



Helping Donors Choose YOUR Organization: Using Image Theory to Change People's Minds

Jumpstart your fundraising efforts with this new model for understanding donor behavior.

By Kurt Schimmel, Darlene Motley, & Michele Cole

There is a growing body of literature on why people give. People give because they trust an organization, because they believe in a cause, because the organization's appeal hits just the right note.

Donors base their decisions on three ideas about themselves.

But less is said about how people make the choices they do when deciding to donate to one organization versus another, to support one cause and not a related one, to respond to one appeal instead of others. Clearly, such information would be invaluable in gaining new supporters for your organization. Is there a way to glean such knowledge and, in effect, predict donors' behavior? The answer is yes, and the tool is image theory.

What Can Image Theory Tell You?

Image theory¹ posits that donors base their decisions on three ideas about themselves:

1. **value image:** the donor's values
2. **trajectory image:** the donor's ideal self
3. **strategic image:** the actions the donor takes to become the ideal self.

In deciding where to give, donors choose organizations that harmonize with these three images. What they're looking for is a place to give that will advance their trajectory toward their ideal selves.

Once they've found a good fit, people will usually continue giving to the same organization. Humans are "cognitive misers" who prefer the status quo. They have little need to evaluate their donor behavior unless it's clear that they can attain their trajectory image better with a new giving pattern. Only then will they search for new organizations.²

You *can* predict donors' behavior, and the tool is image theory.

The argument can be made that this is what occurred when the United Way scandal broke. Eventually, Mr. Aramony was tried and sentenced for his misdeeds. In the meantime, however, contributions to United Ways across the country fell as long-time donors reevaluated their giving patterns and looked elsewhere for organizations more compatible with their values and self-image.

To gain new donors, then, you need to convince people that an alternative giving pattern will better support their trajectory image. And you must show them that your

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organization is a good match for that image.

How Can You Turn this Information into Fundraising Results?

Here are ways to use your understanding of image theory to garner more funds for your organization:

1. **Gather information** about potential donors' giving choices. What organizations and causes do they support? What can you surmise about their values, self-images, and their paths to become their ideal selves? Peruse such sources as *Who's Who*, other organizations' published donor lists, shared mailing lists, and board rosters of like organizations.

2. **Use this information to check** how well your organization and your solicitation fit with each donor's giving pattern. Look for the degree of match between your organization and the donor's three images.

3. **If no candidates pass the screening**, repeat the process with a new set of potential donors. For candidates who do pass the screening, evaluate the best way to approach them to advance their trajectory image.

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4. **Fine-tune your marketing materials** to appeal to donors' desire to become their ideal selves. The more you can connect with people's trajectory images, the more effective your marketing will be. Such an approach has a better measure of success than using focus groups to test marketing materials.

5. **Seek media coverage** that will overturn potential donors' status quo in favor of switching to your organization. Coordinate this coverage with marketing material focused on people's core values and self-images.

6. **When creating solicitation materials**, tap into people's decision-making processes as much as you can. Customize your appeals to donors' needs to fulfill their journey toward their ideal selves.

These techniques for gaining new donors also work for recapturing lost donors and upgrading donors to higher giving levels. In each case, your aim is to produce image congruence—a match between your organization and people's three images of themselves. Focusing on values and self-image will help you communicate a compelling argument to give—or to give more—to your organization. ■

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FOOTNOTES

¹Image theory was developed by Lee Roy Beach and Terence R. Mitchell in 1987 ("Image Theory: Principles, Goals, and Plans in Decision Making," *Acta Psychologica*, 66) and tested by Richard Potter and Lee Roy Beach in 1994 ("Decision Making when the Acceptable Options Become Unavailable," *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 57), among others.

²See, for example, Sandra Richmond's "Image Theory's Compatibility Test and Evaluations of the Status Quo," *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 73.

OTHER REFERENCES

Dunegan, Kenneth, "Image Theory: Testing the Role of Image Compatibility in Progress Decisions," *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 62.

Seidl, Christian, & Stefan Traub, "A New Test of Image Theory," *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 75.

Donors are looking for a place to give that will advance their trajectory toward their ideal selves.

Creative Fundraising Ideas

Highlight Your Services with a Giving Tree

A giving tree raised \$2,600 at the World Tour Gala for Chicago House (www.chicagohouse.org). Organizers of the event attached leaf-shaped envelopes to an artificial tree in the middle of the ballroom. On the front of each envelope was written the name of one of the organization's products or services, along with a value between \$10 and \$500. Guests could donate by picking an envelope from the tree, putting a check inside, and giving it to a volunteer. Such an idea makes an organization's services more tangible and lets people know exactly how their donations are being used.

Hold Year-Long Parties

Ask each of your board members and other supporters to commit to holding a party one day during the year and to ask a friend to do the same. The host decides what kind of party it will be—a birthday bash, fish fry, coffee and dessert, wine and cheese tasting, church supper, luncheon, potluck, costume party, the ideas are endless—and supplies the location, date, food, and refreshments. The host then invites guests to come to the party and make a donation to your organization. This idea has generated tens of thousands of dollars for Children's Hospital of the King's Daughters (Norfolk, Virginia). The organization's Web site (www.chkd.org) explains the concept and invites anyone visiting the site to host a party.

Team Up with Artists

Artists love a challenge, as the director of the Fulton Street Gallery in Troy, New York, discovered when she asked local artists to create clothing made from trash (everything from garbage bags to old CDs). The artists then modeled their creations at the organization's fundraising auction. Consider other innovative ways you might encourage artists in your area to create and donate art that guests to your event can bid on or buy. Also see "Special Events Galore!," published monthly for \$79 per year by Stevenson, Inc., www.stevensoninc.com.