



The Psychology of Giving



Here are two simple techniques that can lead to more donors.

By Brad Bell

One of the best ways to boost donations is to use techniques that have been tested in scientific experiments. Such experiments let us make conclusions about cause and effect by keeping everything the same except for the factor under investigation. People in an experiment could be randomly assigned either to receive the technique (experimental condition) or not receive it (control condition). The random assignment would make it equally likely that people with certain personality characteristics would be in each group. Sometimes differences between groups can occur by chance alone. Thus, we would perform statistical analyses to find out how likely it is that differences between the groups would reflect a chance outcome.

Here are two fundraising approaches that have been tested in scientific experiments. Both are simple techniques that can easily be used in face-to-face and telephone fundraising. The differences between groups described below (percent donating) were shown to be statistically significant.

Ask People How They're Feeling

With the first technique, you introduce yourself to the prospect and ask, "How are you feeling?" After they answer, you give an appropriate response, such as "That's good," "Great," or "I'm sorry to hear that." One reason this technique may work is that it could disrupt people's tendency to

We know these methods work because they've been investigated in scientific experiments.

ignore your message and say, "Not interested."

This technique has been investigated in face-to-face fundraising. In one study, 25.5% of people were willing to make a donation when this technique was used. In contrast, only 9.8% of people were willing to make a donation when the technique wasn't used (standard-approach condition).¹

Legitimize Small Donations

Imagine approaching people and asking them to make a \$20 donation. This doesn't seem to be an unreasonable amount. However, the people you approach may have donated to many organizations and feel they can give only \$5 or \$10 to each one. They feel embarrassed about how much they're willing to donate. So they make a quick excuse and move on without making a contribution.

Is there any way you can increase donations in this situation? One approach that may work is to legitimize small donations by adding words such as "Even a dollar will help" to a standard request. This technique is a way of making it sound acceptable to make a small donation without directly asking for a small donation.

In one face-to-face study, 50% of people (21 of 42) made a donation when the words "Even a penny will help" were added to a standard request for money. In contrast, only 28.6% of people (12 of 42) made a donation when using a standard request without legitimizing small donations.²

The findings from another study suggest that adding "Even a dollar would help" or "Even five dollars would help" can increase the percentage of people making pledges in telephone fundraising. For example, 33.4% made a pledge when the words "Even five dollars would help" were added. In contrast, only 24.4% made a pledge in the control group, in which small donations weren't legitimized. ■

Footnotes

¹This study did not involve information on the amount they were willing to donate. There was also another condition in the study.

²The total amount collected was greater when legitimizing small donations (\$30.34 vs. \$18.55), but no information was provided as to whether this difference was statistically significant. Some studies have found that legitimizing small donations has no statistically significant effect on the percentage of people donating.

Brad Bell (bluefox@spiritone.com, www.bluefoxcom.com) received his Ph.D. in psychology from the University of Washington. He is author of several books, including The Social Psychology of Fundraising, Fourth Edition.