

Research Article

Giving from a distance: Putting the charitable organization at the center of the donation appeal ☆

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Abstract

Past research has shown repeatedly that people prefer donating to a single identified human victim rather than to unidentified or abstract donation targets. In the current research we show results countering the identifiable victim effect, wherein people prefer to donate to charitable organizations rather than to an identifiable victim. In a series of five studies, we manipulate temporal and social distance, examine a variety of donation targets, and measure intention to donate time or money as well as actual donations of money. We show that people are more willing to donate to a charitable organization when they are temporally or socially distant from the population in need. Willingness to donate to a specific person in need is higher when donors are temporally or socially close to the donation target. Furthermore, we demonstrate that (a) empathy mediates donations to a single victim, yet does not mediate donations to charitable organizations; (b) that donation giving to charitable organizations is unique and is not similar to donations to a group of victims. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

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Introduction

Charitable giving is a vital element of today's way of life. Between 60% and 80% of U.S. households donate to more than one million charitable organizations in the United States, and it is estimated that between 1998 and 2052, people will donate between \$6.6 and \$27.4 trillion to these organizations (National Philanthropic Trust, 2007). While the number of charitable organizations that compete for donors' contributions continues to increase, the economic crisis of 2008 has caused contributions to decrease over the past few years. Thus, raising money has become more challenging than ever for charitable organizations (see also Bendapudi, Singh, & Bendapudi, 1996). The question of how nonprofit organizations should best request donor support is of

critical importance (Reed, Aquino, & Levy, 2007; Smith & Schwartz, 2012), yet the answer is not quite clear.

Many charitable organizations choose to focus on an identifiable victim when designing donation appeals, under the assumption that people donate more to an identified individual in need and less to abstract entities such as a charitable organization. Such campaigns are usually accompanied by vivid images, in an attempt to make the request for donations very personal and emotionally engaging. Recent findings seem to converge to the notion that a vivid display of a single person in need indeed increases donations, mainly because such appeals are emotionally engaging and trigger empathy towards the victim (Loewenstein & Small, 2007; Small, Loewenstein, & Slovic, 2007).

The current research aims to explore donation-giving to charitable organizations per se, rather than to a single identified victim. We suggest that in certain cases, fundraising campaigns can benefit from focusing their appeals on the charitable organization rather than on a specific person in need. In the current paper we explore the circumstances in which each type of donation target

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yields greater donations. Specifically, we suggest that when potential donors are psychologically distant from the population in need, they are more willing to donate time or money to a charitable organization rather than to a single victim.

The ability to increase donations without highlighting specific victims is of significant importance to charitable organizations for several reasons. First, excessive usage of appeals highlighting specific victims may lead donors to become “emotionally immune” to these appeals, thus reducing their effectiveness. Second, donor loyalty, which is one of the most important goals of charitable organizations (Nathan & Hallam, 2009), can only be achieved when the non-profit organization is in the focus of the request. Third, since organizations are legally required to use specifically targeted donations for the intended purposes only, organizations may prefer to receive general donations (to the organization) rather than donations to specific targets. Fourth, in cases when it is possible to blame the victims for their current situation, identification of a single target enhances negative perceptions of the victim and decreases donations (Kogut, 2011). Finally, in the current paper we will show that highlighting a specific victim whom potential donors perceive as different and distant from their own state/identity/in-group may also jeopardize willingness to donate.

We propose and show that the two types of donation targets (either a specific victim or a charitable organization) can effectively motivate a donation, depending on the donor’s psychological distance from the target. We suggest that the “identifiable victim effect”, that is, the preference to donate to a specific person in need, occurs when people feel psychologically close to the donation target (Loewenstein & Small, 2007; Small et al., 2007). However, we suggest that the preference to donate to a general, abstract target such as a charitable organization emerges when people feel psychologically distant from the ultimate beneficiary of the donation.

The effectiveness of donation appeals

A growing body of literature suggests that charitable giving is strongly influenced by the ways in which appeals for donations are presented (Bendapudi et al., 1996; Chang & Lee, 2009; Small & Verrochi, 2009; White & Peloza, 2009). Thus, in the increasingly competitive world of fundraising, designing an effective appeal should be one of the primary goals of charitable organizations. Charitable organizations can control many aspects of their appeals, including the use of images, wording, and message length. Prior research on appeal effectiveness has found that charitable appeals that evoke personal nostalgia, religious feelings, or empathy and self-efficacy have positive effects on people’s donation intentions (Basil, Ridgway, & Basil, 2008; Ford & Merchant, 2010; Malhotra, 2010). Donations are further enhanced when the donation act is presented as an economic transaction rather than an act of charity (Holmes, Miller, & Lerner, 2002) or when obtaining “good feelings” is presented as a reason for giving rather than social responsibility (Benson & Catt, 1978). Furthermore, the effectiveness of an appeal may depend on the type of message used in relation to the cultural context in which the appeal is presented. When the message is congruent

with the cultural dimension of individualism–collectivism, people are more likely to consider making a contribution to the charity (Laufer, Silvera, McBride, & Schertzer, 2010). Other research suggests that in situations that heighten public self-image concerns, appeals highlighting benefits to others are more likely to generate donations compared with appeals highlighting benefits to oneself. In contrast, self-benefit appeals are more effective when consumers’ responses are private in nature (White & Peloza, 2009).

The influence of the inclusion of a victim’s image in a charitable appeal is not straightforward. The use of such images may either enhance charitable contributions (Perrine & Heather, 2000) or reduce them (Isen & Noonberg, 1979; Thornton, Kirchner, & Jacobs, 1991). In the context of child poverty, Chang and Lee (2009) found that the image valence of a victim enhances the effectiveness of a charitable appeal, but only when the image is congruent with the framed message, and especially when the image and the message are presented in a negative way. In a study on the emotional expressions of victims presented in charitable appeals, Small and Verrochi (2009) found that people are particularly sympathetic and likely to donate when they see sad expressions rather than happy or neutral expressions.

The identifiable victim effect and donations

One of the most prominent findings in the literature on donation giving is that an appeal on behalf of an identifiable victim generates greater willingness to donate in comparison to an appeal on behalf of statistical victims (Jenni & Loewenstein, 1997; Small, Loewenstein, and Slovic, 2007). Donations increase when the victim, identified by name or through a picture, triggers sympathy and empathy. Victim-identification processes are more likely to take place when donors are more knowledgeable about the victim’s background. In one study, for example, donations were higher when donors knew about the humanitarian disaster in which the victim was hurt, than when they lacked that knowledge (Zagefka, Noor, & Brown, *in press*). The identifiable victim effect occurs even with minimal information: In a study by Small and Loewenstein (2003), participants were more willing to donate when they believed their donations were designated for a pre-determined specific anonymous victim (with no identification information) than when they were told that the victim would be determined after their donation.

One study (Kogut & Ritov, 2007) that tested the boundaries of the identifiable victim effect showed that the effect was stronger when donation beneficiaries were part of the donors’ in-group rather than the out-group. Specifically, when donors perceived the victim (or victims) as belonging to their in-group, they donated more to a single identified victim than to a group of seven or eight victims. Conversely, when donors perceived the victims as belonging to an out-group, no difference was found between requests for donation to a single victim and to a group of victims.

The studies described above consistently found that appeals emphasizing identifiable victims enhance donations. Correspondingly, researchers as well as charitable organizations act on the assumption that people contribute more to an “identifiable victim”

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