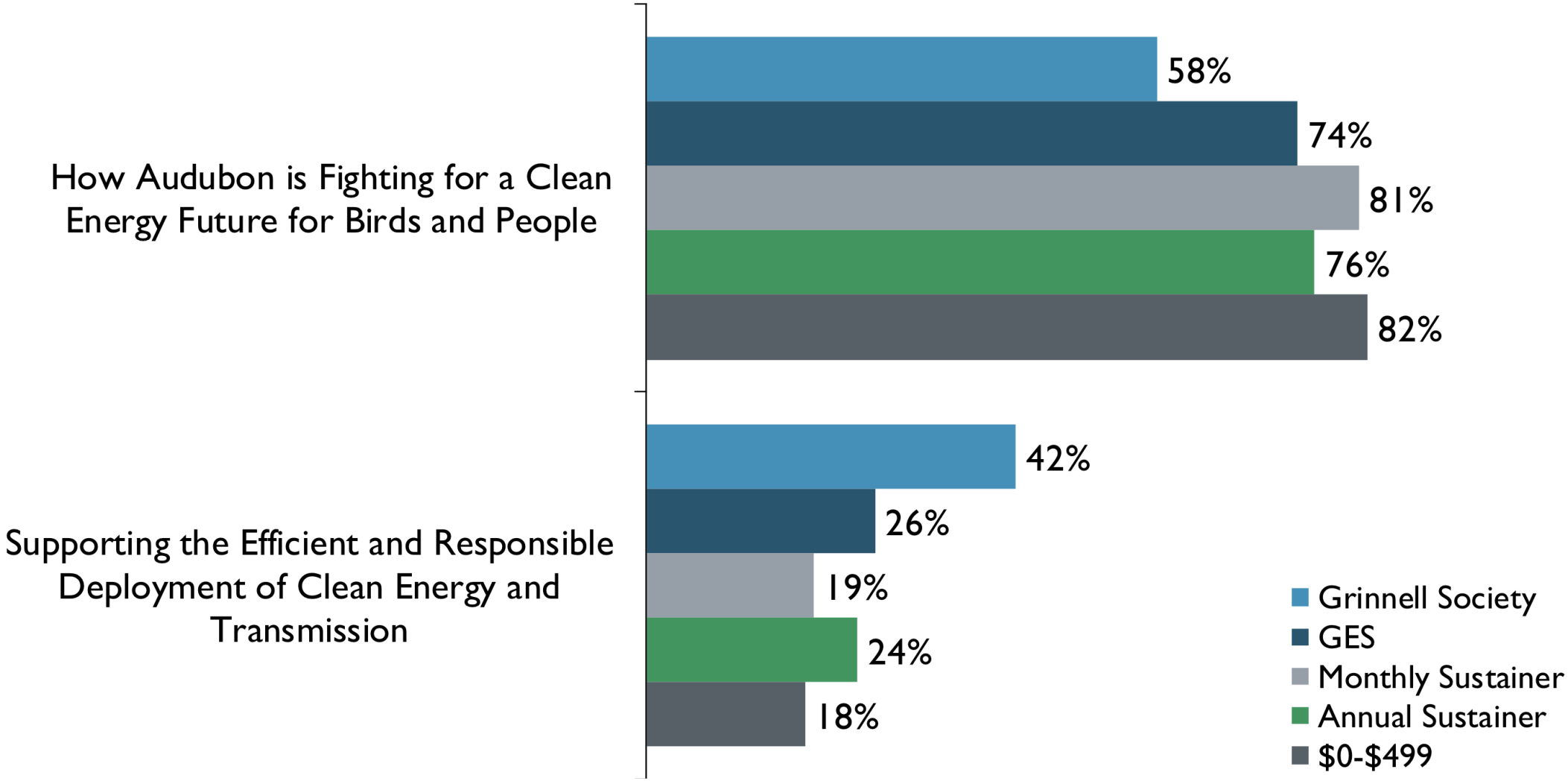
Supporters are **infinitely** more likely to use plain language to describe Audubon's scientific expertise.

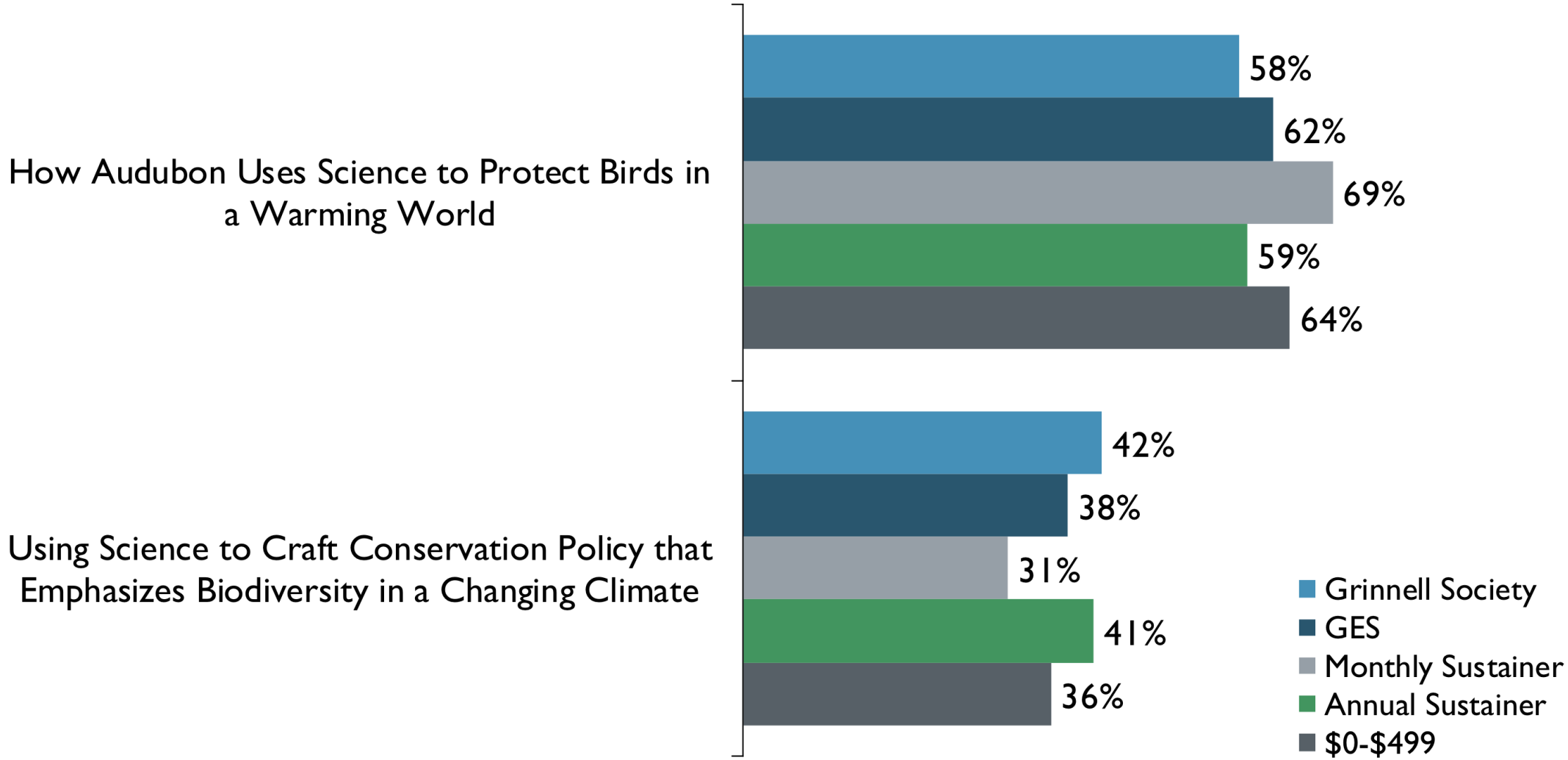
# Finding #7:

## Digestible science

While supporters see Audubon as leaders in using science to protect birds, the language supporters use is much less scientific.

Demonstrates the importance of infographics, data visualization and basic summaries to enhance engagement & understanding.


How Audubon is Fighting for a Clean Energy Future for Birds and People
58%
74%
81%
76%
82%
Supporting the Efficient and Responsible Deployment of Clean Energy and Transmission
42%
26%
19%
24%
18%
Grinnell Society
GES
Monthly Sustainer
Annual Sustainer
$0-$499


How Audubon Uses Science to Protect Birds in a Warming World
58%
62%
69%
59%
64%
Using Science to Craft Conservation Policy that Emphasizes Biodiversity in a Changing Climate
42%
38%
31%
41%
36%
Grinnell Society
GES
Monthly Sustainer
Annual Sustainer
$0-$499

# 3x

Campaigns that use 1st person plural and include donors in the solution are 3x more successful.

# Finding #8:

## Inclusion Matters

**First person plural** (we) language increases engagement 3x.

Talk about **“birds in your community”**.

# 5x

Supporters are 5x more likely to discuss engaging young people than Audubon's web copy.

# Finding #9:

## Youth Engagement

**Young people engaged** in bird protection is a frequent topic for supporters.

Opportunity to align with the future-facing vision of supporters, who want to see this as a **multi-generational movement**.

*“I get little glimmers of hope from younger generations coming through. But what worries me is that by then its going to be too late.”*

*“I think its important to engage with younger people about this and to make them understand what’s happening.”*

**Focus Group Transcripts**

0

Supporters describe themselves as “outdoor enthusiasts.”

# Finding #10:

## Misaligned in describing supporters

Audubon is more likely to use terms like ***outdoor enthusiast*** when describing supporters.

Supporters describe themselves as ***bird watchers*** or ***nature lovers***.


Eager
Awe
Knowledge
Donor
Interactive
Engaged
Empathetic
Louisianian
Compassionate
Lifelong
Focused
Outdoorsy
Creative
Committed
Future
Open
Writer
Educated
Lucky
Curious
Docent
Doer
Wildlife
Attentive
Adventurer
Persistent
Connected
Volunteer
Seeking
Thankful
Quiet
Truthful
Fulfilled
Responsible
Faithful
Serious
Intelligent
Care
Reliable
Proud
Excited
Admirer
Hopeful
Busy
Believer
Motivated
Rare
Learning
Naturalist
Know
Part
Amateur
Activist
Lover
Satisfied
Generous
Solution
Happy
Determined
Environment
Staff
Concerned
Dedicated
Sincere
Passionate
Wonder
Deliberate
Aware
Donations
Amazed
Active
Health
Appreciative
Hard
Science
Informed
Rational
Enlightened
Love
Cautious
Passive
Joy
Working
Grateful
Thinker
Joiner
Willing
Considerate
Worry
Peace
Driven
Beauty
Environmentalist
Learner
Helpful
Birder
Support
Leader
Feeder
Enthusiastic
Joyous
Involved
Conservationist
Ecologist
Novice
Scientist
Walker
Member
Advocate
Observer
Outrage
Inspired
Interested
Joyful
Sharing
Climate
Binoculars
Angry
Conservation minded
Nature
Licensed
Cranes
Webinars
Center
Watching
Nerd
Glad
Distant

# 2024 AUDUBON CALENDAR CONTRIBUTION FORM

☐ **YES!** As a passionate bird lover, I want to continue protecting birds — like those featured in my 2024 Audubon calendar — and the natural places they need. I am enclosing a generous gift of:

☐ $HPC24 ☐ $1.5HPC24 ☐ $2HPC24 ☐ $2.5HPC24 ☐ Other $_____

This amount or more would really help!



Audubon
225 Varick Street, 7th Floor
New York, NY 10014

As a bird watcher and a passionate nature lover, you know how much birds urgently need your help. As I write, peak fire season is underway in the West. If years past are any indication, the months ahead could be filled with intensifying wildfires, unearthly orange skies, and smoky days devoid of birdsong.

# Audubon's Takeaways

- Invaluable exercise in understanding donors – how they talk about Audubon's work, versus how we talk about our work.
- Align our language (how we talk about our work, how we describe our supporters)
- How we make broad issues digestible and relevant.
- A lesson in specificity – specific birds, specific actions, specific impacts.
- What's appropriate for different audiences (when more emotive, colorful language is appropriate).

Section Five

# Longitudinal Direct Mail Copy Study

O'BRIEN • GARRETT

# Can we identify specific language that is predictive of fundraising success?

## Study Methodology

- Closed System AI/Comparative Linguistics Model
- Ingested direct mail copy across the agency from a two-year window
- Success was defined as meeting or exceeding the campaign's income budget
- Views at the top level, by issue, program type, ask type, and organization
- Conducted more in-depth studies with individual organization.

# The Scope

These studies included very large sample sizes.

- Campaigns from 2021 – 2023.
- Additive donor file sizes for the mailings analyzed topped 3 million .
- More than 300 individual campaigns.
- Millions of words ingested to the analytics engine.



**3,000,000** Donors touched



**8**

**Campaign Types**



**300+**

**Mailings**



**15**

**Organizations**



**3**

**Donor Levels**



**2,589,000**

**Words analyzed**

# Types of Organizations

| Advocacy | Humanitarian | Institutional | Environmental |
|---|---|---|---|
| 25% | 25% | 15% | 35% |
| Acquisition | Acquisition | Acquisition | Acquisition |
| Renewal | Renewal | Renewal | Renewal |
| Appeal | Appeal | Appeal | Appeal |
| Midlevel | Midlevel | Midlevel | Midlevel |
| Cultivation | Acknowledgements | Acknowledgements | Acknowledgements |

**A note on crisis giving:**

Some organizations were part of high-profile moments, like Ukraine or the overturning of Roe v. Wade. In those cases, we have validated overall findings with and without crisis-window efforts to eliminate bias.

# 33.4x

matching opportunities are 33.4x more likely to be successful.

## Finding #1:

## Matches are a statistical powerhouse

Next time your boss asks if matches really matter...



## MS Project 2 | Campaign Analysis Part 1

Analysis of how successful communications differ from unsuccessful ones and how communications vary by campaign type.

I want to learn about **'SUCCESSFUL'** compared with **'NOT SUCCESSFUL'**

Show me: differences | **frequencies** | similarities

between: topics | grammar | phrases | **words** | emotion

SUCCESSFUL Words | NOT SUCCESSFUL ...

deadline ×

Insights

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| ☐ deadline | 0.01% | Vs. | <0.01% | |
| ☐ deadlines | 0% | Vs. | 0% | |

# 16.5x

Successful packages articulated specific needs 16.5x more often than unsuccessful packages.

## Finding #2:

## Be specific about needs

Tangible, basic needs work best, but even with less tangible needs specificity matters.

*“the Alto Mayo protected forest spans a stunning 450,000 acres of the Peruvian Amazon and provides local communities wit shelter, food, water, and livelihoods*”

# 8.8x

Referring to a donor's kindness and compassion is nearly 9x more likely to be successful.

## Finding #3:

## Kindness counts.

Emphasize kindness, generosity, and caring. Love wins.

*"the good news is that your love and kindness can help in a big way.."*

*"people around the world are hopeful that you will share your kindness today"*

# 8.4x

Packages mention some type of family are more successful.

## Finding #4:

## Family matters

**Human families, animal families, even communities**, yield the same result. Family triggers an emotional response.

Packages that talk about families are strongly predictive of success.

# 6.5x

Packages that celebrate beneficiaries are more likely to find success.

## Finding #5:

## Beneficiaries are the heroes

Copy that emphasizes the **strength and resilience** of beneficiaries – whether human or animal- is more likely to succeed.

Emphasizing **positive traits**, vs. victimizing, leads to greater connection.

## Strength and resilience

AD

Adopting language highlighting strength, endurance and resilience of in-need communities is 6.5x as likely to be successful.

**ACTIONS:**

**Differences:** SUCCESSFUL **Vs.** NOT SUCCESSFUL **6.5x**

6

Custom

Topics **x1.4 Strong**

Phrases **x7.1 enormous coura...**

Grammar

Words **x12.4 enduring**

**x6.7 resilience**

**x5.1 resilient**

I am confident that displaced families will continue to face the toughest days of their lives with courage, resilience and hope.

Emergencies OE T... | Letter | U4U

by acting right now, you can deliver: fleece blankets to warm and comfort displaced children longing for home sleeping mats so grandparents don't have to sleep on the hard ground hygiene kits to keep families healthy and prevent disease clean water an...

No Winter Acq Test | Letter | U4U

as a member of the Henry Kendall society, you will make a major impact on this critical work by ensuring we can stand strong and take decisive action to create a stronger, more resilient future.

HKS Invite Appeal | Letter | UCS

with your continued support, we can continue to restore these resilient ecosystems.

Appeal | Brochure | CI

your generosity, your commitment, and your trust have given us the strength to be fearless and ambitious providers and protectors of sexual and reproductive health care.

Renewal Control | Insert | PPFA

and we're going to need every ounce of that strength to push back against the extremist assaults on our fundamental freedoms.

Acq Control State ... | Letter | ACLU

# 3.2x

3rd person plural language is more effective.

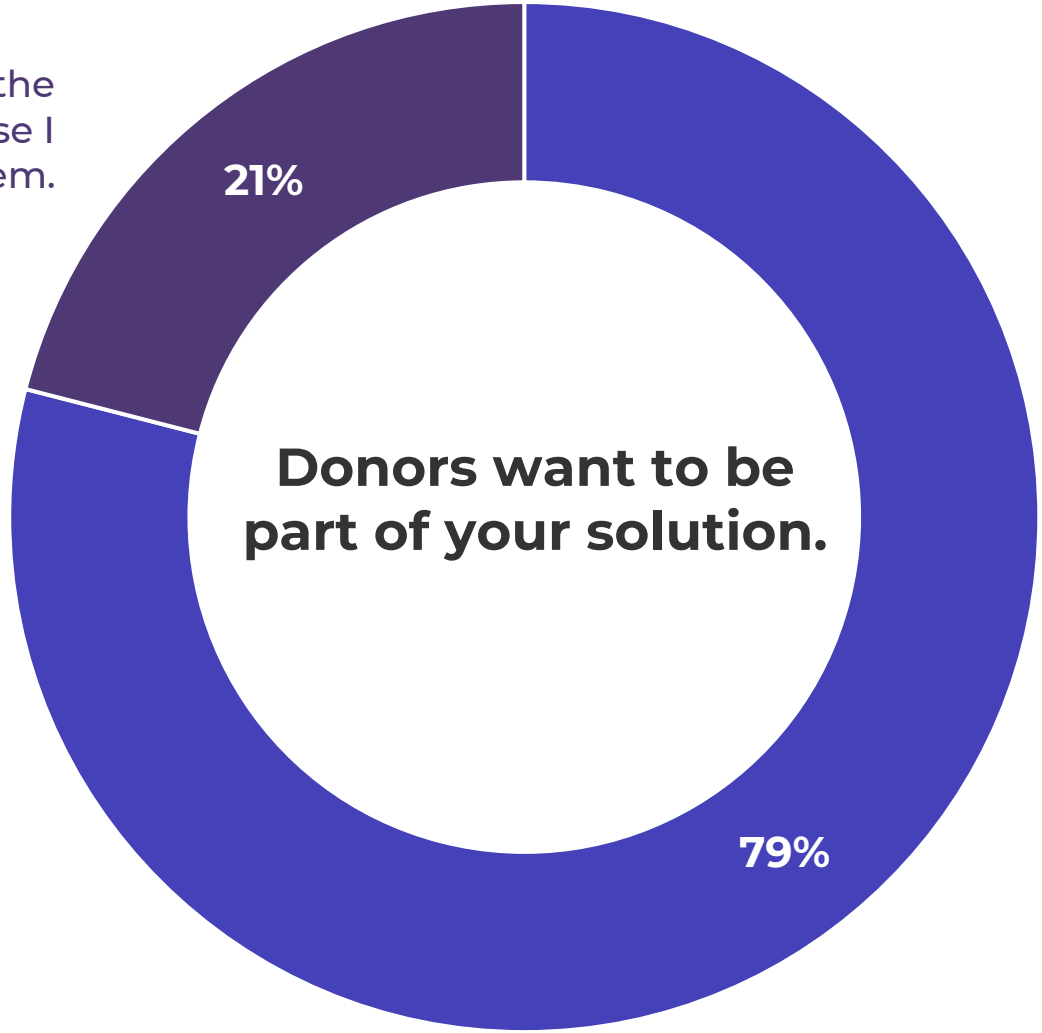
## Finding #6:

## There is no “I” in team.

Your donor is part of your team, so make sure your language includes them.

3rd person plural language emphasizes that the donor is part of your journey.

I give money to organizations like the National Audubon Society because I want them to solve the problem.




I give money to organizations like the National Audubon Society because I want to be a part of the solution.

# 2x

Packages that directly address the donor are 2x more likely to succeed.

## Finding #8:

## Address the donor directly.

Donors need to see themselves in the narrative. 1st person singular – **YOU** can make a difference.

Go beyond “your gift” to emotionally engage the donor.

# 1.8x

Successful packages are more likely to provide historical context.

## Finding #7:

## Tell your story.

Donors need to know **why.** Why your organization is the right vehicle. Why the problem you're trying to solve exists today.

Provide **context** for how we got here and why we know we can succeed.

*“..we just need to get them to those displaced in Ukraine, those who fled to neighboring countries and those in other regions where they can be put to immediate use.”*

# -2.5x

“Trying” language is less likely to yield successful results.

## Finding #9:

## There is no try.

Highlighting non-specific efforts and the fact that the organization is “trying” to make change may be **too vague** to be impactful.

# -2.5x

“Trying” language is less likely to yield successful results.

## Finding #9:

## There is no try.

Highlighting non-specific efforts and the fact that the organization is “trying” to make change may be **too vague** to be impactful.



*“You can drive our efforts forward even more…”*

*“Politicians are trying to control our bodies…”*

*“Trying to stay ahead of the turmoil…”*

# -1.4x

Packages that state “the truth” are 1.4x less likely to be successful.

## Finding #10:

## You can overplay the “truth.”

Take care when stating beliefs or values as truths.

Using **absolutist** or **superlative** language can backfire, especially with audiences that are already a retention risk.

*“The truth is, whatever the outcome, you and xxx need to get to work.”*

*“I truly believe our country is at a high-stakes moment of truth.”*

*“We are fact-based in a fact-challenged world.”*

Section Six

# What you can do today

# Be more specific about your audience, your goals, your actions, and your asks.

Across the whole study, specificity rises to the top as the most impactful action we can take.

# Audit your communications for ways to include your donor in the story.

Remember they want to be part of the solution, not an afterthought.

# Remind donors that they are kind and caring people.

Validate their instinct to be generous.

# Get to know your donors so that you can better align your messaging.

There may be important nuances in language that are creating distance.

# Where appropriate, make your language more conversational and less formal.

Don’t dumb it down, make it more accessible.







# Thank You

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# Next Up!

## Closing General Session!



Rhea
**Wong**

A leader in the New York nonprofit community and a frequent educational commentator in the media who has raised millions of dollars in private philanthropy and is passionate about building the next generation of fundraising leaders. and author of *"Get That Money, Honey"*.

BRIDGE CONFERENCE
PRODUCED BY DMAW AFP

#Bridge23 AMPLIFIED