

Natural disaster relief: How does psychological distance affect donations?

December 10 2013

When natural disasters occur, news reports can tug on our hearts and influence how we react to relief efforts. According to a new study published in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, consumers are more likely to make a financial donation when there is a sense of immediate urgency and when the act of donating makes them feel good.

"People's feelings are generally believed to vary along two dimensions: how intensely they are felt and the degree to which they are pleasant versus unpleasant," write authors Lawrence E. Williams (University of Colorado), Randy Stein (Lieberman Research Worldwide), and Laura Galguera (Universidad de Oviedo).

The authors studied how psychological distance (a sense of connectedness or detachment) and [abstract thinking](#) affect judgments. They focused on judgments based less on what [consumers](#) think (logically) and more on how consumers feel (emotionally).

In one study, consumers donated less for hurricane relief when they were focused on the distant future, compared to when they were focused on the (psychologically closer) near future. Distance reduced giving because people feel less emotional concern for what happens later compared to what is going on right now. Importantly, however, consumers gave more when they thought about donating in an abstract way, compared to a concrete way. Abstract thinking increased giving because it makes the idea of donating feel more pleasant.

By understanding the relationship between increased distance and less intense feelings, brands can work to disassociate unpleasant side effects. For example, companies selling alcoholic beverages can focus on the fun experienced on a night on the town, versus the overindulgence often associated with a hangover.

"Often consumers must make judgments and decisions involving unpleasant emotions, such as anxiety when deciding whether to seek medical treatment or anger when receiving a defective product. In these situations, our research suggests brands using emotion-based appeals should take a figurative step back in order to minimize the impact of those feelings on consumer behavior," the authors conclude.

More information: Lawrence E. Williams, Randy Stein, and Laura Galguera. "The Distinct Affective Consequences of Psychological Distance and Construal Level." *Journal of Consumer Research*: April 2014.

Provided by University of Chicago

Citation: Natural disaster relief: How does psychological distance affect donations? (2013, December 10) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2013-12-natural-disaster-relief-psychological-distance.html>

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