

**An analysis of potential donor interviews
for the United Way of Norman**

Andrea X. Ko

University of Oklahoma

JMC 4453

Abstract:

This report analyzes four different interviews with potential donors to the United Way (UW) of Norman, our client organization. Our prior research identified the key public of the organization as young working professionals, middle age donors, or retirees living in the city of Norman, Oklahoma. In order for our investigation to be as informative as possible for the client organization, all four of our interviewees fit the target demographic accordingly. Interviewees were asked thirteen questions about the UW of Norman. Examples of topics covered were their familiarity with the organization, their personal ideals and beliefs regarding donating to nonprofit organizations as well as lifestyle habits. Common themes that emerged include their preferences for transparency in how nonprofit organizations handle public donations, and how the current COVID-19 pandemic has affected their day-to-day lifestyle habits.

Introduction:

The UW of Norman is a nonprofit organization that helps fund 42 programs within 29 organizations in the Norman, Oklahoma region. Like all other similar organizations and especially because of its extensive network of aid throughout the city, it is constantly in need of funding in order to continue to help fight for “better education, financial stability, health and independence for every person in our community.” (UW Norman, 2021) In today’s tech savvy society, nonprofit organizations have to update their outreach methods accordingly in order to keep up with evolving donor habits. Dissemination and interactivity has been proven to have a significantly positive effect on consumer-perceived trust and satisfaction (Feng et al., 2017). This in turn positively influenced intentions to donate, and facilitated electronic word-of-mouth behavior. Over the years, social media sites like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram have become one of the main methods of communication with donors past, present and future. This is because of their versatility and ability to elicit interactions more effectively and on a more personal level. It has been demonstrated that with careful research and planning, using social media platforms, among other methods, is a good way to develop social networks with stakeholders and donors (Waters et al., 2009). Our interviews did indicate that, while no substitute for person-to-person interactions, social media has been a primary and effective communication method for people to stay in touch with their personal and professional circle. This has been especially so with the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic, where videoconferencing software like Zoom and social media interactions had to be the placeholder for face-to-face communication.

Although there are a multitude of studies that examine the evolution and current status of potential donor behavior as they relate to nonprofit organizations, there are currently little to no studies that exist for our client organization. Our interviews aim to discover potential donor

habits and attitudes towards donating to the UW of Norman, and compare them in order to derive meaningful information that will potentially aid our client organization in their future fundraising efforts. Researchers opted to conduct in-depth interviews in favor of other survey methods. This is because it allows interviewers to explore respondents' feelings and perspectives on the research subject, in order to collect rich information that can further inform future program evaluation and development (Guion et al., 2011). In addition, participants are more confident, relaxed, and feel more encouraged to express their deep thoughts on a certain subject (Milena, 2008).

Research Questions

Researchers conducted the interviews in order to fill in missing information from our secondary research. Prior research, while extremely helpful, helped us understand the client organization's key publics as well as the organization's degree of outreach, on a broader and wider level. We wanted to investigate potential donor beliefs, ideals, and habits on a more personal scale in order for our client organization to optimize and refine their fundraising efforts. These research questions served as the focus of the current study.

RQ1: What do potential donors look for when choosing what organization to donate to?

RQ2: What are potential donors' current perception of the United Way of Norman?

RQ3: How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected potential donors' giving habits?

RQ4: How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected potential donors' ability to communicate?

Method:

Researchers identified four potential donors in the Norman, Oklahoma community and subsequently interviewed them over the Zoom videoconferencing software. Prior IRB approval was acquired in order for the study to be conducted. In addition, informed verbal consent was obtained and recorded from interviewees before each interview commenced. A total of thirteen questions (see Appendix A) were asked. The length of each interview ranged from approximately eleven minutes to approximately half an hour, depending on how long participant responses were. The interviews were then transcribed by the researchers in order for analysis to take place.

Key Findings

RQ1: What do potential donors look for when choosing what organization to donate to?

Interviewed participants were rather unanimous in their preference for accountability or transparency in the way nonprofit organizations handle donor money. An interviewee is quoted saying,

“Instead of just saying, you know, it's going to benefit such and such afterschool program. I want to know, like the books that's going to buy for the, for the classroom that the students are in. I want to know like those pieces. Um, I think it just makes it more real”

Participants were in agreement that they wanted to see concrete results of their monetary donations to nonprofit organizations. Instead of carefully crafted PR spiels, participants preferred tangible information in the form of specificity so that they could make the informed decision of whether the organization's actions were in line with their personal beliefs, and whether or not to continue donating. They wanted to see that their donation actually make a positive impact to the nonprofit's beneficiaries.

RQ2: What are potential donors' current perception of the United Way of Norman?

All four interviewees mentioned that they had previously heard of the UW of Norman before this interview was conducted. This indicates that the client organization has been successful in community outreach efforts. All of our interviewees were affiliated with the University of Oklahoma in some way, whether faculty, staff or alumni. At least one participant indicated that they had heard of the UW of Norman through campus outreach or fundraising events. For example, an interviewee is quoted here:

“I can't say how I originally found out, but I hear about it all the time frequently through work. Um, and I work at OU.”

Another interviewee, an alumni of OU, mentioned that when they were still a student, they had friends that were consistently volunteering with the UW of Norman. Hence, it can be inferred that they perceive our client organization as active and successful in their outreach efforts. The client organization also has had a broad network of volunteers that our interviewees were aware of and familiar with, and it can also be concluded that our interviewees recognize that they are quite active helping out in the community.

RQ3: How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected potential donors' giving habits?

At least one of our interviewees mentioned that the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic meant that they no longer were able to donate at in-person events like fundraising activities or donor drives. All interviewees mentioned that they have been active in donating to nonprofit organizations in some capacity using the internet. They gave examples of payment services like Venmo, CashApp, and PayPal to illustrate how they were donating during the pandemic. One of our interviewees gave the example of the recent winter storm that devastated the Texas power grid. She donated to fund relief services using the Venmo app.

RQ4: How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected potential donors' ability to communicate?

All our participants stated that since the onset of the pandemic, they resorted to using some form of social media in order to compensate for the lack of face-to-face interaction. In order to have real-time conversations, participants used text, phone calls, or videoconferencing software. However, they made sure to point out that it was not a substitution for in-person interactions. At least one interviewee mentioned that wherever possible, they preferred to meet in person.

Conclusion

Using the in-depth interview method yielded valuable information about our client organization's key publics, which included their expectations of nonprofit organizations, the evolution of their habits and lifestyle due to the pandemic, among others. Even though our interviewees were from different walks of life, some of their responses were quite similar. For example, they indicated a unanimous preference for accountability and transparency in organization finances, as well as their preferred method of donation, which is through Internet payment services. Moving forward, we will be able to combine information gleaned during our focus group interviews with our broader survey results in order to obtain a comprehensive review of potential donors in order to optimize time and resources towards effecting fundraising efforts

References

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

1. Have you heard of UW of Norman? If so, how?
2. What characteristics of a non-profit make you want to donate to them?
3. Have you ever volunteered for a non-profit organization?
Tell us about your experience with them.
4. What issues are you passionate about helping with in your community?
5. How do you form connections in your community? Have you had a good experience finding people that you relate to/ enjoy hanging out with?
6. Is there anything currently in your life that is getting in the way of you making charitable donations?
7. How has COVID-19 affected your work? Have primarily worked remotely or has it been business-as-usual?
8. Post COVID-19, how have you been keeping up with people in your personal life?
9. How would you prefer to communicate with those people?
10. How has COVID changed the way you make donations?
11. What do you know about UW of Norman?
12. How do you think non-profits could improve their communication with donors?
13. How could non-profits make it easier for you to donate?

Appendix B

Oral Consent Script to Participate in Research

Good morning/afternoon/evening. Would you be interested in participating in a research project I/we are conducting at the University of Oklahoma? We'd like you to participate because you are a stakeholder of United Way of Norman.

We're conducting this research project because we are hoping to learn more about stakeholder donation behaviors, perceptions of United Way of Norman, and communication habits and preferences during COVID-19. About 40-42 people will participate. If you agree to participate, I will be asking you to answer a few questions related to the topic. This should take about 30-60 minutes.

Your participation in this research doesn't involve any direct risks or benefits to you. However, the findings of the study will be used to guide and inform the United Way of Norman's future fundraising and communication efforts with the Norman community so that the organization can better serve the community.

All of the information I'm collecting will be kept secure and confidential, and only researchers or the University of Oklahoma – Norman Campus Institutional Review Board will be able to look at it.

Your name will not appear in any research report. After removing all identifiers, we will share the research report with Daren Wilson, the president of United Way of Norman or use it in future research without obtaining additional consent from you.

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant or any concerns or complaints regarding your participation, you can contact me at (include your phone number and email address), or my professors Dr. Xiaochen Angela Zhang at (405)-325-2726 or angelazhang@ou.edu/Brian Petrotta brian.a.petrotta@ou.edu or OU's IRB at 405-325-8110 or irb@ou.edu.

In order to preserve your responses, they will be recorded on an audio/video recording device.

Do you agree for your interview to be audio/video recorded? _____ (note response)

Do you agree to being quoted directly? _____ (note response)

May I contact you again to recruit you into this research or to gather additional information? _____ (note response)

Data are collected via an online platform not hosted by OU that has its own privacy and security policies for keeping your information confidential. Please note no assurance can be made as to the use of the data you provide for purposes other than this research.

Before you agree to participate, remember that your participation is completely voluntary, you don't have to answer any question, and you can stop at any time. If you do choose to participate and then change your mind, you won't be penalized in any way. Finally, if you would like a printed copy of the information I've just read to you, you are welcome to have this one.