Should Charities Ask for Time Before Money?

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Charitable giving may be a $300 billion industry in the United States, but for nearly all nonprofits encouraging donations is the number one challenge. Recent research from the Stanford Graduate School of Business shows that nonprofits can benefit financially by prompting potential donors to make an emotional connection to the organization and to its mission.

According to a new study published in the *Journal of Consumer Research* in October 2008, asking supporters for their time, not for their money, is a better way to increase donations. Jumping straight in and soliciting potential donors for funds can, in fact, alienate them—making them less likely to get involved and less likely to actually donate. Asking them to volunteer first, however, can positively shift their willingness to give both time and money.

The reason, according to Jennifer Aaker of Stanford Graduate School of Business and Wendy Liu of UCLA, coauthors of the study, is that questions regarding time versus money stimulate different mindsets. When people are solicited for their time, they automatically think in terms of emotional meaning and fulfillment: Will volunteering for this charity make me happy? When tapped for money, they start thinking about the far more practical, boring, and sometimes painful matter of "economic utility": Will making a donation make a dent in my wallet?

"The 'time first' approach therefore makes the emotional significance of what you're asking stand out, which stimulates positive feelings and an increased belief that volunteering would be linked to personal happiness. That emotional mindset ultimately leads to greater giving," explains Aaker, General Atlantic Partners Professor of Marketing at the Stanford Graduate School of Business.

In the first of the study's three experiments, participants in an online survey read a brief statement about the mission of a fictitious cancer research foundation. Those who were asked first how much time they would be willing to volunteer to the organization—and then how much money they would donate—offered to give nearly twice as much money as those who were asked only about money.

In the second test, participants read about HopeLab, a real nonprofit organization that serves children with cancer. Members of one group were asked first how interested they were in donating time to the organization, and then how interested they were in giving money, while another group was asked the questions in reverse. A third group was not asked either question.

Participants were given ten $1 bills as payment. On their way out they passed a donation box for the organization, and were handed a "volunteer for HopeLab" flyer on which they could leave their email addresses. The following week, HopeLab contacted those who left their addresses and helped monitor the number of hours those volunteers actually worked for the organization over the next month.

Once again, individuals who were asked first for their time gave twice as much money to the donation box as those who were asked first to make a financial donation. Moreover, those who were asked first for money gave less than both those who were asked first about their time as well as those who were asked

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Executive Summary

Asking potential donors for their time, not their money, is a better way for nonprofits to increase donations of both time and money.

■ When people are asked to donate time, they automatically think in terms of emotional meaning and personal fulfillment, asking themselves: "Will donating time make me happy?" They also connect to the mission of the organization making the request.

■ By being asked to make a financial donation, individuals turn their minds to economic utility: "Can I afford to make this donation?"

■ While providing stakeholders with metrics on where a nonprofit's money is going can be useful, an overemphasis on dollars at the expense of the emotional connection may actually turn off donors.

neither question. “That shows that the mere mention of money serves to distance people,” Aaker says.

What’s particularly interesting is that participants who were asked first about their time not only gave the most money of all, but also they donated the most time to the organization. This affirms for the researchers that what motivates people to give dollars when they are asked first for their time is not simply guilt; that is, they are not donating more generously as a way of “buying out” of having to give up precious hours. “If guilt had been operating, then those who were asked for time first may have given more money, but they would have given less time than any of the other groups. In fact, the reverse was true,” says Aaker.

Aaker and Liu believe that requests for people’s time elicit thoughts of the non-monetary emotional benefits they will get out of spending their time helping out a charity. “It makes them more likely to say, ‘What an interesting organization this is! Donating my time here would make me personally happy,’” Aaker says.

In a third experiment similarly involving “time first” and “money first” questions, participants were also asked point blank about their personal beliefs regarding guilt and happiness. The responses affirmed that when willingness to volunteer was measured first, people reported a greater belief in the relationship between volunteering and personal happiness. Guilt did not enter significantly into the equation.

In short, the new study suggests that asking for people’s time connects them with the deep mission of the organization, which makes them more inspired to be involved in that endeavor in every way. Conversely, asking people for money may well cause them to disengage.

“Nonprofits, therefore, may want to create more differentiated ways to foster feelings of meaning in their donors,” Aaker says. Also, she cautions, while providing stakeholders with metrics on where an organization’s money is going can be useful, an overemphasis on dollars at the expense of emotional connectedness may actually turn off donors.