

# **Charitable Fundraising and Smart Giving:**

## **How can charities use behavioral science to drive donations?**

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### **Abstract**

Charitable giving is a powerful force for health and happiness. But most people do not give very much, and the rate of private giving in the U.S. barely keeps pace with GDP growth. In addition, most donors make only a minimal effort to research charities before giving, thus missing the chance to support the most “effective” charities (those which help the most people with each dollar they raise). This review summarizes empirical research on techniques that could increase the rates at which people give to charity, with a special focus on techniques that might allow effective charities to leverage their special traits to win support from donors. The review also examines cognitive-scientific explanations behind the effects of certain techniques, points out promising areas for further research, and uses its findings to create a set of strategic recommendations for charitable organizations.

## Introduction: Why study charitable giving?

Charitable giving (philanthropy) contributes to the well-being of donors and beneficiaries alike.<sup>1</sup> In the U.S., most of this giving comes from individuals, rather than corporations or charitable foundations (National Philanthropic Trust, 2014). Private charity funds medical research and universities, as well as a wide variety of programs that improve the quality of life for hundreds of millions of people each year. According to some estimates, an individual who gives to “effective” charity organizations whose programs are especially impactful can give one person a year of healthy life (GiveWell, 2014a) or save someone from going blind (Baltussen, Sylla, & Mariotti, 2004) for less than 100 dollars. Unfortunately, most programs funded by charities are not nearly this impactful on a per-dollar basis, even within narrow, impact-focused spaces like public health (Jamison et al., 2006). Still, even less-effective charities serve a number of important needs in the developing and developed worlds alike, from helping disaster victims get back on their feet to sheltering homeless people from exposure to the elements.

Charitable organizations rely on individual giving to accomplish their goals. If individuals gave more often and/or gave more money, nonprofits would be in a position to do more work, and thus more good, to the overall benefit of society. Of course, every dollar given to charity is a dollar not given to fulfill the donor’s other desires, and charitable giving is not always the “best” use of money, depending on the donor, the recipient, and the value system of the evaluator. But it would be beyond the scope of this (or any) review to conclude whether a dollar typically creates more utility when it goes to charity instead of something else. For the sake of argument, this review assumes that increasing charitable giving is a worthwhile goal.

The nonprofit world, like any other sector of the economy, can be thought of as a marketplace with participation from a number of different parties. If it is desirable for charitable “consumers” to “buy more”

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<sup>1</sup> This study defines “charitable giving” as any form of monetary donation that is either not reciprocated, or reciprocated by a reward of clearly lesser value. This includes dropping a dollar in a Salvation Army cauldron, handing a dollar to a stranger who needs to buy a bus ticket, or PayPal-ing a dollar to the American Red Cross. It also includes sending money to NPR and getting a free tote bag worth much less than the cost of the donation. But it would not include giving to a college so that one’s name will be put on a building (a reward which could *only* have been obtained through a donation). Almost all studies included in this review concern giving to charitable organizations, rather than to individuals not affiliated with an organization.

(that is, for donors to give more), there are several groups with the power to effect this change: Charities, governments, foundations, and so on. This review focuses on charities themselves, and summarizes research on two related questions:

1. How can charities motivate people to donate more money?
2. How can the most effective charities (those that produce especially positive outcomes for each dollar they receive) make use of their distinguishing features (including evidence-backed programs and financial efficiency) to drive giving?

## **Does charity help the recipients?**

The most direct impact of charitable giving is on those who receive donations. Thousands of studies have found that interventions organized by charities can improve health, literacy, and dozens of other quality-of-life indicators for recipients in developed and developing nations alike (e.g. Innovations for Poverty Action, 2015; Copenhagen Consensus, 2015; Kristof, 2014).

Even large-scale issues can be addressed through philanthropy. For example, in the past 25 years, extreme poverty (measured by the percentage of the world's population living on \$1.25 or less per day) has dropped by half Gill (2012). Over the same period, the child mortality rate in the developing world has also fallen by about half (Gates & Gates, 2015). This is due in part to the work of charitable organizations like the Gavi Vaccine Alliance and UNICEF (2015), which receives one-third of its funding from non-governmental sources. For example, Gavi, which leverages public and private resources to improve access to childhood immunization, has played a role in preventing over six million deaths from conditions like yellow fever, typhoid, and rubella (Gavi, 2015).

There are, of course, many other sources responsible for addressing some of the same problems, including new technologies, changing economic policies, and government spending (on social welfare and foreign aid). It is hard to figure out how much good each of these sources does in comparison with the others. For example, some authors have argued that the overall impact of foreign aid is neutral or even negative (Easterly, 2006; Moyo, 2009).

Private charity also has critics, who sometimes argue that it leads recipients to a life of dependency or does more good for nonprofit employees than the intended recipients (e.g. Buffett, 2014). While these critics often make excellent points, those who believe charity to be a negative phenomenon overall are very rare, so this review will not devote any additional space to refuting their arguments. It is also obvious that many charities do make a positive impact (by any definition of the term “positive”), as has been measured and independent charity evaluators like GiveWell (2015). This review will focus especially on charities that are effective according to the standards of these evaluators.

## **Does charity benefit the donor?**

In recent years, several studies have established that charitable giving has a direct and positive impact on the happiness and subjective well-being (SWB) of those who give.<sup>2</sup>

Dunn, Aknin, and Norton (2008) found that greater “prosocial spending” (including gifts and charitable donations) was correlated with greater happiness, even controlling for income. The authors also tracked spending by participants who had just received an annual bonus; the percentage of the bonus spent prosocially significantly predicted happiness. Finally, the authors gave participants a sudden “windfall”, asked some to spend it on other people, and asked the rest to spend it on themselves. Those who spent the money prosocially reported greater happiness than those who spent it selfishly.

Aknin et al. (2013) found that in a Gallup survey of people in 136 countries, within-country results from 122 countries demonstrated a positive correlation between happiness and having donated to charity in the last month, even controlling for income, demographics, and food security (81 of those positive correlations were significant). The authors also found that both Ghanaian and Canadian students reported greater happiness after they remembered a time they had spent money on other people, rather than

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<sup>2</sup> These two measures of well-being both rely on participants’ ratings of their own positive feelings. “Happiness” refers to participants’ happiness, while SWB is measured via questions along the lines of: “How well is your life going right now?”

remembering spending on themselves. The same result was found with another Canadian sample the year before (Aknin, Dunn, & Norton, 2012).

These studies examined “prosocial spending”, a combination of gift-giving and charitable donation. They thus provide only suggestive evidence that donations beget happiness, since gift-giving could be driving the increases the authors found. Anik, Aknin, Norton, Dunn, and Quoidbach (2013) did find that receiving a voucher specifically for a charitable donation increased recipients’ happiness, but the voucher was only compared to no voucher, not to a voucher for spending on gifts – it could be that gifts > charity > nothing, where happiness is concerned.

Aknin, Dunn, Whillans, Grant, and Norton (2013) found that participants who gave to charity felt happier afterwards – but only if they learned from the charity about the positive impact of their support. Aknin, Mayraz, and Helliwell (2014) found that giving money had a greater impact on the happiness of participants who gave higher amounts. The latter two findings suggest that the link between happiness and giving may be mediated by the extent to which donors believe their gift has helped recipients, but more data are needed to test this directly. In contrast, several studies (Aknin et al., 2012; Dunn et al., 2008) found no significant relationship between the amount of money donated and donors’ happiness. It may be that increasing the frequency with which the average donor gives, or the number of people who donate regularly, would have a higher impact on happiness across a population than increasing the average amount of each donation.

Studies tracking the link between giving and happiness are vulnerable to social desirability bias. Respondents might overstate how good they feel after giving because they want to seem like nice, prosocial people who enjoy prosocial behavior. It could also be true that happy people are more likely to give; Aknin et al. (2012) found that participants who reported greater happiness were more likely to commit to spending a sudden windfall on other people. People who give more could also be happier in general for unrelated reasons, which could explain the finding of Choi and Kim (2011) that a person’s charitable giving predicted their level of SWB nine years later.

The finding that spending money on others may be linked to happiness and/or SWB is interesting in light of the finding by many authors that, once people reach a certain level of income, earning more

money has a very modest effect on life satisfaction (Clark, Frijters, & Shields, 2008; Kahneman, Krueger, Schkade, Schwarz, & Stone, 2006). This reinforces the finding that some types of spending (including spending money on ourselves) do not necessarily increase happiness (Aknin et al. 2010; Aknin et al. 2012). If giving more money to charity in a given year does increase happiness, people could potentially avoid the “hedonic treadmill”<sup>3</sup> by giving more, even as they reach an income level where further income has sharply diminishing marginal utility (Diener, Lucas, & Scollon, 2006).

### **Do we need more charity?**

Charitable giving can be immensely helpful to recipients and also make donors happier. But is there a compelling reason to think we should, or even can, give more than we do now? (After all, eating food also makes us happy and satisfied, but that does not mean we should all start eating more food.)

In the United States, charitable giving makes up roughly 2% of national GDP. This figure has remained relatively constant since 1970 (Perry, 2013). Meanwhile, inflation-adjusted per capita GDP has nearly doubled in the U.S. over the same time period, and mean household income has risen about 15% (DeNavas-Walt & Proctor, 2014). Americans are wealthier now, but our giving does not seem to reflect that. Instead, for every \$2 we spend on others, we continue to spend \$98 on ourselves, possibly giving up a fair amount of happiness in the bargain.

What’s more, in some countries, giving is actually in decline. The percentage of citizens who had given to charity in the past year decreased by at least three percentage points between 2012 and 2013 in India, Germany, Spain, Italy, New Zealand, Mexico, and over a dozen other countries (Charities Aid Foundation, 2014). In fact, the rate of giving in the global population at large dropped 2.5 percentage points between 2010 and 2014, even as per-capita GDP rose in nearly every country (World Bank, 2014). Meanwhile, giving continues to become easier no matter where a person lives, as more charities build

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<sup>3</sup> Wherein people quickly return to a stable level of happiness shortly after experiencing major life changes. If the changes in question were intended to have a permanent positive impact, this is an unfortunate outcome.

websites and post details of their activities online. It seems likely that many people in the U.S. and elsewhere have the necessary financial resources and information to give more.

It is well outside the scope of this paper to describe the positive effects of a widespread increase in charitable giving. Peter Singer (2006) notes that the wealthiest 10% of U.S. families could donate an additional \$400 billion each year without seriously straining (with billionaires giving the highest percentage, at a third of income), and that charities could use this amount of money to virtually eliminate global poverty. This level of giving would more than double the United States' level of private giving, which seems almost impossible given the pattern of the last 40 years. But it is important to note that the richest Americans do not give away a higher percentage of their incomes than other Americans; they may actually give less (Mayo & Tinsley, 2009). In other words, U.S. charities could potentially raise quite a lot more money without donors having to experience serious financial difficulty.

### **Do we need more effective charity?**

Increasing the amount that people give is an important goal to work toward. But it may be even more important that people give to *effective* charities: those which can, with each dollar they raise better accomplish their goals (whatever those may be) than most other charities with the same goals. If one developing-world charity can perform a cataract surgery for \$200, doubling donations will double the number of surgeries which can be performed. But if each donor instead gives to a second charity that can perform a surgery for \$100, this could also double the number of surgeries, without donations increasing at all.

This example is overly simple, but many such cost-effective trades do exist in the world of charitable giving, especially when the goal in question is something abstract like "helping the blind" rather than "performing surgery". For example, the charity Guide Dogs of America raised over four million dollars in 2013 (Charity Navigator, 2013a). They used most of this funding to train 54 guide dogs, each of which will serve a single blind person for about ten years, at a cost of approximately \$42,000 per dog (Guide Dogs of America, 2014). Seva Foundation, a Canadian charity with a comparable budget (roughly nine

million dollars) provided basic eye care to over one million patients in 20 countries during 2013, while performing over 85,000 sight-restoring surgeries (Charity Navigator, 2013b; Seva Foundation, 2014). For the cost of providing one person with a guide dog, a donor could instead have paid for Seva to perform hundreds of additional surgeries.<sup>4</sup> This is the difference that can be made with a few tens of thousands of dollars' worth of effective giving. If a substantial portion of the \$250 billion in U.S. private giving could be redirected from less-effective to more-effective charities, the potential benefits are enormous.

## Why is charity not more effective?

Given that information on charities' work is available to the public, why do trade-offs like that between guide dogs and eye surgery still exist? Basic economic theory holds that similar goods should not differ widely in price, but while no major restaurant chain sells a \$500 hamburger<sup>5</sup>, some major charities still offer very expensive services that accomplish much less good per dollar than their cheaper equivalents. If the purpose of charity is to help other people, why are the world's most effective charities not also the most popular? How can relatively ineffective charities continue to thrive?

## The information gap

One reason is that charities are "sold" very differently than consumer products. When people buy things for themselves, they get the chance to examine how well they work. Many consumers also rate goods and services online, allowing other potential buyers to learn about those things before they buy. By the time people purchase something for themselves, they will almost always have relevant information that helps them choose something to suit their needs, whether they want soap, scissors, or an SUV.

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<sup>4</sup> This calculation assumes that Seva has "room for more funding", an important characteristic of charities which refers to their ability to quickly turn additional money into impact. For example, if Seva only has five surgeons on staff, all of them working full-time, a small donation might not pay for more surgeries right away. Still, even in that scenario, Seva can simply invest small donations until they have enough money to hire a sixth surgeon.



But charities are not like soap: Many people who donate to charitable causes have never used the services of those charities and never will. (Notable exceptions include people who donate to their own churches or universities, or to hospitals where they or a relative underwent treatment.) Thus, donors do not automatically receive information on the impact of their giving, and are not in a good position to figure out which charities best “suit their needs” – that is, produce the results the donors wish to fund. This lack of information leads many donors to support causes they might not have chosen if they had understood the likely impact of their giving.

Take the PlayPump, a water pump that draws its power from children who play on an attached carousel. Roundabout Outdoors, which manufactured and distributed PlayPumps to villages with limited access to clean water, won awards from the World Bank and was featured in a cheerful PBS documentary . They also raised tens of millions of dollars between 1999 and 2008. In 2009, however, Roundabout stopped installing new PlayPumps, after reports surfaced detailing the flaws of the device: It was more expensive than traditional pumps, required more human labor to pump the same amount of water, and broke very easily (Circle of Blue, 2010). And yet, despite the low impact of RoundAbout’s work, the appealing image of a child playing on a carousel captivated thousands of well-educated donors, some of whom knew a great deal about international development. Had many of the donors actually visited PlayPump villages and seen the product being used, they might have seen the flaws and given differently.

### **Failure to compare**

The PlayPump is far from the only example of misused charity money. D.A.R.E., a nonprofit school program meant to reduce drug use by teenagers, was popular throughout the United States during the 1980s and 1990s, but was shown by several meta-analyses not to actually change behavior (Ennett, Tobler, Ringwalt, & Flewelling, 1994). Studies on the “reformed” program that D.A.R.E. began to implement in 2003 still show very mixed evidence of impact (Singh et al., 2011). Meanwhile, the organization received over a million dollars in donations and grants in 2014 – money that could have gone to a program like Big Brothers Big Sisters, which has been conclusively shown to reduce drug use among children who enter the program (Grossman & Tierney, 1998).

Any donor whose goal was “keeping kids away from drugs” could have compared the two organizations with a quick Google search, and chosen the option that better suited their goals. And yet, most donors give to charities without doing very much research, or looking for other charities that accomplish the same goals more effectively. Money for Good, a survey funded by several major charitable foundations, found that only 6% of donors compared multiple charities before choosing where to give, and that only 33% did any research at all (Hope Consulting, 2011). Comparing charities is very important. If someone gives to an ineffective charity, they will not do very much good, and they will have less money left over with which to support effective charities. People who give to one charity seem to give less to other charities as a result; LaBarge (2014) found that many regular donors keep a “mental budget” for charitable giving and will cut back on giving once they reach the limits of that budget.

Unfortunately, some of the most popular sources for information on charities do not give visitors any way to compare the impact of different organizations. GuideStar (2015) offers donors easy access to nonprofits’ financial information, but does not process this data in any way, which makes it very difficult to figure out how different charities stack up against each other. GreatNonprofits (2015) features ratings and reviews from donors, but includes no information on impact (e.g. how many people are helped by a nonprofit for every dollar in revenue), leaving donors with no way to compare different organizations. Charity Navigator (2015), the most popular evaluator, only ranks charities on transparency and fiscal efficiency (i.e. the proportion of revenue that goes toward programs rather than overhead), without any mention of impact.<sup>6</sup>

## Popularity contests

Some organizations (e.g. GiveWell), do expressly compare charities based on measures of effectiveness (often recommending fewer than a dozen after examining hundreds). But a charity’s

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<sup>6</sup> “Efficiency” and “efficacy” aren’t quite the same thing. All else being equal, we should donate to a charity that spends 90% of revenue on programs over one which spends 80%. But all else is rarely equal – if the latter charity has higher overhead but still helps twice as many people per dollar, it would be the better choice for an impact-focused donor.

marketing success or popularity may be more important than its effectiveness when it comes to attracting donors. Milofsky and Blades (1991) note that, as of 1990, no major charities were addressing sexually transmitted diseases other than AIDS – perhaps because STDs were “less appealing” to some donors than other problems, even if no less devastating to the afflicted. Brannon and Stmad (1977) point out that the charity sector allocates funding just like the corporate sector – through advertising campaigns meant to convince the public to give to whichever charity purchased the advertisement, regardless of actual impact. (Milofsky, 1988) predicts that this emphasis on fundraising might lead charities to “drift away” from their ostensible goals – focusing on marketing and events rather than effective action against the problems they wish to solve.

Even when advertising is taken out of the picture, public awareness of global issues may not match the severity of those issues. This could lead us to remain ignorant of certain important problems, and to give less effectively as a result. Adams (1986) found that the number of deaths in a natural disaster explained only three percent of the variance in U.S. television coverage of that disaster. The most powerful predictive variable, which explained nearly a quarter of the variance in coverage, was the number of U.S. tourists who visited the affected country each year. Adams estimated that the death of one Western European led to about as much coverage as the deaths of nine Latin Americans or twelve Asians. Multiple studies have found links between the amount of media coverage a specific disaster receives and the amount of private charity donated for disaster relief (Brown & Minty, 2006; Simon, 1997). If the effects discovered by Adams persist in the present day, donors’ lack of focus on effective giving may be partly due to their not hearing about the worst disasters.

Many psychological factors can also lead donors to give to charities that are not especially effective. This review will explore those factors in the final section of the literature survey.

## How Can Charities Raise More Money?

This review aims to compile work from many fields to provide charities with a comprehensive set of answers to the above question. Ideally, a marketing director at any nonprofit will be able to read this review and come away with ideas for measurably improving the success of their next campaign.

However, the review is not just targeted at nonprofits. It also discusses mixed and controversial findings in the existing literature, proposes cognitive factors that could explain the results of multiple studies, and suggests directions for future research on some of the most promising techniques.

The papers reviewed fall into one of two categories:

1. **General giving.** Literature on techniques which could be used by a wide variety of charities, whether or not those charities are especially effective.
2. **Effective giving.** Literature on techniques which could enable charities to distinguish themselves by discussing their financial efficiency, the evidence behind their methods, and the impact of their programs.

## Method

This review makes use of an extensive literature search, including the following sources:

1. Google Scholar.
2. Existing reviews of the literature on charitable giving, especially R. Bekkers and P. Wiepking (2010) and Zagefka and James (2015).
3. Books which themselves reviewed the literature on persuasion or behavior change, especially pertaining to charitable giving.
4. The research websites of people and institutions whose work often touches on the topic of charitable giving (e.g. John List; the Notre Dame Science of Generosity Initiative).
5. The Philanthropic Studies Index of the Indiana University of Pennsylvania.

6. The reference sections of all cited articles.
7. Other papers and nonacademic articles discovered in the course of research.

Search terms included various combinations of "charitable giving", "charitable donation", "philanthropy", "charity", "effectiveness", "altruism", and "experiment".

Outside of background and demographic information, this review focuses on papers which contain empirical analysis of giving behavior. Purely theoretical papers, discussing reasons why people might give without examining any data, are not reviewed. Neither are papers which only examine the evolutionary or neurological roots of giving behavior.

For reasons outlined below, the review also excludes studies of economic games and "public goods" experiments (e.g. dictator games) in which participants did not give to a charity; studies which relied on donors' memory of past giving; studies which measured participants' stated willingness to donate but did not solicit actual donations; studies which measured the donation of something other than money (including food, used clothes, and blood); and studies which measured prosocial behavior other than charitable giving (including volunteering and "helping behavior").

Papers which explicitly studied long-term relationships between charities and donors ("donor retention") were excluded to conserve space. Still, charities may benefit enormously from improving their donor retention rates, since recruiting new donors can be much more expensive than keeping past donors loyal. Sargeant and Hudson (2008) provide an excellent review of this important subject.

Studies which analyzed giving to colleges and churches were also excluded. Both types of organization tend to raise money from donors with whom they have strong pre-existing relationships, while most of the experiments in this review discuss giving by strangers to charities where they aren't regular donors. In addition, these organizations' relationships with their donors involve a strong reciprocal factor, which could lead donors to want to "return the favor" if fairness plays the same role in giving as it does in many other economic activities (Rabin, 1993). Donors to other charities are probably not affected by reciprocity in the same way: Yale University solicits funding from Yale alumni who benefited from their Yale education, but even the most devoted donors to New Haven soup kitchens

probably do not eat there very often. (For similar reasons, the review omits giving to friends and family, who are likely entangled in a complicated network of favors and reciprocation with the person who helps.)

Studies on giving to museums and other cultural institutions are included, because many people benefit from the work of these institutions without forming any kind of relationship with them. A tourist might donate to the Metropolitan Museum of Art after visiting once, but most college alumni and churchgoers spend years interacting with their respective institutions. Studies also of university students giving money to help other students (e.g. for a scholarship fund) are included, since a student's relationship with another unknown student is likely far weaker than their relationship with their college.<sup>7</sup>

One purpose of this review is that it be used by charities as a tool to improve fundraising strategy and reduce the use of unproven techniques. For this reason, it excludes studies that examine factors charities cannot easily control, including tax rates, public policy, and stock market performance.

Unless otherwise noted, the studies included have been published in academic journals, books, or other edited volumes. References to unpublished research (e.g. working papers) were included only if the research was available online. Studies in languages other than English were not included.

## Can we predict giving without measuring donations?

This review focuses on studies of actual charitable giving, because other measures of generosity are highly imprecise predictors of whether someone will give away real money.

**Economic Games:** This review excludes economic games, because results do not seem to reflect real-world behavior. For example, Cryder and Loewenstein (2012) note that people share significantly more money in dictator games than they do in their actual lives, in part because players given the chance to share in such games generally have sole responsibility for what others receive. This is not the case when donors give to charities from a distance, or even to solicitors in public places, where hundreds of other

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<sup>7</sup> These inclusions are highly subjective judgment calls, and there may be important differences between the types of charities studied in these papers. Charities which do not provide any direct benefit to their donors should not necessarily expect fundraising techniques that work for cultural institutions to work equally well for them.

potential donors are also available. Another way in which games differ from actual giving: People given money out of the blue (e.g. at the beginning of a game) are far more generous than people asked to give “earned wealth” (e.g. payment for completion of an experiment) (Cherry, Frykblom, & Shogren, 2002). One study did find that “prosocial” people who choose generous options in games of monetary distribution were more likely to perform various charitable behaviors – but with effect sizes ranging from .07 to .14, implying that these games can only predict actual giving behavior to a very limited extent (Van Lange, Bekkers, Schuyt, & Vugt, 2007).

**Self-Reported Giving:** The review excludes studies that only measured giving by asking donors how much they had given in the past. Bekkers and Wiepking (2010) find that self-reported giving is correlated with actual giving, but that people usually remember giving about 30% more money than they really did, perhaps because they misremember their donations or wish to appear generous in front of survey-takers. On the other hand, many studies in this review measure the impact of donors’ *known* past giving on their response to various fundraising techniques.

**Willingness to Donate:** Studies were excluded if they only measured the amount subjects claimed they would be willing to donate if asked for money. Biel, Johansson-Stenman, and Nilsson (2011) find that respondents overstated their willingness to donate (WTD) to the World Wildlife Fund, perhaps because they derived utility from maintaining a positive (i.e. generous) self-image. Aldridge and Fowles (2013) find that responses from people surveyed about their WTD to certain charitable causes on eBay’s online donation platform did not match up well with how eBay shoppers actually give. Alpizar, Carlsson, and Johansson-Stenman (2008b) found that participants who estimated how much they would be willing to donate reported systematically higher amounts than participants actually gave when asked for a donation. Zagefka, Noor, Brown, de Moura, and Hothrow (2011) find that some experimental manipulations increase WTD but have no effect on actual giving.

**Helping Behavior:** Finally, this review excludes studies that only measure other forms of prosocial (“helping”) behavior, like volunteering or assistance with a physical task (e.g. returning a lost object). Benson and Catt (1978) note that charitable donations are different from other forms of helping in many ways: The former involves the sharing of money rather than time or energy, as well as the help of an

intermediary organization which collects and redistributes money. Warren and Walker (1991) argue that most research on “helping behavior” tells us little about the practice of giving, and speculates that actual giving behavior differs from theory in predictable ways. Multiple studies find that donors treat gifts of time, effort, and blood differently than they do gifts of money (Brown, Meer, & Williams, 2012; Lee, Piliavin, & Call, 1999).

### **How donations are counted**

Most studies included here measure charitable giving with at least one of the following metrics: (1) Donor participation (the percentage of those asked who gave anything), (2) the average donation from those who did give, and (3) the average donation per person asked (whether they gave or not). Charities may find these outcomes interesting for different reasons, and many experimental conditions had a positive effect on some of them but a negative or neutral effect on others. This review notes any of these three types of outcome that a study has provided.



## **Review: Techniques That May Increase the Rate of Giving**

### **Who gives? And why?**

Three out of every four dollars given to a charity in the U.S. is given by an individual person, and finding new donors is critical to the survival of almost any charity. It is thus important to understand which types of people give most often and/or the highest amounts, and to understand the situations in which they are most likely to give.

This section summarizes studies on general motivations behind giving, as well as studies examining demographic variables that charities themselves can often access (e.g. age, gender, zip code). Many authors have written about the impact on charitable donations of factors like “empathic concern” (Davis 1983) or “belief in a just world” (Furnham 1994). However, charities seldom know much about potential donors’ personality traits or philosophies, so studies on these “invisible” traits are not reviewed.

### **Reasons we donate**

Bekkers and Wiepking (2010) discuss eight mechanisms that influence charitable giving: “awareness of need”, “solicitation”, “costs and benefits”, “altruism”, “reputation”, “psychological benefits”, “values”, and “efficacy”. These mechanisms interact with each other in many ways. Someone who is aware of a need but not altruistic will not give; an altruistic person who also values efficacy may not give to a charity that seems ineffective; reputation considerations may be a cost or benefit when giving is done in public, but not for private giving; and so on. This review touches on all eight mechanisms to some extent, though the Bekkers and Wiepking paper often does so in greater detail, and is well worth reading for anyone with an interest in the topic.

Moving from abstract mechanisms to concrete explanations, Yörük (2012) reported the results of a Gallup survey on 15,000 households which asked respondents why they gave money to charity. The reasons most often designated “somewhat” or “very” important were (1) having volunteered there in the past, (2) being asked by a close associate, (3) being asked by a member of the clergy, or (4) hearing a

news story about the organization. People who decided on their own to make a donation gave more than people responding to a request. Gallup found that women, blacks, and Hispanics were more likely than other participants to respond to solicitations, and that college graduates were less responsive than other people to all forms of fundraising. Schlegelmilch, Love, and Diamantopoulos (1997) found that people with more education were also less responsive to fundraising in Britain.

### **Giving, warm and cool**

Many studies in this review discuss a framework for giving that imitates the System One/System Two model of cognition (Kahneman, 2011). Some charitable donations are made with cool, rational intent: We give in a way that allows for as many tax deductions as possible, or read through charity-review websites before deciding which organization will make the most efficient use of our donations. Other donations are driven by instinct or emotion: We give to someone who asks for change on the street without thinking, or support our local animal shelter because helping dogs makes us feel a “warm glow” inside (Andreoni, 1990). Even charitable advertising acknowledges these different motivations: The front page of Givewell (2015) calls visitors’ attention to their “in-depth charity research”, while the American Red Cross (2015) proclaims that “the gratification is instant” after a person gives blood.

It is not clear whether “warm” or “cool” motivations drive more giving overall, and some motivations for giving do not fall neatly into either category: We might become excited or happy at the thought of giving to a charity we have thoroughly researched, and we might give very strategically to local organizations in order to publicize our generosity and bask in the glow of our neighbors’ approval. However, warm and cool giving can often be clearly distinguished, and warm giving seems less likely to be done with effectiveness in mind: Donations made instinctively, or out of sympathy for the recipient, are typically not the result of careful calculation and planning.

## **Which demographic factors influence giving?**

### **Gender and family**

Wiepking and Bekkers (2012) review a vast literature on gender and giving. Most studies find that women give more than men, but this could depend on the charitable cause in question. Trends which appear to be true for all causes: Women give more often, and are more likely to give in response to a request, but men, who tend to have higher incomes and more wealth, give more money when they do give (Lyons & Nivison-Smith, 2006). Men are more likely than women to give when the request is made by a woman, especially an attractive woman (Landry, Lange, List, Price, & Rupp, 2005). Women tend to have larger social networks, and are thus solicited more often (Wiepking & Maas, 2009). Women may also be less sensitive to the price of giving (the amount they must pay so that their charity receives a dollar), and thus less influence by techniques which lower that price, like donation matching (Andreoni, Brown, & Rischall, 2003).

Charities may want to target married couples; not only can a letter sent to a couple reach two people instead of one, but male-female pairs (randomly assembled from a mostly-straight population) tend to be more generous than other pairs (Kamas, Preston, & Baum, 2008). In addition, living with a romantic partner (spouse or not) increases the chance that a person will give (Wiepking & Maas, 2009). Charities should also keep in mind that single men do not give as often or as generously as single women (Mesch, 2009; Piper & Schnepf, 2008). Zagefka and James (2015) suggest addressing donation letters to the woman of the house, since women also respond more often to donation requests.

Having children may or may not change the way people give. Most studies reviewed by Wiepking and Bekkers (2012) found a positive relationship between giving and the number of children in a household. Having children could make charities which help children seem more salient and appealing. Children also attend school, join clubs, and participate in fundraisers, exposing their families to additional solicitation. Common sense tells us that different charities may be affected in different ways by the children of potential donors. Save the Children may be more attractive to families with young children,

while Mothers Against Drunk Driving might look for families with older children. If a charity's work is somehow connected to helping young people, this variable is worth investigating.

## **Personal wealth**

Individuals who have more money give more money away. Wiepking and Bekkers (2012) cite "overwhelming evidence" of a positive relationship between income and giving, as well as a separate positive relationship between wealth and giving. Even children who grew up in higher-income families tend to be more generous in adulthood, controlling for their own income (Bekkers & Wiepking, 2011). However, giving seems to be an inelastic good for most people; increases in giving tend to be lower than increases in income, and the percentage of income donated gets lower as income rises (Bakija & Heim, 2008). Income could become more elastic after a certain level of wealth is reached; a billionaire like Warren Buffett can give away 99% of his wealth and still live very comfortably. However, the non-billionaire donors charities can reach more easily probably give a lower proportion of their income away as they grow wealthier.

There are many possible explanations for this: Giving could be a relatively cheap way to increase happiness (as this review has mentioned already), and lower-income people might give for the "warm glow" that higher-income people can acquire through the purchase of more expensive material goods. Lower-income people also have more lower-income people in their own social circles, and may see more evidence of human need on a daily basis, prompting them to give to local causes that help people they know personally. It could also be the case that giving is linked to the number of solicitations a person receives, and that that number increases more slowly than income or wealth (e.g. someone who earns \$500,000/year probably does not receive ten times as many letters from charities as someone who earns \$50,000/year). More thoughts on this phenomenon can be found in Bekkers and Wiepking (2011).

From a charity's perspective, high-income people are still the donors who will give the most money on average. But if a charity wishes to bring in a large number of small donations, or seek out donors not being approached by other charities, it could be worthwhile to look beyond the upper-middle

class. Another promising strategy would involve targeting low-income donors who slip under other organizations' radars, but who are likely to see a rise in income soon (e.g. college or professional students on the cusp of graduation).

## **Age**

Dozens of studies find a positive relationship between age and giving (Bekkers & Wiepking, 2011). That trend, however, eventually becomes weaker and sometimes reverses. Andreoni (2000) finds that giving tends to decrease after the age of 75, while James (2013) points out data showing that an individual's chance of giving each year begins to decline at least ten years before death. Giving levels may decrease as early as age 65 (Belfield & Beney, 2000). Clotfelter (1997) finds that the 45-54 age group has the highest chance of donating, but that 55-to-64-year-olds give the highest average donations, conditional on giving (leaving the two groups very close in terms of their overall giving). As average lifespans continue to climb around the world, this giving reversal may happen later and later. But the factors behind the reversal – lower income and higher expenses, especially healthcare, as we age – do not seem likely to change. Charities should carefully monitor the giving activity of their oldest donors, and perhaps automatically stop soliciting if some number of years goes by without a donation. On the other hand, the chance of receiving a bequest (a donation given in a person's will) could make it worthwhile to continue building relationships with older donors.

## **Religion**

Bekkers and Wiepking (2011) review many studies showing a positive relationship between religiosity and giving. However, these studies typically define donations to churches as a form of charitable giving, which means that their results may not apply to secular charities seeking donations. That said, others have reported that religious people give more money to secular causes than the non-religious, both in the U.S. (Eckel & Grossman, 2004) and in the relatively secular Netherlands (Bekkers & Schuyt, 2008). Others find that they give the same amount (Wilhelm, Rooney, & Tempel, 2007) or that the

relationship depends on the level of religiosity. For example, Lunn, Klay, and Douglass (2001) found that U.S. Presbyterians who went to church more often gave less to secular causes, and Brooks (2005) found a similar result with a wider sample of Christians. Include the fact that these studies use several different definitions of “secular causes”, and the effects become very muddled. Bekkers and Wiepking (2011) delve deeper into the full complexity of the topic. Different charities, of course, will find more or less value in reaching out to believers: The Salvation Army will probably have better luck than Planned Parenthood if both charities try to raise money from Catholics.

## **Techniques to Increase Giving in General**

Dozens of techniques meant to increase charitable giving have been studied in great detail. Most of these techniques could be used by almost any charity – displaying a photo of a beneficiary, for example – and do not rely on a charity’s evidentiary backing or cost-effectiveness for success. This section of the review explores these “general” techniques.

### **The Power of Suggestion**

Many studies, ranging from early work by Cialdini and Schroeder (1976) to recent research from the UK’s Behavioural Insights team (Sanders, 2014), investigate what happens when a charity suggests that people give a specific amount of money. How do different suggestion levels alter giving behavior?

### **Paltry contributions**

When a solicitor specifically mentions a very small amount – for example, saying “even a penny will help!” – people are often more likely to give than they are if the solicitor doesn’t mention any specific amount. This technique is known in literature on persuasion (or “compliance”) as “LPC”, for “legitimizing paltry contributions”. In a recent meta-analysis of studies that compared a paltry-contribution request to a

request with no suggested amount, Andrews, Carpenter, Shaw, and Boster (2008) found that paltry-contribution requests did increase the likelihood of giving, but did not examine how these requests affected the amount given. This information is important: If donors take a paltry-contribution request literally and give very small amounts, even a higher participation rate might not compensate for the lower donations. This is not necessarily what happens, however: Dolinski, Grzyb, Olejnik, Prusakowski, and Urban (2005) found in two field experiments that adding a paltry request to a control statement increased the average amount that each participant donated by over 50%. Brockner, Guzzi, Kane, Levine, and Shaplen (1984) found that a paltry-contribution request led people to pledge more money (over the phone and in person) than a control request.

It seems natural to assume that someone asked to donate a small amount would actually give a small amount. So why is LPC effective? The effect could work through the mechanism of "legitimization", whereby a previously-unthinkable action becomes "accepted as a new standard or norm" (Shearman & Yoo, 2007). When solicitors suggest that a penny will help, participants who might not have given at all might realize that giving only a penny is a "legitimate", socially acceptable decision, leaving them more likely to donate some amount rather than nothing at all. Meanwhile, donors who already planned to give may not change their plans based on a solicitor's suggestion. (Another explanation: If someone thinks that even a penny can help, they might be enthusiastic at the thought of how many pennies they can afford to donate, and feel as though they have an unusual opportunity to make a substantial impact.)

Still, not all studies found positive results for this technique. Shearman and Yoo (2007) found that while a paltry-contribution request increased compliance rate over a control request, participants hearing the paltry request gave far less, to the point that the control request brought in more money per participant. Weyant and Smith (1987) found a similar effect during door-to-door solicitation; paltry requests slightly increased compliance rate, but brought in far less money on average.

Results were also mixed when paltry-contribution requests were used outside of face-to-face solicitation. DeJong and Oopik (1992) saw a drop in average donations from donors mailed a letter which included "even a penny will help". On the other hand, Weyant and Smith (1987) found that donors gave more on average when mailed a request for a small donation rather than a request with no suggested

amount, while Desmet (1999) found that shifting a donation scale toward lower (though not quite “paltry”) amounts slightly increased the amount raised by each letter in a charitable mailing.

Though multiple meta-analyses examine the effect of LPC on likelihood of donating, no meta-analysis looked at its effect on the average amount given by those who donate. Overall, the literature seems to show that LPC is likely to increase (or at least not decrease) the number of donations received, but is not especially effective in increasing the amount given overall. Further studies in this field could examine whether the technique works differently on people who were or were not planning to give already, or on new donors and those who had given to the charity in the past. Researchers could also try to confirm the suspicion of Weyant and Smith (1987) that the technique does not work as well with higher-income participants. Finally, several studies use LPC conditions with concrete phrases like “even a penny” or “even a dollar”, while others use abstract phrases like “even the smallest amount”. It would be interesting to learn whether the former type of request was more effective than the latter. Guéguen (2013) tried to answer this question in France; he found that writing “even a centime will help” on a donation box raised 15% more money than writing “even the smallest amount will help”, which in turn raised more money than a control condition without either message. Still, further studies could try different concrete requests (e.g. “even a dollar”).

### **Anchoring donors on generosity**

What happens when charities use the opposite strategy, suggesting that donors give high amounts? Many experimental studies have shown that people presented with arbitrary numbers tend to be influenced by those numbers when they make decisions. For example, spinning a 10 on a roulette wheel led people to guess that there were fewer African members of the UN than they guessed after spinning a higher number like 65 (Tversky, 1974). Thus, we might expect that seeing a high suggested donation would lead donors to make higher actual donations.

Weyant and Smith (1987) found that suggesting high donations lowered donation rates without raising the amount of the average donation. But Doob and McLaughlin (1989) found exactly the opposite



result; mentioning a set of “suggested gifts” ranging from 50 to 250 Canadian dollars brought in 20% more money per letter than a range of 30 to 100, without reducing the donation rate at all. Altmann, Falk, Heidhues, and Jayaraman (2014) found that suggesting larger donation amounts to visitors on an online German donation platform raised overall giving, both for the charities on the platform and the site itself. Sanders (2014) doubled the amount suggested by a charitable mailing and found that donations *more* than doubled in response – a shockingly large change which may not hold up over more studies, but which is still indicative of an overall pattern.

The results of Desmet (1999) were somewhere in between. The author found that a higher suggested donation in a mailing reduced response rates compared to a control mailing, but that a lower suggestion failed to raise response rates, perhaps because donors didn’t see the new low rate (less than 100 francs, or \$15) as worth their time to send in. Desmet also found that donors generally ignored the highest and lowest suggested values in a range of suggestions, while choosing the value closest to their previous donation. This implies that charities could benefit from micro-managing their mailings, basing suggestions to each donor on their past donations and slowly increasing donors’ giving with each new letter. More evidence for the power of targeted suggestions comes from Schibrowsky and Peltier (1995), who found that a higher suggested donation range alone did not raise donation rates, but “matching” the donation range to the donor (suggesting higher donations to those who had given more in the past and lower donations to those who had given less) increased the overall amount given by each of the two groups. Similarly, Verhaert and Van den Poel (2011) found that that past donors to a charity gave the most money when a solicitation suggested an amount equal to the average of their previous gifts.

Suggested donation amounts could be more effective when charities work in social proof, discussing impressive gifts from other donors to normalize the idea of giving generously. Shang, Reed, and Croson (2008) ran an experimental study to examine the power of social suggestion during a radio pledge drive. Callers to the radio station who were told that a past caller had pledged a large amount gave more than callers who did not hear this, though only when the past caller was of the same gender as they were. The authors later replicated this finding (Shang & Croson, 2009), but noted that only new donors were influenced by the “anchor” amounts; previous donors were harder to influence with social

suggestion. Similarly, Verhaert (2010) found that new donors were easily persuaded by solicitations that mentioned other donors, but that this strategy actually reduced the odds of “reactivating” a lapsed former donor.

Assuming that a charity wants to use suggestion, is it better to suggest a high or a low amount? Fraser, Hite, and Sauer (1988) found that high suggestions doubled donations compared to a control suggestion, but found no increase in donations after a low suggestion. And Alpizar, Carlsson, and Johansson-Stenman (2008a) found that suggesting a \$2 donation raised about 25% less per donor than suggesting \$10, even though participants in the \$2 suggestion were more likely to give. High suggestions seem to be a better choice, though results will vary for each charity and set of donors. As with any technique in this review, charities should experiment carefully before a full-scale implementation.

### **Sequential suggestions: Foot-in-the-door, door-in-the-face**

Charities could also start off with a high or low suggestion and use that suggestion as leverage to make a second, middle-of-the-road request.

Starting with a low suggestion is known as the “foot-in-the-door” technique, first described by Freedman and Fraser (1966), who found that asking participants to place small stickers on their windows steeply increased the odds that they’d later accept a large, ugly sign in their yard. Foot-in-the-door (FITD) relies on asking for a small initial favor to establish a relationship, before asking for a larger favor. If the initial request is accepted, a social bond forms between the requester and helper, who may feel a sense of obligation to comply with a second request (Freedman and Fraser 1966).

Foot-in-the-door strategies sometimes work for charities. Reingen (1978) found that asking someone to answer a few short survey questions nearly doubled the chance that they gave to the American Heart Association (assuming they said yes). Pliner, Hart, Kohl, and Saari (1974) found that people who accepted their request to wear small pins honoring a cause led them to donate more to a related cause just a few seconds later. However, foot-in-the-door seems to fail as often as it succeeds (though more data are needed). Brownstein and Katzev (1985) found that asking people for a small favor

when they entered a museum made them less likely to give before they left. Williams and Williams (1989) found that using an FITD solicitation did not increase donations compared to a control solicitation. One study even found that participants asked for an initial favor gave less often and less money per donation than control participants (Wang, Brownstein, & Katzev, 1989).

If charities do want to try foot-in-the-door, they should keep the “continued questions” effect in mind. One meta-analysis of FITD requests (for many kinds of helping behavior) found especially high compliance rates from participants who were asked to answer many survey questions after they had already answered a few (Burger, 1999). The author speculated that this phenomenon may generalize: “It appears the participants’ sense of commitment is extended to the second request”. Thus, using the same type of help for the small and large request could be especially effective. One path for future research on suggestion and donations would involve asking for a very small donation and following with a larger monetary request, to see if the “sense of commitment” extends to giving money.

What if charities start with a high suggested donation, then ask for less money if the listener says no? This is the “door-in-the-face” (DITF) technique, which asks for a large favor, then backs down to ask for something more reasonable. This technique is thought to work by triggering our natural tendency to look upon concessions as a kind of favor. If the solicitor “makes a concession” and offers to accept a smaller amount than they “really wanted”, we will consider revising our initial refusal into an acceptance. For example, Cialdini et al. (1975) asked undergraduates to sign up for a year of unpaid volunteering; the students all refused. But those who had refused were three times as likely to agree to chaperone a trip to the zoo (without pay) as those who had not heard the ridiculous initial offer. Even when the students had no reason to consider an enormous commitment, the simple act of refusal led them to comply with a second, reasonable request.

Several studies have examined the impact of DITF on charitable donations. Soliciting Israeli students on the collection day for a national charity campaign, Schwarzwald, Raz, and Zvibel (1979) found a “boomerang effect”. A “reasonable” initial request (50 shekels or less), even when refused, led to a higher rate of donations when a smaller amount was suggested – but an “unreasonable” request (60 shekels or more) lowered donation rates compared to the control condition, perhaps because students

were annoyed to have been bothered with a ridiculous question. Wang et al. (1989) found a similar effect in a door-to-door study for the American Cancer Society. Asking for \$10 or \$25 before asking “can you please just give two dollars?” raised compliance rates and average donations, but asking for \$50 first did neither.

One meta-analysis of 117 studies testing door-in-the-face requests (most of which did not concern charitable donation) found that DITF had a positive effect on verbal compliance (e.g. expressing willingness to give money) but no significant effect on behavioral compliance (e.g. giving an actual donation) (Feeley, Anker, & Aloe, 2012). The success of DITF was also found to be dependent on baseline compliance; the higher the proportion of participants who accepted a request in the control condition, the less successful DITF was. Charities using this technique should save it for a request that has not been heeded by many donors in the past.

How do these two “sequential-request” techniques compare to each other? Some studies showed that participants gave equally in either a foot-in-the-door or door-in-the-face condition (Reingen, 1978; Williams & Williams, 1989). Others found that DITF outperformed FITD (Brownstein & Katzev, 1985; Wang et al., 1989). In a review of literature on both techniques (used separately), Dillard, Hunter, and Burgoon (1984) suggests that FITD is better for requests with low baseline compliance (fewer than 25% of people accept the intended final offer), but that DITF is superior for higher baseline compliance, or when baseline data are unavailable.

Overall, both foot-in-the-door and door-in-the-face requests show potential to work under certain fundraising conditions; depending on the context, however, one might be superior to the other, and a straightforward suggestion might be the best plan of all. Charities should experiment with several suggestion techniques to find something appropriate for their needs.

## **Solicitations, Conversations, and Donations**

If a charity uses employees or volunteers to solicit donations (whether outside a supermarket or at a charitable gala), how should those employees look, dress, and act?

Wearing a uniform could help. Bickman (1974) asked people to give money to a stranger in the street. Experimenters were more successful when dressed as uniformed guards than when dressed in civilian garb, and this effect persisted even if the experimenter left the scene before the participant decided whether to give. Using a similar manipulation, Bushman (1984) found that male and female experimenters in firefighter uniforms persuaded more participants to donate than experimenters wearing suits or casual clothes. However, participants in the Bushman study attributed their compliance to “obedience” rather than “altruism”, which could mean that uniforms are less persuasive outside of face-to-face contexts where people feel pressure to obey. Consistent with this interpretation, Lawrence and Watson (1991) found that *televised* solicitors wearing a uniform related to their cause (e.g. a nurse’s outfit for a Red Cross request) did not raise more money than solicitors in business suits.

What about simply wearing formal rather than casual clothing? Some experimental studies find an increase in compliance rate for participants asked to give by suit-wearing solicitors (Chaiken et al. 1974, Levine 1998). But several others find no difference between formal and casual clothing (Bull and Gibson 1981, Hensley 1980, McElroy 1994). Intriguingly, Williams (1989) found that zoo volunteers raised more money when they wore suits rather than casual clothes, but only when they asked specifically for a very large “membership” donation rather than a small donation. Perhaps small donations are triggered by a “warm glow” urge to feel good by giving, but large donations also require trust or some kind of signal of efficacy, like a well-dressed volunteer? The physical context of a request may also moderate the effect of formal clothing; business suits should be more impressive in a mall than at a gala.

Clothing aside, other characteristics of a solicitor can also be important for solicitation. Physically attractive people are more persuasive in general (Chaiken, 1979), and attractive solicitors were found to be more likely to receive money from strangers for an emergency tetanus shot (West & Brown, 1975). Landry et al. (2005) found that attractive solicitors – especially attractive females – raised more money as door-to-door solicitors. Iredale, Van Vugt, Dunbar, and Miller (2009) found that straight men donated more when watched by attractive women than when watched by other men, but that this effect did not hold for straight women watched by an attractive man. High-status solicitors can succeed even if they are not attractive; Pandey (2010) found that college professors asking for charitable donations were more

persuasive and raised more money overall than students (whether they were asking students or other professors). Increasing the number of solicitors could also increase their impact; Jackson and Latané (1981) found that pairs of solicitors raised more than single solicitors, though less than they would have raised working separately.

What about the solicitor's race? Bryan and Test (1967) found that white shoppers were significantly more likely to give to a white than a black Salvation Army bell-ringer. A 48-year-old study on race might not generalize well to present-day America, but then again, List and Price (2009) found that minority solicitors raised less than white solicitors from white and minority households. Freeman, Aquino, and McFerran (2009) suggest that priming morality in general could help charities get around racial bias. The authors gave white undergraduates the chance to donate some share of a potential lottery prize to the United Negro College Fund. Those who reported a higher sense of "moral elevation" gave significantly more, while those reporting a higher level of "group-based-dominance" (desire for one's in-group to dominate others) gave significantly less. However, reading a story about highly moral people (the Amish, in this case) neutralized the effect of group-based-dominance and increased donations from even the most unlikely, in-group-focused participants.

Going beyond presence and appearance: How should solicitors actually talk to potential donors? Are conversations better than simple requests? Are solicitors more persuasive when they talk about themselves in addition to the cause? Several experimental studies made use of a "dialogue" (or "foot-in-mouth") condition, within which solicitors preface a request by greeting a person (e.g. "hello, how are you?") and responding to the answer (e.g. "that's great" or "I'm sorry to hear that") before pitching their cause. These studies used monologue conditions, where solicitors simply ask for money without asking questions, as controls.

Dialogue consistently helps solicitors raise more money. Dolinski et al. (2005) found that potential donors approached through dialogue gave twice as much on average as donors who heard a monologue. Dolinski, Nawrat, and Rudak (2001) found that dialogue increased compliance without decreasing the average gift per donor, even when people answered "not well" in response to the "how are you doing?" question. In slight contrast, Howard (1990) found that dialogue increased the likelihood that participants

would invite a solicitor to visit their homes and pitch, but only when they said they were feeling well. The author also found that a request including the phrase “hope you’re doing well” was no more effective than a request without that phrase, and that participants had to verbally respond to a solicitor’s question before becoming more likely to give. Interactive conversations are the key to effective dialogue.

Starting a conversation gives solicitors the chance to bring up similarities between themselves and potential donors – which itself can be an effective technique. Aunel and Basil (1994) found that solicitors identifying themselves as students raised more money from other students. Dolinski et al. (2001) found a positive but non-significant effect for a similar student-identification condition. Yinon and Sharon (1985) found that secular Israelis gave more to secular than religious solicitors, but that religious donors did not give more to religious solicitors. J. M. Burger, Messian, Patel, del Prado, and Anderson (2004) found that participants gave more money to a solicitor who claimed to share their first name.

Charities using face-to-face solicitation should be wary of “empathy avoidance”, wherein people go out of their way to avoid feeling empathy if they think it will lead them to give something away (Shaw, Batson, & Todd, 1994). Andreoni, Rao, and Trachtman (2011) found that nearly 1/3 of supermarket shoppers walked to a door on the other side of the store to avoid a Salvation Army solicitor who spoke to shoppers (rather than only ringing a bell). Shoppers who passed the talking solicitor gave more often and more money, so the decision to avoid them seems to have been rational for anyone who did not want to give. Trachtman et al. (2014) found similar avoidance in a replication of Andreoni et al. Even before the term “empathy avoidance” was coined, Pancer, McMullen, Kabatoff, Johnson, and Pond (1979) found that students walked farther to avoid a table with a donation canister than an empty table, perhaps so they would not appear ungenerous to other students if they did not give. (Curiously, the presence of students at the table made no difference.) Empathy avoidance may be social – a way for shoppers to avoid appearing stingy in front of strangers – or an attempt to avoid struggling with contradictory desires (to help and not to help). Either way, the easier it is to avoid a request, the more likely it is that potential donors will go out of their way to do so.

## Giving socially

Some researchers (e.g. Iredale, 2008) hold that giving behavior is partly explained by the desire for social status: We give because it makes us look good to those who see us give. If this is true, we ought to give more when we are in the presence of other people. Does this happen?

Social pressure (e.g. being asked to give face-to-face) generally increased overall giving in an experimental study by Long (1976), though donations to one of the six health organizations in the study were actually negatively correlated with social pressure. Satow (1975) found that subjects watched by an experimenter donated more to a psychology research fund than subjects who chose whether to give in private. Being watched by someone other than a solicitor can also increase donations. Reyniers and Bhalla (2013) found that even having a single other person participants' donations increased the amount they gave by 40%. What's more, when donors were allowed to revise their donation after learning how much a partner gave, those with generous partners adjusted significantly upward – but those with stingy partners adjusted downward. Reinstein and Riener (2011) found that students gave more when they knew their donations would be revealed to another participant (one they had spoken to beforehand). This effect was stronger when that other participant had not given yet, perhaps because the “leader” donors predicted that their partners would give more if they also did. If so, they were correct: Other participants gave more after learning about a leader's high donation (though learning about a low donation did not lead them to give less). Female “leaders” were particularly influential.

We can even be influenced by the behavior of people who cannot see us, as long as we are watching them instead. Two studies found that seeing someone else donate to a street solicitor increased the likelihood that a person would donate to the same solicitor (Bryan & Test, 1967; Lincoln, 1977). Lincoln et al. (1977) noted that men were especially influenced by male donors, though this was not the case for women and female donors.

However, giving in a public setting does not always increase donations. Alpizar et al. (2008b) found no significant difference between anonymous and public donations to a national park. Wiesenthal, Austrom, and Silverman (2010) found that participants who were members of groups gave less money the



larger the group – though this may have been because the groups were solicited outside of a pub, and may have been more impatient or distracted when they contained more people. (Whether the first member gave slightly predicted the giving of other group members.)

Cultural differences could moderate the effect of publicity on giving. Lambarraa and Riener (2012) tested how Moroccan potential donors would react to publicity if they followed a religion (Islam) which encourages giving only in private (the practice of *Sadaqah*). They found that participants gave less when their donations would be made public, but only if the participants were Muslims or the experimental instructions were written in Arabic rather than French. Non-religious participants gave more in the public than the private condition. Depending on the religious and cultural backgrounds of potential donors, charities may fundraise more successfully if they keep donations private.

## **One-Way Messaging**

Many charities will never see most of their donors in person. For these charities, mass mailings, email newsletters, viral videos, and Facebook campaigns can all be important fundraising tools. What do these forms of “passive solicitation” have in common? They all use some combination of pictures and words (whether written or spoken) to persuade a donor in the absence of a live solicitor. How can such stimuli be used to improve returns from fundraising campaigns?

## **Words and Pictures**

Adding photographs to a donation request will often increase the amount of money raised. But photos are not always effective, and the content of a photo matters a great deal. Deborah A Small and Verrochi (2009) found in a range of experimental studies that photographs of sad children brought in more and larger donations than photos of happy or neutral children. Conversely, Dyck and Coldevin (1992) found that a photo of a smiling, well-fed child led to as many donations as a photo of a frowning child with exposed ribs, and that the smiling child brought in more money overall (perhaps because donors who saw the happy child felt like they were seeing the direct results of the charity’s work: “The

photo gives me a positive feeling of success in what World Vision is doing"). In both studies, adding any photo to a request made the request more effective.

Thornton, Kirchner, and Jacobs (1991) found that using photos on donation jars in stores doubled the daily donation rate, but that photos made no difference in door-to-door solicitation. In two similar studies, photos in charity advertisements and on donation boxes increased giving by about 20% (Perrine & Heather, 2000) and photos used by solicitors for the March of Dimes actually *lowered* donations (perhaps because the images "upset" potential donors) (Isen & Noonberg, 1979). Photographs could also increase the impact of using a "follow-the-leader" social cue: Sanders (2014) found that people who received a card with a message from a co-worker inviting them to donate were twice as likely to give when the card also included the co-worker's photo (even if that person was a different gender or worked in a different location).

Photographs are not the only visual stimuli with a positive effect on giving. Guéguen, Jacob, and Charles-Sire (2011) left a variety of donation boxes in French bakeries. After four days, round and square boxes had collected similar amount, but *heart*-shaped boxes brought in twice as much per day as the other shapes. Powell, Roberts, Nettle, and Fusani (2012) added stickers that looked like cartoon eyes to a donation canister in a supermarket, which doubled the money raised per shopper (not conditional on donation). This prosocial result matched the finding by Bateson, Nettle, and Roberts (2006) that office workers paid more for coffee they had taken when a picture of eyes was present in the break room .

Photos generally have a positive influence on giving, but charities should be careful not to create the appearance of waste with an expensive, image-heavy mailing. Bekkers and Crutzen (2007) found that including a color picture in a mailing led to lower response rates and lower average donations from new *and* former donors to a religious charity, while raising the cost to send each letter. The authors speculate that the elaborate messages may have raised donors' estimates of the charity's fundraising costs, lowering their confidence in the charity as a result – an effect seen in Bowman (2006).

Photographs can be visually arresting, but charities also need to send verbal information to potential donors. Nicolas Gueguen has authored a variety of fascinating studies on a few specific words. In Gueguen et al. (2011), French solicitors raised 60% more money when they wore shirts which read "loving

= helping” rather than “donating = helping”. (Whether this shows the positive effect of priming donors with love or the negative effect of using a tautology is uncertain.) Guéguen et al. (2013) found higher donor compliance in response to the phrases “you are free to accept or refuse”, “do as you wish”, “you are free”, and “do not feel obliged” – and that using the last phrase twice was more effective than using it once. Perhaps donors give more when they feel freer; on the other hand, it may be that simply making a longer pitch improves the odds of receiving a donation. Further research in this area, and on other promising words in many different languages, would be quite valuable.

### **Empathy and other feelings**

Empathy generally has a substantial positive influence on our tendency to behave prosocially (Eisenberg & Miller, 1987). But can empathy be primed in a way that increases charitable giving?

Warren and Walker (1991) sent letters asking Australian recipients either to picture Sudanese people trapped in a crisis situation or imagine themselves in the same situation. People in the latter (empathy) condition gave no differently than the others. (Marjanovic, Struthers, & Greenglass, 2012) found that participants’ level of empathic concern made no difference to their donations. In contrast, Dickert, Sagara, and Slovic (2011) found that Oregon undergraduates given an affect prime (which led to a boost in empathy toward charitable recipients) gave more on average than students given a control prime. And Batson, Chang, Orr, and Rowland (2002) found that undergraduates asked to feel empathetic rather than objective while listening to an interview with a heroin addict voted to allocate more of their student-activity budget to supporting a drug-treatment center.

On the other hand, empathy can backfire if a charity turns it into a requirement for giving. Chuan and Samek (2013) found that potential donors gave less money and less often when offered the “reward” of writing a letter to the recipient of their gift. The authors proposed that donors who could not give enough to win a card did not feel like giving at all, but it could also be the case that expressing empathy by writing a personal note felt like an effortful addition to giving.

What about emotions other than empathy? What can inspire someone to give even if they are not looking through the eyes of a recipient?

Basil, Ridgway, and Basil (2006) induced guilty feelings in college students by comparing their luxurious lives to those of impoverished children in the developing world. Students who felt more guilt donated more of their participation payment, but this effect was entirely mediated by students' feelings of responsibility, which were highly correlated with guilty feelings. Even if it works, though, making donors feel guilty might not be a good idea in the long term; for example, it could easily worsen empathy avoidance, leading people to evade solicitors and recycle charity mail without opening it.<sup>8</sup>

A better prospect might be moral elevation, the feeling people get when they hear about a virtuous act, which often promotes prosocial behavior (Haidt, 2003). Freeman et al. (2009) found that a feeling of elevation led to higher giving from white students to black students. Thomson and Siegel (2013) found that participants' feelings of moral elevation after hearing a story of generosity were positively correlated with their donations to Toys for Tots. And Henderson, Huang, and Chang (2012) found that hearing about surprising acts of altruism, where a large social distance existed between the giver and recipient (e.g. Chinese students mentoring Turkish students) led students to donate more money to an unrelated cause than when they heard a story of altruism without social distance (e.g. Chinese students mentoring other Chinese students).

Existential terror is another feeling shown to increase giving, though it might be even harder than guilt to induce without offending donors. Jonas, Schimel, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski (2002) applied "terror management theory" (Rosenblatt, Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Lyon, 1989) to predict that scared participants would give more to charities, and especially American charities, as a way to feel protected by following cultural norms. And indeed, participants who were reminded of their own deaths gave significantly more to American (but not international) charities, compared to participants who thought about a painful dental procedure they had gone through in the past.

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<sup>8</sup> Of course, there are also humane reasons not to intentionally make innocent people feel guilty.

**Giving time, giving money**

Liu and Aaker (2008) found that, while people who think of their money as scarce are less likely to donate it, time donations (e.g. volunteering) show no such scarcity effect. They also asked students to volunteer for a nonprofit, and found that even those who declined gave more generously when asked to donate later. Was this a door-in-the-face effect, or did the volunteering question lead people to think about giving money as though it were the same as giving time (and thus, less affected by scarcity considerations)?

A. L. Brown et al. (2012) examined the second possibility. The authors paid students to perform a boring, repetitive task under three conditions. Each condition gave participants the chance to donate as much as they wanted by making choices, but only one allowed them to work “directly” for the charity, by earning money that was automatically donated. This final condition mimicked volunteering, by connecting the students’ work and the charity’s benefit with no intermediate “donation” step. It was also the most successful condition, leading to the largest donation rate and the highest mean donation-per-participant.

**Helping yourself, helping others**

Giving to charity often leads to a boost in the donor’s happiness. If charities explain to donors that giving will make them feel better, will they give more than when they think about the benefit to other people? White and Peloza (2009) found that Canadian students gave more when the gift was framed as beneficial to other people – but only when donations were announced in front of a group of other students. In a private giving condition, students gave three times as much after the self-benefit framing. When donors weren’t set to lose status in front of others by appearing selfish, they gave in a more “selfish” fashion, appearing to care mostly about their own benefit. Benson and Catt (1978) found the same effect: The phrase “I know it would make you feel good to know you are helping” doubled contributions to the United Way in a door-to-door solicitation, compared to “It’s really your responsibility to help”.

Even if telling donors about how they can benefit from giving is sometimes effective, it seems important for charities to also mention the recipients of donations. What should they tell donors about the people they help to maximize the impact of their requests?

Mentioning beneficiaries at all is a good start. Kang, Park, Lee, Kim, and Allenby (2014) found that advertisements which focused on beneficiaries raised more money than advertisements which focused on the problem the charity was fighting to solve – even though the participants were Korean and the beneficiaries were African. Charitable beneficiaries should also be presented as both blameless and willing to help themselves. Zagefka et al. (2011) manipulated perceptions of victim responsibility, and found that participants' levels of "victim blame" negatively predicted the amounts they gave to famine victims. They also found that blame led to smaller donations for the victims of a civil war. However, participants' perception of how hard victims were working to improve their own situations did not correlate with the amount they gave. In a similar but much simpler intervention, Benson and Catt (1978) told potential donors either that most of those receiving help were "innocent victims" or that they "have themselves to blame". The average donation was twice as high in the former condition. Fong (2007) found that participants told that a welfare recipient was "industrious" (looking for work and hoping to hold a full-time job) donated twice as much to support that person as participants told the recipient was not looking for work or hoping to work full-time. Participants also gave more if they believed, before learning about the recipient, that poverty is generally caused by bad luck.

### **Identifiable-victim bias: The power of the known individual**

If a charity want to include photos of children in a mailing, should they use a single child or a group of children? Should stories about the charity's impact discuss one beneficiary, or the charity's impact on an entire population of beneficiaries?

In each case, the former. Two of the most consistent findings in the literature on giving is that people prefer giving to individuals over groups, and to "identifiable victims" (people with names and faces) over "statistical victims" who only appear in data (like the six million children under the age of five

who died in 2013; World Health Organization, 2014). While people in the latter category are just as real as people whose names are known, they cannot be identified personally, which limits their emotional appeal (Jenni & Loewenstein, 1997). We even prefer donating to specific people when we do not know who they are: In a study by Deborah A Small and Loewenstein (2003) participants gave more to Habitat For Humanity when they were told the charity had chosen one of four families to receive a house (which family was not specified) than when they were told the charity had yet to choose which of the families would be helped. Even though one family would be helped in each case, and the participants did not know which, simply knowing that a gift's recipient had been chosen led them to give more generously.

In a series of studies, Kogut and Ritov (2005a) found that participants gave more often and more generously to help a single child than to help eight children. This propensity increased when the children were named and pictured; identifying the eight children actually *diminished* participants' willingness to give money for their sake, even when the amount that would save the lives of all eight was the same as the amount needed to save the life of one child. (Participants saw only the individual or the group.) Later, the authors replicated the finding that donors will give more to identified individuals and to a non-identified group. They also found that identified individuals received about twice as much money as identified groups, even when the cost to save one life was the same as the cost to save eight (Kogut & Ritov, 2005b).

However, this second study also included a joint-evaluation condition, which gave participants the chance to contribute either to an individual child, a group of seven children, or both. Most participants split their donation equally, and neither "side" received more than the other, even though the cost to save the seven was the same as the cost of saving the one and an even split would save fewer hypothetical lives than giving more money to the group. When participants were forced to choose – giving only to the individual or the group – they finally acted to help more people, giving twice as much on average to the seven as to the one. However, participants who had only seen the single child, and did not know about the group, gave more often and more money than participants who had seen the group.

Why does showing the names and faces of children in a group consistently lower the amount that people will donate to help them? Perhaps we find it overwhelming to feel empathy for many people at

once. Bloom (2014) suggests that our capacity for empathy is limited, and that trying to “see through the eyes” of eight different people is so difficult that we might exhaust our emotional energy trying to do so, leaving us too tired to be very generous. It might also be easier for an individual to identify with other individuals: Further research could explore whether groups of people, making a decision to give *as* groups, are more likely than individual donors to support a group of children.

If people cannot empathize with many other people at the same time, what other tactics might induce donors to care as much about groups as they do individuals? Hsee, Zhang, Lu, and Xu (2013) had an interesting idea: Frame the giving decision so that donors think of a group as a collection of individuals, and extend their empathy for one individual to the group as a whole. The authors call this the “unit asking technique”.

In one study of unit asking, participants were asked how much they would give to buy Christmas presents for 20 children from needy families. Half those participants were first asked how much they’d give to buy presents for *one* child. This simple intervention, which implied to participants that they ought to multiply their original empathy by a large number of beneficiaries, doubled the amount they were willing to donate. Another study using the same condition (but with 40 children) raised the average participant’s donation from \$52 to \$100 without reducing the number of donors. A third study asked participants to support the research of 70 doctoral students. In this case, unit asking (starting with one student, then moving to 70) led to average donations over five times as high, again with no impact on the number of donors. (The participants in this study were wealthy MBA students, which may have allowed them to donate especially high amounts.)

These are extremely powerful effects, and while unit asking has not yet been replicated by other authors, it has the potential to reduce donors’ pro-individual biases and raise giving towards otherwise unsympathetic groups of people. However, the authors warn against using too large a number in the second half of a unit ask: Helping 1000 or 10,000 people may be too much to ask, and might even make the problem seem hopeless.



## **Solicitating by mail**

Charity mailings and e-mailings are a major source of revenue for many nonprofit organizations. How can mail campaigns be optimized for fundraising?

For physical mail, optimization starts with the envelope and its content. Vriens, Van der Scheer, Hoekstra, and Roelf Bult (1998) sent 48,000 solicitation mailings to Dutch households and found that charities could increase returns by reducing the effort required to respond (by including a separate envelope for mailing back the check). Feld, Frenzen, Krafft, Peters, and Verhoef (2013) found that mailings could bring in more donations by putting photos and the recipient's name on their envelopes, and by adding postscripts to the letters inside. In another study on personalization, Behavioural Insights (2014) found that including the recipient's name on a solicitation email (ostensibly from the CEO of their company) doubled overall donations in a company-wide charity program.

Mailings should also take into account the donation history of each recipient (even if they have never given before). Piersma and Jonker (2004) found several inefficiencies in the mailing patterns of a large Dutch charity: the organization wasted time and money sending letters to people with weak donation records and failed to create narrow donor segments for better mail targeting. Still, charities need to turn non-donors into donors somehow. (Desmet, 1998) found that new donors were more likely to make a donation if they were mailed a catalogue with products they could purchase for the charity's benefit, perhaps because they saw a commercial relationship as a good precursor to giving altruistically.

Might a charity irritate donors by sending too much mail? van Diepen, Donkers, and Franses (2009) found in a field experiment that this was not the case for five large Dutch charities. (According to the authors, American charities usually send more mail than their Dutch counterparts, so this result may not generalize.) Other studies suggest that most donors who stop giving to a charity simply forget about it rather than actively rejecting it – meaning that additional mailings could stop donors from leaving (Faulkner, Truong, & Romaniuk, 2014; Sargeant, 2001). But while bothering donors may not be a problem, bothering spam filters can have terrible consequences. Mejova, Garimella, Weber, and Dougal (2014) found that emails from certain large, well-respected charities (including St. Jude's Children's Research Hospital, one of America's largest nonprofits) automatically went to spam more than half the time. To

avoid this fate, charities should follow the advice of email services like Mailchimp (2015) that offer advice on avoiding the spam folder based on observations of hundreds of millions of emails.

Finally, to succeed at raising money through email, nonprofits have to actually send emails. Dunham and Company (2014) studied the email practices of 151 large nonprofits. The authors found that 1/3 of charities did not send emails to new mailing list subscribers within 30 days of subscription, and that over half waited more than 90 days before asking a new subscriber to donate. Any nonprofit with this problem can fix it easily; common sense holds that donors should start getting emails soon after asking for them, so that they do not forget why they are receiving messages or stop caring about the charity's work before the first donation is requested.

### **Fundraising through social media**

How can charities use their presence on social networks to raise more money? Saxton and Wang (2013) present one reason for charities to be wary of Facebook: On the Facebook Causes donation platform, charities with an average of 318,000 "fans" raised an average of \$1,252 over the course of a month, which averages out to under a nickel per fan per year. On the other hand, the authors note their study may not have caught a link between Facebook fandom and donations outside of the Facebook platform. Castillo, Petrie, and Wardell (2014) studied the impact of a charity's attempt to incentivize sharing of a campaign. The organization added \$1 or \$5 to the donation of any donor who posted a link to a charitable campaign on their Facebook wall or sent it to a friend in a private message. These interventions did influence donors' posting, increasing the amount that their friends gave – but the amount raised was not enough to offset the cost of the subsidies. Still, suggesting that donors share the news of their gift with friends is free, and could be helpful if a subsidy is not used. In addition, varying the suggested content of the shared message could improve the effectiveness of subsidies. The strategy is worth exploring further, especially given the state of social-media fundraising: 75% of large charities do not even ask donors to share news of their donation on social media (Dunham and Company, 2014.)

## Organizing Campaigns

Any charity trying to raise money with a sustained campaign has many options for how to structure that campaign. Should they use one donor's gift to "match" the donations of other donors? Should they let donors choose where their money goes? Should they reward donors with gifts? What else can a charity do to produce a successful campaign?

### Incentivizing donors: Seeds, Matches, Lotteries, and Gifts

If a charity has a certain amount to spend on fundraising for a campaign, how should that money be spent to provide incentives for donors to give?

One option is to use "seed funding". A charity could "seed" a campaign with money of their own (or from a pre-existing donor) before starting their solicitation. This might create the appearance of existing social support for a cause, or make the goal seem easier to achieve from potential donors' point of view. Some seed campaigns include a goal, explaining how much they aim to raise overall, which ought to be helpful. An animal shelter with a seed donation of \$1000 towards a new \$5000 kennel is already closing in on their goal, but if the Gates Foundation announces that they have received a \$1000 seed donation to help them eradicate malaria, this will not make their campaign appear likelier to succeed. Not making a goal explicit forces donors to guess at how close a campaign is to success.

Rondeau and List (2008) found that donors gave more money to a \$5000 goal-amount campaign seeded with \$2500 than to a campaign raising \$5000 with no seed donation. The seed condition also raised more than a campaign with a goal of \$2500. Even when donors were told that the same amount of money remained to be raised, seeing that a seed donation had been given beforehand increased the amount they gave. List and Rondeau (2003) found that seeding \$2000 for a campaign with a \$3000 goal sharply raised average giving compared to seeding only \$300 or \$1000. This effect held even when refunds were offered to donors in the event that the goal amount was not raised. This clashes with the theory of Andreoni (1989), who predict that seed money should be irrelevant when refunds are available, since refunds eliminate the risk of a campaign not "succeeding", and a higher seed donation increases

giving by increasing the apparent chance of “success”. Instead, List and Rondeau propose that the seed-funding model of Vesterlund (2003) which assumes that high seed gifts signal a high-quality campaign to other donors, is more promising as an explanation of their results.

Verhaert and Van den Poel (2012) found that a campaign seeded with half of its goal amount raised much more money than the same campaign without seed funding from recipients of fundraising letters who had not given to the charity before, and from “low-fidelity” donors who had not given consistently or given large amounts. But seed money had no effect on the giving of the “high-fidelity” donors who were the charity’s most frequent and generous supporters, perhaps because those donors were already confident in the charity and did not care about the social support signaled by the seed donation.

A third model explaining the success of seed donations comes from Jensen, King, and Carcioppolo (2013), who propose that simply viewing progress toward a goal (e.g. the addition of seed funding) inspires donors to give, excited by the prospect of continued progress and eventual success. Cryder, Loewenstein, and Seltman (2013) examined the effect of a charitable campaign’s nearing its goal. The authors worked with a disaster-relief charity to send letters advertising real campaigns that had already raised 10%, 66%, or 85% of their goal amounts, as well as control letters for the same three campaigns that did not mention the amount already raised. The 10% and 66% campaigns were no more successful than their respective controls, but the campaign that was 85% complete attracted over twice as many donors as its control counterpart, and also much higher donations. Charities could learn from this study by soliciting more often on behalf of campaigns that are closest to completion; donors seem to enjoy giving to a cause that will probably succeed.

However, seed funding has not always been successful in experimental studies. Landry et al. (2005) found that telling people a fundraiser with no goal amount had been seeded with \$1000 did not increase donations. Chen, Li, and MacKie-Mason (2006) found that seeding an online campaign with half the necessary funding did not raise contributions compared to not seeding the campaign. On the other hand, a web-design mishap which made it nearly impossible to donate severely limited the size of Chen’s donor sample, and the study stands as a very weak counterexample to successful studies.

Another option for incentivizing donors is to offer them a “match”, telling them that additional money will be added to each dollar they give. The match amount can vary: for example, a 1:2 match would add 50 cents for each dollar donated. Ideally, such a match will make giving more rewarding and appealing for donors; for the price of only a dollar, they can make sure that *more* than a dollar goes to charity. (That is, the “price of giving” drops when a match is added.)

Rondeau and List (2008) found that a 1:1 match (adding a dollar to each dollar given) did not increase donations relative to a control condition, and was less successful than a seed donation of the same cost. In other words, spending \$2500 to fund the first half of the campaign before soliciting raised more money for the Sierra Club than spending that \$2500 to incentivize donations. Karlan et al. (2007) tested 1:1, 2:1, and 3:1 matches and found that, while the existence of a match increased participation rate and overall donations, the *amount* of the match made no difference; donors gave just as generously when each dollar they gave raised \$2 instead of \$3 or \$4. The authors also found that the matching condition had an effect on donors who had given below the median amount in the past, but not on donors above the median. This coincides with the observation of Verhaert et al. (2012) that donors who already strongly support a charity care less about additional incentives to give. (Karlan, List, & Shafir, 2011) replicated the finding that match amounts are not very important; a 1:3 match, barely adding anything to a donor’s gift, was just as successful as a 1:1 match, but neither increased giving from people who were not already active supporters of the charity. The identity of the source of matching funds also appears to matter; people told their donation would be matched by the prestigious Gates Foundation gave twice as often as those told the matching donor was anonymous, without reducing the average amount per donation (Karlan & List, 2012).

One potential issue with matches – and any other form of donation incentive – is that they may not change the amount donors give in the long run. If someone plans to give \$100 to a charity this year, and one of the charity’s two annual campaigns is a matching campaign, the person may give \$100 to the match and \$0 to the other, instead of \$50 to both. In this scenario, the matching campaign crowds out giving to the ordinary campaign, and the charity does not actually raise extra money from donors. Meier (2007) found that matching students’ gifts to two charitable funds increased giving in one semester, but

that students in the control group actually gave more over the next three semesters. This could imply that crowding-out is a real problem, or that getting an incentive to give one time makes donors care less about giving when no incentive is offered.

A matching condition could also be framed as a “rebate”. Instead of giving an extra dollar for each dollar given by a donor, a charity could use money set aside for a match to “refund” donors 50 cents for each dollar given. In each case, the “price” to a donor of giving two dollars is just one dollar. However, rebates have a poor track record. Eckel and Grossman (2003) found that every one of a variety of rebate conditions raised less money than a mathematically-equivalent matching condition. Bekkers (2005) found that matches increased giving relative to a control, while rebates did not, and that a 1:1 match was no better than a 1:2 match. He also found that participants’ expectations of how much other people would give were highly correlated with their own giving. This could explain some of the success of matching: hearing “your gift will be matched by another donor” signals social support for a campaign, while hearing “we will give you a discount on your giving” does not. In addition, donors who received a match or rebate during the experiment did not give less in response to a second, non-incentivized donation request later, in contrast to the findings of Meier (2007).

A third incentive option is to hold a raffle or lottery, where participants get the chance to win a reward if they donate. List and Price (2009) found that two lottery conditions brought in more donations than two control conditions in a door-to-door solicitation campaign. Landry et al. (2005) found that participants gave more when they were entered into a lottery for a cash reward than when they were not. On the other hand, the extra money raised by List and Price would barely have covered the cost of their lottery, and Landry et al. would have lost money on theirs. Lottery conditions may only be suitable for large-scale campaigns with many thousands of donors (rather than the 1000-2000 approached in these field experiments). Onderstal, Schram, and Soetevent (2013) found that a lottery did not raise donations relative to a control condition, though the reward in that study was a Nintendo DS worth much less than the reward in Landry (and perhaps worth nothing at all to households without children or young adults). The authors also found that an auction condition (where the highest donor won the prize) brought in less

than either control condition; they speculate that competing for a prize may crowd out the intrinsic motivation to give.

As a final form of incentive, charities could spend money to offer prizes, gifts, or other forms of status to donors. Kristofferson, White, and Peloza (2014) found that people offered a commemorative World War I pin gave twice as much when asked to support a Canadian veterans' charity by a different person a few minutes later. And Behavioural Insights (2014) found that giving out candy doubled the chance that British bankers would sign up to donate a day of their salaries to charity (an extraordinarily impactful technique, since each day given away was worth hundreds of dollars).

But other studies show that gifts may be almost worthless. Alpizar et al. (2008a) increased participants' average contributions by 13 cents by offering gifts – which cost \$1.50 apiece. In a surprising set of experimental studies, Newman and Shen (2012) found that offering gifts as a reward significantly *reduced* giving compared to offering nothing at all. The authors theorize that physical gifts might only be effective when they can be used to signal membership or in-group status; donors will not increase their giving to win a box of chocolates, but an NPR tote bag is another story. This may turn out to be the case, but existing empirical research does not appear to support spending money on rewards for donors (especially when it could instead be spent on donation matching or seed funding). On the other hand, gifts given out before a donation is made (e.g. Behavioural Insights, 2014) might work better than gifts given as rewards. (Further research is needed.)

## **Donor choice**

Many charities establish campaigns which allow donors to choose which of the charity's causes their donation goes to fund. Is this a good idea? Probably: Every study on the topic seems to confirm that donor choice has a positive effect on fundraising.

Aretz and Kube (2013) gave past donors to a German charity the option to choose which of five developing countries their next donation would support. Most donors just accepted the default option to support all countries equally, but those who made a choice gave more money, on average, than past

donors without the choice option – and also more than they themselves had given in past years. Further research could explore ways to increase the number of donors who make a choice in the first place, perhaps by providing more specific information about each country. In another study on choice, Soyer and Hogarth (2011) gave participants the chance to give to one of 3, 8, or 16 NGOs. Those in the 16-NGO condition gave much more than other participants, even though 92% of their money went to the four best-known organizations. The presence of lesser-known organizations was less important than giving donors a choice between several organizations they recognized. The authors also found that letting donors give to multiple causes at once further increased donations. Similarly, Li, McDowell, and Hu (2012) found that donors gave more when they could choose which of a charity's eight "purposes" to support.

## Strategies for Effective Charities

Many donors give to charities for personal reasons – to help their friends, or reciprocate benefits they received themselves. However, 71% of individual donors surveyed by Money For Good expressed a wish to see information on effectiveness before donating (Hope Consulting, 2011). This implies that some giving is also driven by the desire to help others without regard for personal gain (also known as "pure altruism"; e.g., Andreoni, 1990). And some charities do an especially good job of helping others. Several charity-evaluation organizations (e.g. GiveWell, Giving What We Can) have developed metrics for assessing charity effectiveness, generally by comparing a charity's revenue with the impact it has achieved (where "impact" is often measured by better health, increased income, or some other boost in quality of life).

Many of the charities these organizations support have the following characteristics in common:

1. They focus on problems that affect huge numbers of people, are very harmful to each person they affect, and have known solutions.
2. They carefully measure the impact of their programs.
3. They do not spend a high ratio of their funding on overhead costs like advertising or administration.



4. They can do more good with each dollar they raise than most other charities with the same goal.

None of these characteristics guarantee effectiveness, but each is at least indicative. And while it is often extremely difficult to compare the cost-effectiveness of two charities (is the ACLU more effective than the American Red Cross?), it is easier to compare the effectiveness of various programs charities might implement (e.g., Jamison et al., 2006) and often very easy to compare two charities with the same mission (as was done above with the Seva Foundation and Guide Dogs of America).

How can charities with characteristics indicative of effectiveness use them to their advantage? This section will explore ways that effective organizations can frame their unusual properties to appeal to potential donors and increase donations. Some studies in this section use hypothetical allocations, or “willingness-to-donate”, as a metric for giving. These were included because few relevant studies used actual donations. They may not generalize to actual giving, but they can at least give charities ideas for which techniques might be worth trying out with real donors.

## Evidence of Impact

A charity might persuade donors to give by reporting evidence of its own impact. To test this, Karlan and Wood (2014) compared two types of mailings: one describing a beneficiary’s detailed personal story, and the other describing “scientifically rigorous” studies on the charity’s work and statistics related to its impact. The addition of research findings successfully increased the donation rate for “frequent donors of large gifts”, while reducing gifts from recent small donors and not affecting those who hadn’t given previously. The authors suggest that large donors give more after learning about a charity’s impact because they give out of “pure altruism” rather than because of an emotional impulse (since emotional impulses tend to “shut down in the presence of analytical information”). Large donors may also be more responsive to statistical evidence if they are wealthier, which would predict their being better-educated (and understanding statistics more clearly), as well as explaining how they were able to give large gifts in the first place.

In addition to the general impact of their work, charities could also specifically tell donors about the impact of their individual gifts. Merchant, Ford, and Sargeant (2010) found that participants who imagined donating and then received “feedback” from a charity – information on how their “money” was used – were more likely to say that they would donate actual money. While the authors didn’t measure donations directly, they propose an interesting mechanism for the effect of feedback: It strengthens the habit of giving, by linking the anticipated positive emotion felt while preparing to give to the actual emotional reward of learning about impact, in line with the habit-formation model of Schultz (2006).

## Helping Lots of People

Effective charities often seek to demonstrate their impact by discussing the scope of the problems they solve, or the number of people they help. Can numbers like these persuade donors to give?

### Scope Insensitivity

People tend to give more to individuals than to groups. The “identifiable victim” effect shows that a single person in need tends to elicit more empathy than a larger group that offers no clear individual with whom to identify. Scope insensitivity is a similar phenomenon; people will often give equal amounts to help small and large groups, even if helping the large group is cheaper. For example, Frederick and Fischhoff (1998) cite a wildlife valuation study in which participants were, on average, willing to pay about the same amount to save 2,000 birds or 200,000. Unless all the bird-loving participants were randomly assigned to the first group, this result clearly has little to do with rational calculation. Instead, it seems as though participants thought about how much they would pay “to save some birds” and did not think about the number of birds in danger.

Slovic, Finucane, Peters, and MacGregor (2002) even find that donors can be led to put more value on saving *fewer* lives. The authors asked some participants how much they’d give to improve airport safety such that the lives of 150 people would be saved. Others were asked how much they’d give to save

various percentages of those 150 lives (e.g. 98%, or 147 people total). Participants actually gave more in some percentage conditions, even when the total dropped to 90%. Saving 135 lives was, on average, seen as more valuable than saving 150. The authors reasoned that an intervention might seem “clearly very good” if it was close to the “perfect” end of a percentage scale, while simply saving 150 lives is “diffusely good” and harder to evaluate. It may also be true that a percentage condition could also lead people to think about the tragic deaths of those who were *not* saved – and thus, to value more highly the lives that were preserved. (These two explanations could easily be tested with a study that included a 100% condition; the theory of Slovic et al. would be vindicated if participants placed more value on saving 100% of lives than saving 98%.)

Slovic and Västfjäll (2010) cite the “affect heuristic” as responsible for our failure to fully value each human life in situations where many lives are at risk. We tend to use instinctive, affective impressions to determine the goodness or badness of actions. Statistical arguments usually leave us cold, preventing us from forming the affective impressions that inspire us to help. We also fall prey to “psychophysical numbing”, wherein each additional life at risk seems less important: We care a lot about saving the life of one person, less about adding a second life to the first, and much less about going from 87 lives to 88. Many authors and historical figures have remarked upon the difficulty of feeling empathy for large numbers of people at once (Slovic, 2007).

An experimental study finds evidence for a different kind of psychophysical numbing: The tendency to care less about saving lives when more people are at risk (Fetherstonhaugh, Slovic, Johnson, & Friedrich, 1997). Participants were less likely to allocate money to a hypothetical refugee camp when they could only save 1500 lives out of 250,000 refugees rather than 1500 lives out of 11,000. Warren and Walker (1991) found that participants donated less to Sudanese refugees after hearing about the full scope of the refugee crisis, rather than the struggles of a single family. Fetherstonhaugh et al. use the term “drop in the bucket” to describe the thought process that might bring about these decisions: saving a tiny percentage of a population could feel useless even if 1500 individuals still get the chance to live.

Bartels and Burnett (2011) found that students who were primed to think humans or animals as members of groups rather than individuals exhibited “proportionality bias”: They were more likely to favor

saving a large portion of a small group rather than a small portion of a large group, even though more lives were always at risk in the second condition. In other words, as group identity became salient, students began to care more about saving groups than actually saving people. The authors hypothesize that the identifiable-victim effect could be partly driven by proportionality bias, in line with Jenni and Loewenstein (1997). While statistical victims usually seem like a small percentage of some large group (e.g. the U.S. population), known individual victims seem like groups unto themselves, and thus worthy of salvation.<sup>9</sup> Dickert, Västfjäll, Kleber, and Slovic (2014) propose another model linking identifiable-victim bias to proportionality bias. The authors explain that we feel more empathy and compassion towards easily-imagined victims. When many diffuse individuals are portrayed as members of a “coherent unit” or close-knit group that is easy to imagine, we tend to feel stronger prosocial emotions for them. Thus, we might place more value on saving an entire [identifiable] group than on saving a greater number of diffuse individuals, even if the group members themselves are not individually identifiable.

### **Statistical victims**

Effective charities, many of which pursue public-health interventions within large populations, often help “statistical victims”. For example, when vaccines are distributed, fewer children die, but it is impossible to know which children are being saved. Given this focus, can these charities reduce potential donors’ natural apathy toward statistics and successfully convey the impact of their work?

Small, Loewenstein, and Slovic (2007) taught students about their natural aversions to statistics, in an attempt to induce care for statistical victims. In a pair of studies, students were asked to give to Save the Children, and some were asked to first read an article which explained that many people tended to care more about “specific people with problems” than “statistics about people with problems”. Then, they were shown either a set of statistical facts about children at risk of starvation or a photograph and story of a single child. In both studies, students who read the article gave similar amounts in the statistical and

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<sup>9</sup> For example: The death of ten Americans is sad, but there are 300 million more Americans. But the death of Jeff Uniqueman the St. Louis bartender is a terrible tragedy – there was only one Jeff Uniqueman in the world, and now we’ve lost him!

individual conditions. However, they did not give *more* in the statistical condition than other participants – they only gave less in the individual condition, counter to the authors' intentions. The authors also found that adding statistics about the scope of an issue to the story of an identifiable victim reduced donations from participants who read the story. (Perhaps the juxtaposition of a single victim with statistics on the huge number of other victims made the problem seem hopeless, leading to psychophysical numbing?)

Finally, they gave participants simple math problems to prime a "calculating mode" of processing information, expecting that this might prompt additional donations to statistical victims. Compared to students primed with an emotional "feeling mode", those in the calculation condition gave no more to statistical victims and less to identifiable victims. Similarly, Dickert et al. (2011) found that an affect prime boosted empathy, intention to donate, and actual donations toward groups of sick children, compared to a mathematical prime. (Neither condition led to higher donation rates toward the group of children compared to the single child.)

Overall, it seems very difficult to convince donors that "statistical lives" are just as important and worthy of saving as identifiable lives. How should charities behave, then, if their work involves problems that affect hundreds of millions of people and generate huge quantities of data?

One strategy is to avoid groups and statistics altogether in marketing, relying on individual stories and photos to win donors' hearts, as suggested by Dickert et al. (2014). This might work, but would not be especially helpful to effective charities, since statistical impact is often what makes these organizations unusual. Dickert et al. also suggest that charities split their beneficiaries into small, vivid groups before discussing their impact: How many children has the organization helped? How many elderly people? How many women? The Against Malaria Foundation is a real-world example of this. The charity has given out many millions of insecticidal mosquito nets over the last decade, but every donation is linked to a particular distribution in a particular village, so that donors can feel that they have done a lot of good for a small group of people (especially once the village achieves beautifully proportional "100% coverage" with its new nets).

Another option would be to use the unit-asking technique: "How much would you pay to save one refugee? How about one hundred refugees?" Either way, it seems that charities must make use of

donors' feelings for sympathetic individuals and small groups, even if their goals are to help millions of people.

## Talking About Problems: Aftermath, Urgency, and Persistence of Need

How can donors be convinced to place greater importance on especially urgent problems, where a large number of people are in need of help? Evangelidis and Van den Bergh (2013) explain that international aid organizations estimate how much aid is needed after a disaster by counting the number of people affected (that is, those who "[require] immediate assistance during a period of emergency"). But donors' real-world giving to disaster relief is completely unrelated to this number. Instead, donors give more when more people are killed in a disaster, even though only "affected" (and living) people actually require aid. To explore this phenomenon, the authors ran a series of studies where participants were asked how much money they thought should be given to help the victims of various disasters, each of which was described as having "affected" and "killed" different numbers of people. The number of people affected had no effect on the amount of relief donors suggested, even when the term "affected" was clearly defined or replaced with the vivid synonym "survived" (e.g. "4000 people were killed and 8000 survived").

Replacing "affected" with "homeless", however, did increase the amount of relief. This increase was mediated by participants' perceived reliability of the respective terms; many believed that tracking the number of people killed or left without homes was more reliable than tracking the number "affected". (It could also be true that "homelessness", unlike "survival", sounds like a problem that needs to be solved with money.) In a related study, participants expressed higher willingness-to-donate for disasters which left more people homeless (Andorfer & Otte, 2012).

What can charities learn from this? In every study, the number of fatalities affected allocations; statistics on death seem to catch donors' attention. But many important problems affect huge numbers of people without killing very many. For example, the parasitic disease schistosomiasis kills only one person out of every thousand who contract it, but leaves many of its victims with severe health problems.

Charities who deal with these seldom-lethal problems should not simply advertise how many people suffer from the problems, but should instead go into detail about that suffering. The Schistosomiasis Control Initiative might raise more funds by discussing the 10 million people who suffer severe kidney damage as a result of the disease, rather than the 240 million people who are “affected” (van der Werf et al., 2003).

In addition to discussing the plight of survivors, charities could discuss problems in terms of urgency – that is, how bad a situation will become if not addressed quickly. One might expect urgent situations to attract more attention from donors, but the available data are minimal and unclear. Benson and Catt (1978) found that United Way solicitors who used the phrase “you may be their last hope” raised no more money than those who used the not-so-urgent “they could use your support”. On the other hand, Kang (2014) found that charity advertisements which attempted to arouse the reader (with exclamation points and huge numbers demonstrating the potential cost if the problem was not addressed) were more successful than low-arousal advertisements. These studies were very different, and neither examined whether donors themselves felt differently (e.g. more worried for the recipients) in each condition. More work must be done to learn how donors respond to learning about the urgency of a problem and/or the consequences if the problem is not solved.

While “urgency” depends on the consequences if a problem is not solved, charities could also discuss “persistence of need” – that is, how quickly an existing problem can be solved. Warren and Walker (1991) found that donors gave more money to help people in a desperate situation when the donors saw the situation as “short-term”, and soon to change, rather than long-term. While many effective charities deal with long-term public health problems that cannot be solved quickly, they could also get around that problem by discussing steps they have taken toward solving the problem. (“Global poverty has dropped by half in the last 25 years” might be a better frame than “over a billion people still live in extreme poverty”.)

## Charity Ratings

Organizations like GiveWell, Charity Navigator, and The Life You Can Save (TLYCS) rate charities based on metrics of impact and/or financial effectiveness. Charities which raise funds efficiently and carry out effective programs generally receive high ratings from these organizations: For example, the Fistula Foundation is recommended by TLYCS and has the highest possible Charity Navigator rating (Charity Navigator, 2013c). Not all charities with high ratings will necessarily be effective – many rating organizations only examine financial data and ignore evidence of impact, or fail to compare charities to other charities with similar missions – but an especially effective charity is likely to receive high ratings. Can charities use their support from independent rating organizations to raise more money?

Chhaochharia and Ghosh (2008) found that charities given an A grade (the highest possible) by the American Institute of Philanthropy (now CharityWatch) raised about 16% more after being graded than charities given a D grade. Gordon et al. (2009) found that charities whose ratings improved on Charity Navigator raised more money as a result (charities whose ratings dropped raised less money). Notably, these were observational studies; donors who gave more were not forced to view a charity's ratings, and learned about them either independently or through a charity's own advertising.

Lesser-known charities may be in an especially good position to benefit from high ratings. Yoruk (2013) found that "smaller and unknown" charities that just barely received a three-star rating (out of four) on Charity Navigator had raised more money in the last year than charities that happened to fall just below the three-star threshold, and instead received two stars. A similar difference was found between three-star and four-star charities, but no such differences were found for larger, better-known charities. Brown (2014) found a strong effect of a positive Charity Navigator rating when undergraduates chose to donate to one of several charities; this effect was only marginal, however, when he controlled for students' level of experience with their chosen charity. These two studies may show that we see charity ratings as a valuable signal when we lack information, but not when we are already familiar with an organization.

On the other hand, Szeper and Prakash (2010) found that ratings did not affect contributions for a sample of charities in Washington State. Moreover, Cnaan (2011) found that few donors ever visited



charity-rating websites. Most of the 43% of donors who researched a charity online used the charity's website or the Better Business Bureau, which distinguishes between fraudulent and legitimate charities but does not evaluate efficacy. As of 2008, fewer than 5% of donors used Charity Navigator, and numbers from similar sites like GuideStar or CharityWatch were even lower. (Seven years later, it would be very helpful to have updated information on how many donors access these kinds of sites.)

## Overhead Spending

Learning that a charity spends a lot of money on overhead – fundraising and administrative costs rather than programs that help beneficiaries directly – could dissuade donors from giving (Andorfer & Otte, 2012; Li et al., 2012). The most effective charities will often have unusually low overhead, and advertising this fact could increase charitable contributions, especially since donors may not understand what proportion of their donations go toward overhead unless they are told explicitly. This misunderstanding could be harmful if the average donor overestimates how much charities spend on overhead, as Bennett and Savani (2003) found to be the case (by a factor of three).

Does advertising their low overhead spending help charities raise more money? Parsons (2007) found that a charity with very low overhead (7.5%) raised twice as much from prior donors with a fundraising letter that included this information as with a letter that did not, but raised no additional money from new donors. In experimental studies, Kinsbergen and Tolsma (2013) found that many more participants were willing to donate to a fictional charity when it supposedly spent 0% rather than 20% of their contributions on overhead, while Gneezy, Keenan, and Gneezy (2014) found that people gave much less money to a clean-water charity when the charity supposedly spent 50% of contributions on overhead rather than 0%.

How could a charity allocate 0% of contributions to overhead spending, without paying any costs for administration or fundraising? Some charities (including Kiva and the Against Malaria Foundation) have their overhead funding covered by a few specific grants or donors, which lets them promise other donors that 100% of their contributions will help beneficiaries directly. These charities still spend money

on overhead, but donors may not actually dislike overhead spending in principle; they would just rather not pay for those expenses with their own money.<sup>10</sup> The findings of Gneezy et al. support this theory; a charity whose overhead cost (50% of total contributions) had already been paid for by an outside source received just as much support from participants as a charity with no overhead whatsoever. Even though the charity was still spending a lot of money for purposes other than implementing its programs, participants were now confident that their gift would go directly to beneficiaries. In a second study, Gneezy et al. found that paying off \$10,000 worth of overhead (and dropping to 0%) raised more money for a campaign than giving a \$10,000 seed gift or offering \$10,000 in 1:1 matching funds.

Fortunately for effective charities, low overhead costs make it easier to cover overhead completely with the help of a few generous donors. Any charity with the chance to do so should seriously consider approaching its top supporters, talking to them about this research, and asking whether supporters would be willing to help cover overhead in an attempt to increase overall contribution levels.

Any mention of overhead spending must come with a caveat: Spending money on fundraising and administration is not necessarily a bad thing. Pallotta (2008) and many other nonprofit experts warn against demonizing overhead. The world's largest charities – those which serve the most people, help to set national policy, and tackle problems too large for other organizations to solve – grew to their current size in part by investing in powerful advertising campaigns and brilliant executives. High overhead spending can be a signal of inefficiency (any charity that spends 90% of its revenues on fundraising will have nothing left over for services) but minimizing overhead can slow growth, and not all charities should do it. However, ordinary donors (and many charity-rating organizations) are still wary of overhead spending, and charities should keep this in mind.

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<sup>10</sup> After all, when a person gives to a charity that helps sick children, they probably want to feel like their gift is going directly to the children – not to the receptionist who answers the charity's phone.

## 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 21<sup>st</sup> 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.

## Unexplored Areas

There are over one million registered public charities in the United States alone (National Center for Charitable Statistics, 2015). Simply by studying these organizations, researchers could find hundreds of new ideas for experimental studies. However, there are a few areas that seem particularly un- or underdeveloped in the literature thus far.

Bekkers and Wiepking (2011) examine only one study of online fundraising in their review of many hundreds of studies on charitable giving. Even four years later, few studies seem to cover online giving experiments, though the space of possible experiments is vast. Researchers could easily try to replicate various direct-mail studies using email, or even conduct a more in-depth study of giving networks. (What if a researcher were to collaborate with Facebook or Twitter and untangle the viral explosion of the Ice Bucket Challenge, one of the most successful online fundraisers in history?) The dearth of online-giving studies is especially strange considering the recent rise of nonprofits like charity:water and Kiva, which depend largely on social media and online fundraising campaigns. These and other online charities often make use of "A/B testing", which lets them compare different solicitation techniques with enormous sample sizes by randomly showing different versions of their websites to visitors (for examples, see Dunham & Company 2014). However, few results from these tests are ever published, and still fewer are published in scientific journals. Any researcher who gets a charity's permission to examine the results of these tests will have a rich vein of material to mine for insights on fundraising.

Many charities, including some of the world's largest, struggle with a problem that barely appears in the literature: How can donors be convinced to give "unrestricted" donations? Charities should always prefer unrestricted funding, which allows them to allocate money in any way they choose. But donors give more when specific causes are available, prefer to support specific groups of people, and sometimes donate more than a charity can effectively spend on a single problem. The American Red Cross raised \$34 million in four days to aid the victims of the 2011 earthquake in Japan – even though the Japanese Red Cross insisted that they did not need additional funding – and was left with money it could not spend in other places (Smith, 2012). Sometimes, donations for a specific crisis continue to roll in for weeks or



months after the situation has been dealt with. How can charities do a better job of marketing unrestricted donations? Can the American Red Cross convince its supporters to let the organization distribute funding as it sees fit?

Several “feeling” primes have been examined in this review: Guilt, responsibility, moral elevation, and even existential terror. But there are many other feelings which could play a role in giving, and which do not appear in the literature. For example, how might being primed with heroism – not just stories of another person’s heroism, but the idea that a donor themselves should act heroically – change the way people give? Pride is another rewarding feeling: Might donors give more if they believe that giving will make them feel superior to other people?<sup>11</sup> Researchers could also test a prime that evokes the idea of obeying authority or following rules (as many Christian charities do already, with Bible quotes). Lambarraa and Riener (2012) found that Qu’ran quotes did not influence the giving of Moroccan Muslims, but it would be interesting to learn whether these results generalize to people from other religions and cultures.

Finally, one persuasive technique that has not yet been tested in the context of charity is the intriguing “disrupt-and-reframe”. Stating prices in pennies rather than dollars and framing the “new” price as a bargain increases compliance whether participants are buying cupcakes (Davis and Knowles 1999) or signing petitions to raise tuition costs by “only 7500 Eurocents” (Fennis and Das, 2004). Would the Against Malaria Foundation see the same effect if it explained to donors that only 300 pennies could buy a malaria-fighting bednet?

## Methodological Concerns

As explained in the methods section, the amount a person claims they would be willing to give does not always match their actual giving, even proportionally. But a surprising number of studies continue to examine willingness-to-donate rather than real donations, even when participants are being paid real money they could then be asked to give. This seems like a poor way to learn how giving

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<sup>11</sup> This might not be a *good* idea, but it still seems like a better idea than priming people with the fear of death.

decisions are actually made. If researchers are worried that asking participants to give will make them uncomfortable and/or discourage them from joining future experiments, why not simply give an extra \$3 or \$4 to each participant “to give or to keep”? This is somewhat more expensive, but it seems like a small price to pay for effects that translate more reliably into actual human behavior.

Even experiments where participants gave away something of value were not all identical. Some studies dealt with straightforward monetary donations; others presented participants with lotteries and asked them to give up some portion of their potential winnings. How might people treat those two conditions differently with respect to giving? In addition, while many researchers asked for donations on behalf of a real charity, other researchers invented false charities for the sake of the study. Participants probably do not react identically in these conditions, and I suspect that false charities interfere with the reliability of results. Participants might perceive the organizations as fake, and researchers also might act differently when attempting to persuade participants to give to “charities” that the researchers know will not actually help anyone.

Another concern, albeit one researchers themselves cannot easily address: Most of the techniques in this review were tested in only one or two countries, and nearly all studies were conducted in wealthy nations. Will these effects translate to the middle-and-upper-class citizens of developing nations? What about developed nations outside the U.S., Europe, and Australia?

## **Why Charities Should Run Experiments**

Research on charitable donations is a flourishing area of social science. But nearly all the published research in this field either involves experiments by researchers working alone or (on a few occasions) researchers collaborating with a charity to answer a question proposed by the researchers. If charities are experimenting on their own, they are not publishing the results of their work in places where researchers can easily find them.

Experimentation could be hugely valuable to charities, especially larger charities. A typical Salvation Army kettle might raise \$30 per hour to feed the hungry, and the organization’s 2014 Red Kettle

Campaign (a month of bell-ringing all around the country) brought in \$144 million (Salvation Army North, 2015). If the Salvation Army could boost returns by a mere 5% with a change to their advice for bell-ringers, they could feed tens of thousands of additional people. What if they spent a fraction of that potential gain to hire a full-time researcher who could run a dozen experiments every year? And what if the results of those experiments were shared with other nonprofits? What if the United Way and the American Red Cross did the same?

Even smaller charities could see very strong returns on experimentation: For a few thousand dollars, a technique might be discovered which could improve a campaign's fundraising potential by 20-30%, an enormous return on investment. And it is likely that techniques in this review will work very differently when used by different charities – the only sure way for a charity to know what works is to run experiments on its own solicitations, marketing, and campaigns.

Experimentation could be charities' best hope to kill the elephant in the room – that is, the economic trend that the Chronicle of Philanthropy calls "the stubborn 2% giving rate" (Perry, 2013). For nearly 50 years, Americans have given the same two percent of their income, more or less, to nonprofit organizations. While charities do improve their marketing strategies over time, they are competing for donors' attention with consumer goods marketed by for-profit corporations whose advertising divisions are staffed by dozens of scientists. Pallotta (2008) expresses frustration that charities cannot be structured in a way that could let them grow to the size of Apple Computer. But nonprofits also have an advantage over private companies: philanthropy is not a zero-sum game. Many charities are working towards the same set of goals. If the Against Malaria Foundation reduces malaria rates in a certain region, Kiva's loans in that region might bring in higher returns from healthier recipients, and both organizations get to live in a world where extreme poverty is somewhat less dire. What's more, charities are not bound by shareholders to keep their research secret for personal gain. Why not band together to learn more about why people donate?

## Final Remarks

Charities have many options for requesting money from donors in ways that outperform the simple, straightforward “please give us money”. Some of these options more than doubled giving in field experiments, and show extreme promise for use by charitable organizations, whether they rely on networks of solicitors in the field, mailing campaigns, or web donations.

Most of these techniques are not exceptionally helpful for the most effective charities. Many of those charities’ distinguishing features do not naturally appeal to most donors: Scope insensitivity and individual-victim bias hurt organizations that try to discuss how many lives they save, putting people in a “calculating mode” (e.g. by talking about the science behind a charity’s work) might lead them to give less. However, some of these organizations’ other features – low overhead, for example, or the fact that they target especially urgent problems – could be extremely useful for a fundraising campaign.

Will any of the techniques in this review leave a mark on the stubborn 2% giving rate? Or will they simply lead to a new division of the charitable “pie”, as charities that use them win donations away from charities that do not? Peter Singer (quoted in Perry, 2013) is probably correct when he says that increasing the giving rate will likely require a cultural shift in any country that hopes to become significantly more generous, especially among the wealthiest citizens. One idea which shows some promise in this respect is the “giving pledge” model promoted by groups like Giving What We Can (2015a) and The Life You Can Save (2015). Members of these organizations (including the author of this review) pledge to give some percentage of their annual income (at least 10% or 1% respectively) to effective, evidence-based charities for the rest of their lives. These fast-growing organizations have thousands of active members, and those members tend to give effectively (half of the money donated by Giving What We Can members goes to Givewell-recommended charities) (Giving What We Can, 2015b).

The techniques in this review, which tend to produce one-time gifts of a few to a few hundred dollars, may not be the same techniques which will inspire a pledge, or a gift of millions from a reluctant CEO, or a nationwide giving movement. But they provide a solid starting point for charities to design and test new campaigns and marketing strategies, as one small step on the road to a kinder, happier world..

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