

Close, but not too close: Donors to charities aren't always comfortable with a victim-in-need

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Charitable giving is an important pillar of the American way of life, but in these choppy economic waters, philanthropies need to look more closely at their appeal to prospective givers. A new series of studies from Tel Aviv University may have the right formula to get people giving where it counts.

According to three research studies by Dr. Danit Ein-Gar of the Marketing Department, Recanati Graduate School Of Business at Tel Aviv University, and her research partner, Dr. Liat Levontin of the Interdisciplinary Center, Herzliya, organizations need to consider their audience's psychological distance to the [charity](#) to determine the most effective giving campaign.

While the Sally Struthers approach — such as using a starving African child to personify the aims of the organization — may elicit an effective emotional response, this kind of "victim highlighting" isn't always right when givers are geographically distant from the victim, the researchers found. And in some cases, says Dr. Ein-Gar, it's not always appropriate. Child abuse and battered women's charities, for instance, need to protect the victims' identities. And in environmental NGOs, there are often no human victims — the victim is the world itself.

Focus on the person or the deed?

"If you look at the trend of charitable giving campaigns around the world, you'll notice a focus on a person, a personalized message," says Dr. Ein-Gar. Breast cancer foundations use stories of real women, victims from Hurricane Katrina talk about losing their homes, and general stories of "personal" loss and tragedy, like poverty in the family, are used to elicit donations.

But in a series of experiments, Dr. Ein-Gar and her partner found personal "victim stories" only work in certain circumstances -- when the giver can identify with the victim. Otherwise, it may be best to use a more general marketing campaign.

A breast cancer charity, for example, should develop a general campaign if the ad will be seen by both genders in varying age groups. But if it's targeted to women at risk for [breast cancer](#) because of age, then a personal approach might be more effective.

"It's a bit contrary to what we might think, because we're more likely to think that people are more responsive to individuals than organizations," says Dr. Ein-Gar. "But what we found is that if the ad is spread to a variety of populations — wealthy people, old people, people without children — then you might want to focus on the general organization and not just a certain victim."

How to reach a helping hand

In the first of three studies upon which the researchers based their conclusions, they looked at university students and their willingness to help under-privileged kids with homework. If students were asked to help the subject in the near future, they were more responsive to a campaign centered on an individual-in-need than a more generally focused ad campaign.

In a second study, a group of students was asked to help new immigrants with certain tasks like opening a bank account. The group was more willing to help students like themselves instead of people older than themselves. But when the campaign emphasized the immigrant center in general, the students were more willing to volunteer their time to older immigrants.

In the third study, the researchers asked people in an online survey if they were willing to donate money to help people injured in car accidents. In a campaign focusing on individual accident victims, women were more willing to help female victims, and men more willing to help male victims, rather than give to a general organization. But when the ad campaign focused on the organization itself instead of injured individuals, women were more willing to help injured men and men were more willing to help injured women.

General appeals are effective for long-term giving campaigns when the giver is temporally and socially distant from the charity, the researchers concluded. For example, if a charity is looking to raise major funds for young victims from older donors, it might be best to focus on the organization's long-term goals. But campaigns that start "today" with the possibility of helping "today" (online campaigns collecting small donations with a single click) evoke giving behavior when the giver can easily identify with the victim in need.

Provided by Tel Aviv University

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