

Conclusion: More Advice for Charities

The literature on charitable giving contains a bewildering array of contradictory effects and confounding variables. In the midst of this chaos, what are some consistent principles charities should keep in mind?

What donors want

Different types of donors – men and women, religious and secular – give to charity in different ways.

Despite this, almost all donors have certain preferences in common. People tend to give if they can:

1. **Help directly.** Donors shy away from spending on overhead (Gneezy, Keenan, & Gneezy, 2014), and they may overestimate what portion of their donations goes toward fundraising and salaries (Bennett & Savani, 2002). Charities can try to convince donors that their donations will help people directly by guaranteeing that their specific donations will not pay for overhead. They can also give donors the power to choose which cause their donation supports, which may increase donors' confidence in the impact of their gift (e.g. Li et al. 2012). However, charities should be careful before enabling this kind of choice. Adding fundraising "silos" could limit a charity's flexibility; many charities, including the American Red Cross, have been attacked in the media after redirecting some contributions from donors' chosen causes to other causes (CNN, 2001).
2. **Help someone similar to themselves.** Donors who have something common with recipients (Kogut & Ritov, 2007) or solicitors (Burger et al. 2004) give more than those who do not. Charities might take advantage of this tendency by framing beneficiaries as similar to donors in one way or another (Zagefka & James, 2015) Even if the victim is not from the donor's country, are they both European? Are they both human? Do they both work hard? Do they both love their families?
3. **Give to a single, deserving individual.** Over many studies, donors show a strong preference for giving to individuals rather than groups of people (e.g. Kogut et al., 2005; Small et al., 2007). As noted above, donors prefer to have something in common with recipients; they also prefer hardworking recipients who are not responsible for their own suffering (e.g. Benson and Catt,

1978). Innocent children may be especially attractive recipients for that reason, but even if a charity's programs focus on adults, referring to recipients as industrious and responsible should increase donors' contributions.

4. **Make a meaningful contribution to solving a problem.** Donors tend to avoid contributing to needs that are large in scope, or that will last a long time (Warren and Walker, 1991). They like giving to charitable campaigns that are very close to succeeding already (e.g. List and Price, 2003). But even if a charity is dealing with a difficult long-term issue that affects millions of people, they could still benefit by offering "small victories" to their donors. For example, the parasitic worm that causes schistosomiasis is still endemic to many countries, but the World Bank (2015) recently celebrated its near-disappearance from the country of Yemen. Donors might give more after hearing about this kind of success – a large proportion of Yemeni victims being helped– than if they heard the same results framed as "a small proportion of all victims being helped" (e.g. Fetherstonhaugh et al., 1997; Dickert et al., 2014).
5. **Get social approval for giving.** Donors, though perhaps not religious Muslims (Lambarraa and Riener, 2012), tend to give more when their gifts can be viewed by one or more people (e.g., Alpizar et al., 2008; White et al., 2009). And while some large donors prefer to give anonymously (Raihani, 2014), many people might give more if they know that their gifts could inspire others to give as well. Charities should always give donors the option (but not the obligation) to publicize their giving, as well as the ability to share news of their gift on social media. Publicizing donations could also help charities convince future donors to give more (Shang, Reed, & Croson, 2008).
6. **Feel good about giving.** Donors told that giving will make them happier sometimes give more than those told about the benefits their gift will have on other people (e.g. Benson, 1978; White et al., 2009). Donors also claim to be willing to give more when they receive feedback from charities on the impact of their giving (Merchant et al., 2010). Charities should ensure that donors understand what good their donations have enabled, and might also benefit by encouraging donors to feel good about their generous actions. Effective charities could take advantage of their detailed impact measurement by sending especially detailed thank-you notes. On the other hand,

charities should be careful not to provide potential donors with external motivation to give; this could actually reduce contributions, by leading people to think of a charitable interaction as a transaction rather than a gift (e.g. Anik et al., 2011; Newman et al., 2012)

Other Recommendations

Charities seeking to increase charitable contributions can attempt to do so in many ways. A few especially promising strategies:

Treat potential donors as individuals. Most people donate for some of the same reasons, but every person's giving pattern is slightly different. Targeting solicitations – especially customizable solicitations like mailings – to small groups of potential donors (or even individual donors) can sharply increase fundraising by ensuring that each person, whether they give every month or gave one time two years ago, sees a request that fits their giving history. Donors can also be influenced by very minor elements of a solicitation: For example, whether they are asked to give an amount equal to their average past donations (Verhaert & Van den Poel, 2011).

Be specific and informative. Donors who know more about the problem at hand may give more; for example, people were more willing to allocate money to help people left "homeless" by a disaster than to people who were only "affected" in some vague way (Evangelidis & Van den Bergh, 2013). Donors also like giving to individuals, and individuals with names and stories could be even more appealing (e.g., Kogut & Ritov, 2005a). Charities should offer potential donors many details about what will happen as a result of their gift, and even publicize financial information if they have low overhead costs or wish to appear transparent (Zagefka and James, 2015).

Trick donors into thinking reasonably. Explicitly putting donors in a calculating, mathematical mood seems to backfire, reducing giving overall (e.g. Small et al. 2007). But several studies show that a request framed in the right way can actually lead donors to give more even as they think harder about the choice. For example, potential donors who compare two disasters (Evangelidis and Van den Bergh, 2013), or who compare a group and an individual (Kogut and Ritov, 2005), tend to give in a way that helps more

people overall. Charities should probably refrain from comparing between their own programs (donors might become suspicious of a charity offering an explicitly inefficient choice), or from comparing themselves to other charities (such comparisons might seem like personal attacks, provoking negative publicity and turning donors away). However, a charity could ask potential donors to compare the price of a particular intervention with the price of some other, non-charitable good (e.g. “would you rather buy this three-dollar malaria-fighting bednet or a three-dollar cheeseburger?”). Charities could also follow the lead of Hsee et al. (2013) and use the unit-asking technique, perhaps putting donors in the mood to multiply their giving.

Directions for Future Research

Replication and Specification

This review examined many techniques, but few of these techniques have been studied often enough in an empirical charitable-donation context that charities should feel confident about their impact. For example, techniques suggesting certain contribution amounts have mixed results, but have not often been replicated in the 21st century. This is unfortunate, given how much we could learn from additional studies of foot-in-the-door, door-in-the-face, or anchoring-based solicitation.

Several highly promising studies mentioned in this review were published quite recently, but will hopefully be replicated in short order. Hsee et al. (2013), whose “unit-asking technique” greatly reduced scope insensitivity among donors, were perhaps the only authors in this entire review who successfully convinced people to adjust their giving to the size of a group of beneficiaries. Brown et al. (2012) raised donations by giving participants the ability to “volunteer”, working on an experimental task to send money directly to a charity. Gneezy et al. (2014) found that charities who fund overhead separately can raise more money to support their programs. If these effects can be replicated consistently, researchers could also test different variations: How large can a group of people be before unit-asking becomes ineffective? In what other contexts could giving be reframed as volunteering? Would covering only salaries *or* fundraising work as well as entirely covering overhead? All of these effects also have yet to be

tried outside of a lab. How might potential donors react to the unit-asking or overhead coverage techniques if they appear in a charitable mailing or on a website?

Another technique worth exploring further is “follow-the-leader”, where participants told of another person’s generous donation gave more afterwards. This effect has been tested using “model donors” who were similar in some small way – for example, listening to the same radio station (Shang, Reed, & Croson, 2008). But what if the leader to follow were a personal friend of the donor? Or a famous but non-similar person like Bill Gates? If charities can figure out how different types of leaders inspire different types of potential donors, they might be able to build a database of past donors whose stories they can tell to inspire giving from particular groups.

There are dozens of other studies with results worth exploring further. Of particular interest to the author were findings by Basil et al. (2006) that participants who felt more responsible for suffering people gave more money to help them. In addition, Andorfer and Otte (2012) found that participants were more willing to give to causes that few other donors were supporting, perhaps because they felt more responsible for helping people who were not receiving much help. Many causes like this do exist – causes with “room for more funding”, where donations could be put to work immediately. For example, there is an enormous amount of room for more funding in the malaria-fighting mosquito-net space; the projected “net gap” for 2016 (the number of nets that families will need, but which have not yet been funded) stood at nearly 100 million a few months ago (GiveWell, 2014b). Charities could pay special attention to designing responsibility-priming campaigns based on causes like this: “Somewhere in Kenya, a mosquito net is sitting in storage because no one has paid three dollars to put it over a child’s head. That child is now at severe risk of contracting malaria every time they go to sleep. Will you do what others have not, and take responsibility for that child’s safety?” In doing so, charities could fight the bystander effect (Darley & Latane 1968) by ensuring that donors know they are not simply one potential helper in a crowd, but instead can make a specific difference in the world, one that will not happen without them.