



The Science of Fundraising

Increase your odds of fundraising success.

BY BRAD BELL

Has this ever happened to you? You send a carefully-crafted letter to 20,000 people, expecting donations to pour in. Surprisingly, only 2% respond, and the average gift is just \$15. The poor results may partly reflect a reliance on instinct rather than scientific conclusions.

How Science Can Help

Science can be a good friend to non-profit organizations. The findings of scientific studies can provide ideas about what techniques are likely to increase donations, and what techniques may be ineffective or backfire.

There are two ways you gain more knowledge:

- 1. Learn about research findings on persuasion and donating behavior.** If you don't want to take the time to peruse articles in scholarly journals, you can read briefer descriptions of

Your Personal Beliefs May Be Faulty or Incomplete

Fundraising success reflects your knowledge about social psychology—why people give and what influences their behavior. Beliefs based on intuition and experience may be inaccurate.

Research findings from scientific studies sometimes contradict our own beliefs. For example, we may believe that photographs are always persuasive because they attract attention or elicit sympathy. However, research findings suggest that a picture isn't always worth a thousand words. In several studies, including a photo of a child didn't increase donations in door-to-door fundraising.

Also, research findings may reveal strategies that you haven't considered. For example, did you know that a door-to-door solicitor who simply adds the words "even a penny will help" can substantially increase the number of people donating?



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2. Contract with an accomplished researcher who has a Ph.D. and expertise in social psychology. Highly skilled researchers can conduct experiments on the effectiveness of your fundraising efforts. They can use their vast knowledge of theory and research to select the most appropriate factors to vary in your fundraising letter or telephone script. You can discover what techniques are likely to yield the greatest revenue.

Here's a concrete example of how an experiment could be conducted:

- You want to know whether adding a 10-dollar amount to your pledge card will increase donations.

- To address this question, you create two pledge cards. The standard card has options of \$20, \$30, \$50, \$100, and "other." The new card has options of \$10, \$20, \$30, \$50, \$100, and "other." Everything else is identical for the participants in the experiment.
- You (randomly) select a small group of people from your database to be participants. By using a small group of people, you have the opportunity to maximize revenue. Based on your research findings, you can use the best strategy with the entire group of people.
- Next, you randomly assign people in this sample to receive either the standard pledge card or the new pledge card. This is done so that you can be confident that other factors cannot explain the difference.

- After receiving the pledge cards back, you compare the amounts received for the two versions of the pledge card. You perform statistical analyses to find out how likely it is that the difference is due to chance alone. If the chance probability is sufficiently low (less than .05, for example), you can conclude that there is a real difference between the two pledge card versions.

Experiments can be much more complicated than described above. You can vary more than one thing in an experiment. Sometimes the influence of one factor depends on another factor. For example, having two door-to-door solicitors, as opposed to one, may only increase donations when the solicitors are high in status. Because of the complexity of experiments, researchers can be of great help in designing the experiments, analyzing the data, and interpreting the results.

Without the aid of science, some of your fundraising efforts may be like a roulette wheel. With the scientific approach, you can increase the odds of achieving your fundraising goals. ■

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Brad Bell received his Ph.D. in psychology from the University of Washington. Descriptions of his research on the influence of trivial details on mock juror judgments have appeared in newspapers, scholarly journals, and textbooks. He is the author of The Social Psychology of Fundraising, which describes research findings on donating behavior. You may reach him at bluefox@spiritone.com, www.bluefoxcom.bigstep.com.