Giving More Or More Giving: Comparing the Appeal to Make a Difference Versus Express Support in Charitable Giving

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We distinguish two motivations underlying giving: expressing support for a charitable cause versus making a difference to a cause. We find that appeals to express support generate a larger number of smaller contributions, whereas appeals to make a difference generate a smaller number of larger contributions.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Marketers of charities use various solicitation methods to persuade consumers to invest resources to advance certain social causes. In general, charitable organizations seek different levels of contributions, from symbolic contributions (e.g., petition signing) to substantial help (e.g., making large contributions). In addition, some charitable organizations wish to increase their outreach by building a social movement that involves as many people as possible, whereas others focus on raising a few large donations, with less concern about outreach.

To encourage more people to give and to encourage people to give more, charitable organizations develop and use different persuasive appeals. The current research compares two categories of appeals—one calling to express support and the other to make a difference—and tests the distinct effects these appeals have on both the number of contributors (participation rates) and the average contribution size. We predict whether an appeal to express support for a cause increases the participation rate by tapping into people’s motivation to express commitment to the cause via widespread symbolic giving. In contrast, we predict an appeal to make a difference increases the average contribution by tapping into people’s motivation to help a social organization make progress on solving a problem. We further argue that these decisions—whether versus how much to give—are partially independent.

We build on research on the dynamics of regulation, which distinguishes between the motivation to make progress and the motivation to signal personal commitment, in goal pursuit (Koo and Fishbach 2008; Fishbach et al. 2014). At times, people choose goal-directed actions with the motivation to make progress on and eventually complete a goal, whereas at other times, their main motivation is to express their commitment to pursuit of the goal regardless of progress. Likewise, we suggest that people may give to express commitment to a cause or to make progress in solving the problem. We further propose that social campaigns and fundraisers tend to rely on two common categories of persuasive appeals, which map onto and activate these distinct motivations.

First, an appeal to express support (e.g., “express your support” “show that you care”) taps into commitment-based motivation: motivation to choose more symbolic actions that are less concerned with moving the goal forward than with demonstrating that many people endorse the goal. An appeal to express support encourages many people to participate in a campaign by contributing something, even if it is a small amount, because people understand that the number of contributors matters for successfully communicating support.

By contrast, an appeal to make a difference (e.g., “make a difference,” “let’s make progress”) taps into progress-based motivation: motivation to move a goal forward, close the gap, and complete the goal. These appeals encourage actions that are designed to change the status of a goal. Therefore, when a social organization encourages people to make a difference, it communicates that the amount of contributions matters most, such that a few large contributions are as useful as many small contributions.

Accordingly, our hypothesis is that express-support (vs. make-a-difference) appeals would generate a larger number of contributions, because it motivates people to give symbolically to express their commitment. By contrast, make-a-difference (vs. express-support) appeals would generate higher average contributions, because it motivates givers to give substantially to make progress.

We report two field studies and two lab studies. Study 1 was a field study in which we mailed solicitation letters to a selected group of alumni (N = 10,189) as a part of an annual fundraising campaign at a large business school. We framed the request as “express support of the school” or “make a difference for the school” in the letter. As predicted, we found a greater participation rate in the express-support appeal than in the make-a-difference appeal, but a greater donation amount in the make-a-difference appeal than in the express-support appeal.

Study 2 was another field experiment with Compassion International, including a control condition (neutral appeal) to demonstrate the observed effects were driven by the positive impact of the appeals, not by the negative impact. We asked participants to write a message to children on a campaign website and told them that the university would donate 1 cent per character submitted by each participant (i.e., the longer the message, the greater the donation amount). The participation rate was higher in the express-support condition than other conditions, whereas the average length of message was longer in the make-a-difference condition than other conditions.

Whereas field studies with real contributions provide high external validity, they also create a natural dependence between the decision to give and the decision about the amount to give. To address the dependency, in Study 3, we moved to a lab setting to have participants make only one decision: either decide whether to give or how much to give. Participants were presented with one of the following appeals: expressing support, making a difference, or no appeal (control), and indicated either the likelihood of donating something (%), or the amount of donation assuming they all donate something ($). Donation rate was higher in the express-support condition than other conditions, whereas donation amount was higher in the make-a-difference condition than other conditions.

In Study 4, we provide more evidence for process underlying the distinct patterns to solicitations. In a two-step study, we showed (a) express-support versus make-a-difference appeals activate distinct motivations (commitment vs. progress), and (b) a manipulation of these distinct motivations affected the pattern of donation decisions (more giving vs. giving more).

When people join a social movement to promote a social cause, free riding and social loaﬁng naturally result in motivational deﬁcits. Therefore, understanding people’s source of motivation for contributing personal resources toward a social cause is critical. This research ﬁnds that different persuasive appeals evoke different motivations for giving, which has implications for whether and how much people give.

REFERENCES


