



The impact of a surprise donation ask[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Individuals frequently exploit “flexibility” built into decision environments to give less. They use uncertainty to justify options benefiting themselves over others, they avoid information that may encourage them to give, and they avoid the ask itself. In this paper, we examine whether a reluctance to give may arise even when such explicit flexibility is absent. We investigate whether merely alerting individuals to an upcoming prosocial ask — that is neither avoided nor occurs in an environment with flexibility — results in reduced prosocial behavior. That is, we investigate whether individuals use time to quickly find ways to decline prosocial asks and thus whether surprising individuals with prosocial asks increases compliance. Results from a field study and complementary online studies provide a clear answer: yes.

1. Introduction

One need not look far to see evidence of charitable acts. Volunteerism and giving in local communities are common. Social media campaigns, such as #GivingTuesday, highlight giving opportunities online. Giving USA recently reported the highest level of (inflation-adjusted) charitable giving in their 60-year history: \$358.38 billion in 2014. Over 70% of this giving comes from individuals, as opposed to foundations, bequests, or corporations. While about one-third of donations benefit religious organizations, other popular causes range from education to the environment and animals (Giving USA Foundation, 2015).

Despite this prevalence of giving, or perhaps in part because of it, there is a clear reluctance to give. Individuals walk in a direction away from solicitors (Andreoni et al., 2017; Trachtman et al., 2015), do not answer their door for fundraisers (DellaVigna et al., 2012), opt-out of future mail campaign solicitations (Kamdar et al., 2015), and avoid tasks that earn them money if a donation request is known to follow

(Lin et al., 2016).¹ Individuals engage in motivated information avoidance to maintain “wiggle room” that justifies more selfish outcomes (Dana et al., 2007; Bartling et al., 2014; Grossman, 2014; van der Weele, 2014; Grossman and van der Weele, 2017; Golman et al., 2017). Individuals achieve outcomes that benefit themselves over others more often by engaging in self-serving evaluations of fairness (Babcock et al., 1995; Konow, 2000), ambiguity (Haisley and Weber, 2010), risk (Exley, 2015), beliefs about others (Di Tella et al., 2015; Klinowski, 2015; Gneezy et al., 2016), performance metrics (Exley, 2017), and competing moral principles (Danilov and Saccardo, 2016; Garbarino et al., 2016).²

Gino et al. (2016) classify such behavior by noting that “when the context provides sufficient flexibility to allow plausible justification that one can both act egoistically while remaining moral, individuals seize on such opportunities to prioritize self-interest at the expense of morality.” Earlier work highlights this precondition of flexibility to engage in less desirable or questionable behavior when they refer to mechanisms such as “elastic justification” (Hsee, 1995, 1996),

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¹ Avoidance may also reflect a desire to avoid empathetic triggers (Andreoni et al., 2017) or social pressure (DellaVigna et al., 2012), as also supported by additional work (Meer, 2011; Andreoni and Rao, 2011; Castillo et al., 2014, 2017). Relatedly, individuals desire to avoid others knowing about giving opportunities (Dana et al., 2006; Broberg et al., 2007; Lazear et al., 2012).

² Other factors that may be viewed self-servingly may relate to the reliance on chance or others' decisions (Dana et al., 2007; Andreoni and Bernheim, 2009; Linardi and McConnell, 2011; Falk and Szech, 2013), the use of donations (Fong and Oberholzer-Gee, 2011; Li et al., 2015; Gneezy et al., 2014; Batista et al., 2015), or performance metrics (Yörük, 2016; Brown et al., 2014; Gneezy et al., 2014; Meer, 2014).

“causistry” (Norton et al., 2004), or “moral wiggle room” (Dana et al., 2007).³ That is, prior literature suggests that a reluctance to give arises when that reluctance can be camouflaged to some extent via the flexibility embedded in the environment.

In this paper, we investigate whether individuals develop a reluctance to give even if the environment does not provide such flexibility. We examine individuals' responses to a prosocial ask in an environment absent the ability to avoid the ask, competing norms, ambiguity, risk, and other forms of flexibility. In particular, we examine whether a reluctance to give emerges from merely giving individuals time to think about an impending ask. The prosocial ask is thus either announced in advance and “expected” or a surprise and “unexpected.” While our environment does not provide flexibility, individuals may use this time to feel less compelled to be prosocial, perhaps by developing their own justifications for or summoning the mental strength for declining the ask.

Most environments are not conducive to examining the impact of expecting the ask absent the flexibility to avoid it. Future donation asks are often avoided if they are expected. Imminent donations asks, such as when individuals receive fundraising mail or are approached by solicitors, are likely recognized as such and do not allow for unexpected asks. We therefore embed our field experiment in an online voting contest where the ask is imminent but not necessarily expected. Recruitment materials for the voting contest do not highlight that an ask will occur. Instead, they highlight that the animal group that receives the most votes will win a large monetary prize.

Upon arriving at the contest webpage, individuals learn that they must complete a three-step registration process for their vote to count. In the first step, individuals vote for their favorite animal group, and the upcoming ask is still not mentioned.⁴ In the second step, individuals provide information on how they know their voted-for animal group, and depending on their randomly assigned treatment group, may learn about the upcoming ask. In the third step, individuals face the ask and decide whether to click through to the donation page of their voted-for animal group. Strong treatment effects and attrition of only 1% validate this design choice. The use of an online voting contest also maintains the benefits of a natural environment where individuals are not directly informed of, and likely remain unaware of, the ongoing research.⁵ The six treatments groups – which influence what participants view during the second step before the ask – arise from two conditions.

Our first condition addresses our central question by varying the expectation of the ask. When the ask is expected, the second step mentions the upcoming donation ask by saying “Do you love [group name]? Register your vote in the next step, and if you want to, donate to them!” When the ask is unexpected, the second step instead reads “Do you love [group name]? Register your vote in the next step!”

Our second condition investigates potential policy interventions that may counter a reluctance to give.⁶ We compare the effectiveness of providing no information, unavoidable information and avoidable information on “why to give” in the second step. In line with industry practice, provided information features an adoption story about a

³ Indeed, decades ago, Snyder et al. (1979) show that when individuals are choosing between two movie theaters, they only avoid choosing the same movie theater as a person with disabilities if the movies are different – not the same. More recent examples show how individuals use flexibility when delegating decisions to others (Hamman et al., 2010; Coffman, 2011; Bartling and Fischbacher, 2012), weighing plausible counterfactuals (Shalvi et al., 2011), assessing their own ability (Schwardman and van der Weele, 2016), or avoiding “moral tests” (Miller and Monin, 2016).

⁴ While individuals are thus unlikely to expect the ask at this point, it is also worth noting that the degree to which individuals already expect the ask biases against our treatment effects that arise from the manipulation of the expectation of the ask.

⁵ Most individuals have voted in an online contest or poll before (Google Consumer survey, Oct. 2015, n = 500) and over a quarter have done so to help others (Google Consumer survey, Oct. 2015, n = 500).

⁶ This particular investigation was also instrumental to recruiting our non-profit partners.

rescued dog.

Our contest yielded approximately six-thousand participants. When no information is provided, we find that the mere expectation of the ask causes click-through rates to charity websites to fall by 22% from 0.51 to 0.40. Individuals appear readily able to avoid clicking through when given time — in practice, just a few seconds — to think about it. A reluctance to give extends beyond settings with explicitly provided flexibility and hints that being caught on the spot or surprised with a request can increase compliance.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 presents the design, Section 3 discusses the collected data, Section 4 details our results, Section 5 examines whether our results extend to a different context that allows us to also capture donation data, and Section 6 concludes.

2. Design

2.1. Step 1 - Vote for favorite group

For the first step (see Fig. 1), an individual votes for her favorite animal group and provides her first name, last name, email address and zip code. She also confirms her eligibility by agreeing to the terms-of-use and stating that she is 18 years or older, resides in the US and will only vote once. An individual only views information that this contest is related to a research study if she chooses to click on the terms-of-use hyperlink, and in the 4% of cases where this occurs, note that this hyperlink click precedes the treatment variations shown in the second step.

2.2. Step 2 - Presented with any materials related to treatment group

In the second step, the top portion of the page requests information on how the individual knows her voted-for group – e.g. whether she has

VOTE TO GIVE
WAGS & DOLLARS
The Bay Area Animal Groups Contest

Step 1 out of 3

I would like to vote for:

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

So we can count your vote, please carefully provide:

First Name

Last Name

Zip code

So we can email you a confirmation, please provide your email address:

Do you agree to only vote once?

Yes

Are you at least 18 years old, live in the United States, and agree to the Terms of Use of this contest (shown [here](#))?

Yes

Fig. 1. Screen shot of first step of the voting contest.

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