

RUN OF SHOW CONSULTING

The 8-Week Donor Journey Email Series

Pre-Event Content Framework for Nonprofit Galas

10 production-ready emails | 8 Weeks leading to your Gala

Subject lines, preview text, voice notes & Director's Notes included

Replace all [BRACKETED] fields with your organization's specifics

Audience First | Every Time

How to Use This Series

This is a production-ready email series mapped to the 8-week donor journey framework. Every email has a specific job in the arc — read the Director's Notes before customizing copy.

Bracketed fields [LIKE THIS] are your placeholders. Replace every instance before scheduling.

CRITICAL PRODUCTION NOTES:

- The beneficiary story is serialized across Emails 3, 6, and the live event. Do not resolve it early. This keeps an open loop that we want the audience to remember.
- Email 9 (48-Hour) exists for logistics clarity — keep it clean and short.
- Email 10 (Day-Of) should feel like a note, not a broadcast. Resist the urge to add more.
- Never lead with the ask. That job belongs to Act 3 in the room.

Series Cadence at a Glance

01	8 Weeks Out	Save the Date — You belong in this room.
02	7 Weeks Out	The night this organization was born
03	6 Weeks Out	Meet [BENEFICIARY FIRST NAME]. (Story Drop #1 — The Wound)
04	5 Weeks Out	Why we asked [HONOREE/SPEAKER NAME] to be there
05	4 Weeks Out	One number. Most people get it wrong.
06	3 Weeks Out	What happened to [BENEFICIARY FIRST NAME]. (Story Drop #2 — The Turn)
07	2 Weeks Out	What [DAY OF WEEK] night actually looks like
08	72 Hours Out	Three days. A note on what it means to show up.
09	48 Hours Out	Tomorrow night. Here's what you need.
10	Day-Of (Morning)	Tonight.

EMAIL 01

8 WEEKS OUT

You're invited. But first — a question.

Alt Subject: This isn't your typical gala invitation.

Preview Text: What if one night could change everything for [CAUSE AREA]?

Voice Mode: Director on Set

Story Type: Identity

Dear [FIRST NAME],

Every year, thousands of galas happen in cities like yours.

Cocktail hour with friends, Rubber chicken for dinner. A slideshow or video. The ask for a donation.

[EVENT NAME] is not that night.

On [DATE], [ORGANIZATION NAME] is bringing together a room of people who believe — as you do — that [MISSION IN ONE SENTENCE, HUMAN-SCALED].

This isn't an evening about sitting in a ballroom watching a program happen to you. Feeling like you can't leave because you bought a ticket.

This is more than an evening with a name.

It's an evening about what becomes possible when the right people are in the same room, pointed in the same direction, at the same moment for the right cause.

You're invited because you belong in that room.

[DATE] | [VENUE NAME] | [TIME]

Formal invitation to follow shortly. For now — save the date.

With purpose,

[EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR / HOST NAME]

[ORGANIZATION NAME]

P.S. Over the next few weeks, I'm going to introduce you to someone whose life is different because of people like you. Stay with me.

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

The P.S. is doing heavy lifting. It creates a serialized story promise — a reason to open the next email. Do not skip it, and do not move it into the body. The postscript placement signals it's personal, not promotional. Also: resist the urge to include logistics in Email 1. The formal invitation handles that. This email is a scene-setter, not a fact sheet.

It is short on purpose. Over the next 7 weeks, you will give them everything; for now, you just want to get them interested. Let them ask questions - that's engagement.

EMAIL 02

7 WEEKS OUT

The night this organization was born

Alt Subject: It started in a moment. It ended in a decision.

Preview Text: [ED NAME] has never told this story publicly. Until now.

Voice Mode: Peer to Peer

Story Type: Origin

Dear [FIRST NAME],

I want to tell you something I rarely talk about.

[2–3 SENTENCES: The founding moment. Not the polished mission-statement version — the human version. The moment before the organization existed. First person, present tense, specific location and detail.]

Example: "Seven years ago, I was standing in [LOCATION] watching [SPECIFIC SITUATION]. I remember thinking: someone should do something about this. Then I realized — that someone was me."

[ORGANIZATION NAME] was born from that moment — not from a strategic plan, but from an inability to look the other way.

That's still why we do this.

[EVENT NAME] isn't a fundraising event dressed up in centerpieces. It's a gathering of people who share that same inability to look the other way.

What happens in that room on [DATE] will fund [SPECIFIC PROGRAM] for [TIMEFRAME] — and the people it reaches will never know your name. But they'll live differently because you were there.

More soon. I wanted you to know where this came from.

With purpose,

[SIGNATURE]

P.S. Next week, I want to introduce you to [BENEFICIARY FIRST NAME]. Their story is why we do everything we do.

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

This is the Origin story — and it must come from the Executive Director or most senior voice available. First person is non-negotiable. The goal is to humanize the institution before the donor ever steps foot in the room. Avoid polished language. The rougher and more specific this story, the more it works. The P.S. continues the serialized beneficiary thread — keep it consistent across all emails until the story is resolved in the room.

EMAIL 03

6 WEEKS OUT

Meet [BENEFICIARY FIRST NAME].

Alt Subject: I almost didn't tell you this story.

Preview Text: This is the story we tell in the room. You're getting it early — but not all of it.

Voice Mode: Director on Set

Story Type: Identity / Wound (Act 1 — No Resolution)

Dear [FIRST NAME],

I want you to meet [BENEFICIARY FIRST NAME].

[3–4 SENTENCES: Paint the picture of who this person is — their world, their circumstances, their Struggle. DO NOT resolve the story. End at the moment before the organization entered their life. Give them dimension: one detail that makes them a full human being, not a charity case.]

Example: "[BENEFICIARY FIRST NAME] was [AGE] when [SITUATION]. [ONE SPECIFIC DETAIL ABOUT THEIR LIFE]. At the time, [ORGANIZATION NAME] wasn't on their radar — and they weren't on ours.

I'm going to stop there — for now.

Because I want you to be in the room when you hear the rest of this story. It deserves to be heard in person.

What I will tell you: [BENEFICIARY FIRST NAME] is one of [NUMBER] people we've worked with this year. Each of them has a version of this story. Each reached a moment when the path forward wasn't clear, but each has succeeded thanks to you.

That's what your presence at [EVENT NAME] on [DATE] supports.

Not a program. Not a line item.

A person with a name, a future, and a story that isn't finished yet.

See you [DATE].

[SIGNATURE]

P.S. I'll have more on [BENEFICIARY FIRST NAME]'s story closer to the event. It's worth the wait.

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

This is the single most important email in the series. It introduces your emotional protagonist. The discipline here is restraint: do not resolve the story. End the email at the moment before the organization entered their life. Donors who arrive at the gala already knowing what went wrong will be primed to receive the what changed when it happens live. That emotional payoff is worth more than a complete story in an email. Give them a person, not a case study.

EMAIL 04

5 WEEKS OUT

Why we asked [HONOREE/SPEAKER NAME] to be there

Alt Subject: The person I most wanted in that room on [DATE]

Preview Text: This is who's taking the stage — and why it matters.

Voice Mode: Peer to Peer

Story Type: Success / Identity (Honoree/Speaker Arc)

Dear [FIRST NAME],

When we were planning [EVENT NAME], the first question I asked wasn't "what's the program?"

It was: "Who should be in this room?"

That's how I ended up calling [HONOREE / SPEAKER NAME].

[2–3 SENTENCES: Why this person. Their connection to the mission — personal, professional, or both. What they represent to the community you serve. Keep it specific, not reverential.]

[HONOREE / SPEAKER NAME] agreed to be part of this evening not because they were asked, but because [PERSONAL CONNECTION TO MISSION — one sentence, specific].

They'll be joining us on [DATE] — and what they're going to share is the part of the evening I'm most looking forward to.

The full program is coming together in a way that I think will surprise you. Not with production value — with honesty.

Because that's what the room deserves.

[DATE] | [VENUE] | Cocktails at [TIME] | Program at [TIME] | Attire: [ATTIRE DESCRIPTION]

If you haven't confirmed your seat yet, now's the time.

[RSVP BUTTON / LINK]

[SIGNATURE]

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

Social proof arrives here — but not through a bio or a title. The framing must be relational: why THIS person, for THIS cause, on THIS night. If the honoree or speaker has a personal connection to the mission, lead with that. A famous name with no emotional connection to the cause is weaker than an unknown with a deep one. Include the RSVP link {RSVP can also be to purchase a ticket} for the first time in this email — the curiosity about the speaker creates natural motivation to confirm attendance. Name-dropping is good but only if it's relevant. Just to have {celebrity ____} speak breaks trust and creates a show, not a purpose.

EMAIL 05

4 WEEKS OUT

One number. Most people get it wrong.

Alt Subject: The question nobody asks about nonprofit galas.

Preview Text: What does a dollar actually do? Here's the real answer.

Voice Mode: Provocateur

Story Type: Teaching / Process

Dear [FIRST NAME],

Here's a question most event organizers never answer clearly:

What, specifically, does the money from this night do?

The answer that usually follows involves percentages, overhead ratios, and language that sounds like an annual report.

I want to give you a different answer.

[HUMAN-SCALED IMPACT STATEMENT — one specific number, one specific outcome, one specific population.]

Example: "\$[AMOUNT] provides [SPECIFIC SERVICE] for [BENEFICIARY TYPE] for [TIMEFRAME]. Last year, the funds raised at [PRIOR EVENT] made that possible for [NUMBER] people."

That's it. That's the math.

Not cost-per-outcome. Not program efficiency ratios.

Facts tell, and stories sell. Keep the facts to a minimum because most people will not remember them.

[NUMBER] people. [SPECIFIC IMPACT]. Because a room full of people chose to show up.

The goal for [EVENT NAME] is \$[FUND-A-NEED GOAL]. That's not an abstract number. That's [WHAT IT FUNDS — translated back into human terms, not budget language].

You'll hear more about this in the room. But I didn't want you walking in on [DATE] wondering what your investment actually does.

Now you know.

[SIGNATURE]

P.S. The story I started telling you about [BENEFICIARY FIRST NAME]? It continues in next week. And the ending is not what I expected.

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

This email answers the unspoken skepticism question: 'Is this organization actually effective?' The Provocateur voice earns its keep here — you're calling out the way impact is usually communicated (opaque, bureaucratic) and replacing it with something human. The fund-a-need goal appears for the first time, translated immediately into human-scaled outcomes. Do not use budget language. 'Provides 90 days of housing for 12 families' is better than 'supports our shelter operations program.' The P.S. re-engages the beneficiary story thread.

EMAIL 06

3 WEEKS OUT

What happened to [BENEFICIARY FIRST NAME].

Alt Subject: I promised I'd finish the story.

Preview Text: This is the part I save for the room. You're getting a preview.

Voice Mode: Director on Set

Story Type: Epiphany / Turn (Act 2 Setup)

Dear [FIRST NAME],

A few weeks ago, I introduced you to [BENEFICIARY FIRST NAME].

I left the story at [MOMENT OF UNCERTAINTY — briefly restate the struggle from Email 3 in one sentence]. I told you I'd finish it closer to the event.

Here's what I can tell you:

[PARTIAL RESOLUTION — show that the mission works, but withhold the most emotionally powerful detail for in-person delivery. Give the "what changed" but NOT the full "belonging" beat (the ultimate transformation). 3–4 sentences.]

Example: "[BENEFICIARY FIRST NAME] connected with our team in [MONTH/YEAR]. What happened over the next [TIMEFRAME] is something I've watched happen dozens of times — and it still surprises me every time. [ONE SENTENCE: the direction of change without the full outcome.]"

I'm going to save one part of this story for the night of the event. Because some things are better experienced in a room full of people who care.

What I want you to know right now: [BENEFICIARY FIRST NAME]'s story isn't unique. It's representative. There are [NUMBER] more like it this year alone.

[DATE] is three weeks away. I'm glad you'll be in the room for the rest.

[SIGNATURE]

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

This is the turn — the moment the story shifts from struggle to possibility. But the full resolution still belongs to the room. Give the direction of change (things began to improve, a door opened, the trajectory shifted) without the emotional peak (what they said, what they felt, who they became). This disciplined withholding is what makes the live delivery land. Donors who already know the ending don't lean in the same way. Give them enough to know the story is worth hearing. No more.

EMAIL 07

2 WEEKS OUT

What [DAY OF WEEK] night actually looks like

Alt Subject: A few things I want you to know before you arrive.

Preview Text: This isn't a program rundown. It's a heads-up.

Voice Mode: Peer to Peer

Story Type: Process / Future

Dear [FIRST NAME],

Two weeks out. I want to give you a real picture of what the evening looks like — not a program rundown, but a sense of what to expect when you walk in.

When you arrive at [VENUE NAME] at [TIME], you'll have about [X] minutes for cocktails and conversation before we move into the room. [ONE SPECIFIC ORIENTATION DETAIL — where to find the host, what to look for when you enter.]

Once we're seated, the evening moves in three parts.

The first part is about orientation — who we are, why we're here, what this night is actually for.

The middle of the evening is where the real work happens. You'll hear from [SPEAKER / HONOREE NAME]. You'll hear the rest of [BENEFICIARY FIRST NAME]'s story. And you'll understand — more clearly than you have before — what your presence in this room actually means.

The third part is where we ask for your partnership. I won't dress it up — there is an ask. It will be clear, it will be specific, and it will be made by someone who believes in what I'm about to ask you to believe in.

No surprises. No tricks. No guilt.

Just a room full of people with something worth investing in — and a moment to say yes.

I'm grateful you'll be there.

[DATE] | [VENUE NAME] | [FULL ADDRESS]

Parking: [DETAILS] | Attire: [ATTIRE DESCRIPTION] | Check-in details

Questions? Reply directly to this email.

[SIGNATURE]

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

Anxiety reduction is the sole job of this email. Donors who arrive uncertain about format, parking, dress code, or the nature of the ask stay in their heads during Act 1. This email clears all of that. The three-part frame (orientation, real work, partnership ask) is deliberate: it tells the donor there IS an ask without making it a surprise. Transparency here builds trust. Donors who know an ask is coming and are prepared for it give more freely than those who feel ambushed.

EMAIL 08

72 HOURS OUT (Monday of Event Week)

Three days.

Alt Subject: Before [DAY] — one thought.
Preview Text: A note on what it means to show up.
Voice Mode: Director on Set
Story Type: Against the Grain

Dear [FIRST NAME],

Three days.

I've been in a lot of rooms like the one we're building. Produced a few, sat in the audience of many more.

Here's what I've learned: the most important thing that happens isn't the program. It's not the speeches, the video, or even the fund-a-need.

It's the fact that you came.

Something happens when people who care about the same thing occupy the same physical space. The mission stops being abstract. The work stops feeling distant. And the ask — when it comes — doesn't feel like a transaction. You'll show up because you care.

It just feels right.

On [DAY OF WEEK], you're going to hear a story - a message of possibility. I hope that story stays with you. I hope it challenges how you feel and what you thought you knew about what's possible. And I hope when the moment comes to respond — you feel the same thing I felt the first time I understood what this organization actually does.

Ready when you are.

[DATE] | [TIME] | [VENUE NAME]

[SIGNATURE]

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

This email is a reframe. The transactional reading of attending a gala is 'I'm going to an event.' This email replaces it with 'I am part of something.' The tone shifts from informational to philosophical — briefly. This is the Director on Set voice at its most focused: no logistics, no program details, just the emotional premise of the evening restated with clarity. Keep it short. Resist adding anything. Its power comes from what it doesn't say.

EMAIL 09

48 HOURS OUT (Wednesday Evening)

Tomorrow night. Here's what you need.

Alt Subject: Two things before tomorrow.
Preview Text: Everything you need. One email.
Voice Mode: Peer to Peer — Warm
Story Type: Logistics + Story Thread Closure

Dear [FIRST NAME],

Tomorrow is the night. Two things:

LOGISTICS

Date: [FULL DATE]

Time: Cocktail reception at [TIME] | Dinner and program at [TIME]

Venue: [VENUE NAME], [FULL ADDRESS]

Parking: [PARKING DETAILS]

Attire: [ATTIRE DESCRIPTION]

Questions: [CONTACT — reply to this email or call/text [PHONE]]

ONE MORE THING

[BENEFICIARY FIRST NAME] is going to be in that room tomorrow.

I wanted you to know that.

See you [DAY OF WEEK].

[SIGNATURE]

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

Pure utility — with one emotional charge at the end. The logistics block should be clean, scannable, and complete. No prose around it. The 'one more thing' beat at the end — confirming the beneficiary will be in the room — reconnects the entire 8-week story thread and primes anticipation. It also

subtly elevates the stakes: this isn't an abstraction anymore. That person is going to be physically present. Keep the last three lines exactly as written (or the equivalent). Do not dilute the landing.

EMAIL 10

DAY-OF (Morning Of)

Tonight

Alt Subject: This is the day.

Preview Text: One thing, and then I'll let you get on with your day.

Voice Mode: Peer to Peer — Intimate

Story Type: Epiphany / Presence

Dear [FIRST NAME],

One thing before tonight.

You're going to walk into a room full of people who, mostly, came because someone asked them to. Maybe that's you.

But somewhere between arrival and the moment the lights dim and the room gets quiet — something shifts.

It always does.

That's what I want you to pay attention to tonight. Not the program. Not the logistics.

The shift.

See you at [TIME].

[SIGNATURE]

P.S. [VENUE NAME] — [FULL ADDRESS]. See you there.

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

The shortest email in the series. Do not add to it. The discipline of the day-of email is restraint: one idea, stated simply, then released. 'The shift' is the bridge between the content journey and the live experience — it gives the donor something specific to look for when they walk in the room. That single instruction transforms a passive attendee into an engaged witness. The P.S. covers the only

logistics that still matter at this point: confirming the location and time. Everything else has been said.

Conclusion and Best Practices

Email is a very powerful marketing and communication tool. When you mix the two, you have to be careful. We provided logistics, the reason for coming to your event, and a story that makes your guest feel invested. Studies show that when you provide a continuous story, guests understand the night, and after the reveal, they tell friends and family. It's very similar to a movie or TV show.

One word of caution: No matter how amazing your emails are, it does not guarantee that they will get opened. For the best chances of success, I suggest a few things.

1. Get the name and email from table captains or anyone purchasing multiple tickets. Without their email, they will miss part of the story.
2. If someone has purchased a ticket and does not open the email, set your automations to resend it 2 days later with a new headline. You need people to open the emails for all of this to work.
3. You probably know when the best time to send emails to your audience is, if not 7 am Tuesday through Thursday or Sunday am.
4. You can incorporate elements of your beneficiary into your social media so people become familiar with them. Don't assume the email will do all of the work.
5. Take time to do this. If you do not have a beneficiary we have other PDF's that can help you decide.

Audience First | Every Time

Rick Toone - Run of Show Consulting

www.runofshowplaybook.com

info@runofshowplaybook.com