

Freecycling has viral effect on community spirit and generosity

May 30 2012

The results, published earlier this month in the journal *Administrative Science Quarterly*, may help explain why a growing number of recession-weary Americans are participating less in monetary-based consumerism in favor of "gift economies" built on freebies and community spirit.

"We found that being active in online gift-giving communities like Freecycle generates strong feelings of solidarity and identification, which in turn drive people to give more gifts in the system," said Robb Willer, assistant professor of sociology and psychology at UC Berkeley. "This dynamic may help explain why the membership of sites like Freecycle and Couchsurfing has taken off in recent years."

In a wide-ranging survey of more than 1,300 online consumers and recyclers, UC Berkeley and Stanford University researchers gauged the dynamics of transactions and levels of solidarity and group identification among two of the most popular online goods exchange networks: Freecycle and Craigslist.

Launched in 2003, Freecycle is a thriving, grassroots, web-based recycling network that boasts 9 million members in more than 70 countries. Craigslist, started in 1996, is a pioneering online free-classifieds system used predominantly to advertise goods or services for sale, and it claims to receive 50 million ads a month.

"Users of Freecycle make unilateral contributions to other individual users, but cannot make requests for payments or ask for any other form

of reciprocation," the study notes. "In contrast, Craigslist users exchange resources with one another by engaging in direct transactions, the terms of which are explicitly shared and mutually agreed upon."

Researchers hypothesized that people who give and receive via a "generalized exchange system," (Freecycle) would feel greater solidarity and group identification than those using a "direct exchange system" (Craigslist). The results bear out their claims.

"What we found is that a site like Freecycle is uniquely good at generating pro-group sentiments like group identification and solidarity," said Willer, a co-author of the study. "The more people receive gifts through these systems, the more they come to identify as members of the group and view the group as cohesive and high in solidarity, more so than Craigslist members. These pro-group feelings in turn motivate members to give to the group."

Thus, the study points out, "If a critical mass of contributions can be harnessed, it may spark a sort of 'virtuous cycle' that leads groups featuring generalized exchange to achieve productivity and maintain group members' giving."

Freecycle and Craigslist users answered questions about their consumer activity and sentiments about their respective online communities. Among other things, they reported the amount of time spent on these websites or listservs and the number of items bought, sold, advertised, given and received. They also rated how strongly they agreed or disagreed with such statements as "The group I belong to is an important reflection of who I am," or "My group membership has very little to do with how I feel about myself."

Researchers factored in such variables as environmental concerns – reducing waste sent to landfills – and political or religious affiliations

that might predispose their subjects to stronger feelings of idealism and group identity.

Overall, the study found Freecycle's "generalized exchange system" inspired greater team spirit and giving behavior among its active members than did the "direct exchange system" for Craigslist users.

Another notable disparity between Freecycle and Craigslist respondents emerged during recruitment for the study. Given the choice to enter a lottery drawing for a 30GB video iPod or get an official Freecycle banner to promote the organization at public events, about 60 percent of Freecycle users opted for the iPod. By comparison, nearly 80 percent of Craigslist users opted for the iPod over a small donation to the charitable Craigslist Foundation.

On a practical level, the findings offer management strategies to foster more positive and cooperative working environments.

"When leaders communicate to employees about exchange dynamics, they may be better off emphasizing how ... 'we all benefit from sharing resources' rather than ... 'we should do more to help our colleagues,'" the study concluded.

In addition to Willer, other co-authors of the study are Francis Flynn, a professor of organizational behavior at Stanford's Graduate School of Business, and Sonya Zak, Ph.D., a former researcher at Stanford's Graduate School of Business.

Provided by University of California - Berkeley

Citation: Freecycling has viral effect on community spirit and generosity (2012, May 30) retrieved 24 April 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2012-05-freecycling-viral-effect-spirit-generosity.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.