

How to boost tips and donations with the dueling preference approach

August 10 2020, by Matt Weingarden

Researchers from University of Missouri-Kansas City, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, and University of Pennsylvania published a new paper in the *Journal of Marketing* that examines the effectiveness of what they call "the dueling preferences approach" on prosocial giving.

The study, forthcoming in the *Journal of Marketing*, is titled "Penny for Your Preferences: Leveraging Self-Expression to Encourage Small Prosocial Gifts" and is authored by Jacqueline Rifkin, Katherine Du, and Jonah Berger.

BallotBin, a UK-based company, designs custom bins for the disposal of cigarette butts. These "ballot bins" have a fascinating feature: They pose a question and provide two bin compartments, each labeled with a possible answer to the question. Smokers can then answer the question through the disposal of a cigarette butt into either compartment. For example, one recent "ballot bin" in London asked smokers whether flying or invisibility is the better superpower, allowing them to express their [preference](#) by depositing their cigarette butts in one of two labeled compartments. This set-up can be found in a variety of other settings designed to increase prosocial acts. Cafés have started to position two tip jars rather than one, asking patrons whether they prefer Star Trek or Star Wars. Similarly, the ASPCA asked people to donate money by expressing their preference for cats or dogs ("Vote for your Paw-sident").

This set-up, in which the act of giving is framed as a choice between two

options, is called the "dueling preferences" approach. But the question remains: Is the dueling preference approach really more effective at increasing prosocial giving than traditional approaches? And if so, why?

The research team set out to answer these questions. They conducted initial experiments in real cafés and with real charities using several different "duels" (summer vs. winter, mountains vs. beach, chocolate vs. vanilla ice cream) and discovered that the dueling preferences approach can indeed be more effective than traditional approaches at increasing small prosocial gifts. In particular, the dueling preferences approach increased people's likelihood to tip/donate and how much money they gave.

Next, the researchers sought to understand why this approach works. Several follow-up studies indicate this approach works because it provides people with the opportunity to say something about who they are. Du explains, "People love to talk about themselves and share their opinions. In fact, the parts of the brain that light up when we get to share our opinions also light up in response to finding \$10 or getting a sweet treat. This fact about human psychology ultimately makes the dueling preferences approach an inherently attractive and motivating opportunity. People are willing to give money to share what they believe in."

Of course, the dueling preferences approach must be implemented tactfully. People may be willing to give money to share what they believe in, but what if a duel captures an issue people don't believe in? As Rifkin described, "When we tested a duel that asked people's preferences for the letter "A" vs. "B"—a relatively uninspiring issue—we were not able to increase prosocial giving. Similarly, when we tested a duel that was interesting to some, but not to all—one's preference for pets—we found that the duel only increased giving among those who found the issue to be important to them. Also, people do not always want or even need to

express themselves." While the inherent need to say something about who we are is critical for harnessing the power of dueling preferences, people differ in what and when they want to share. As a result, it takes some thought to figure out exactly what options to choose, when, and among whom to deploy this approach.

Overall, those interested in increasing prosocial giving can benefit by leveraging the flexibility and ease of implementation of the dueling preferences approach. Ultimately, if managers can effectively harness people's desire to express themselves, this approach can be a powerful tool for increasing prosocial giving. The magic of dueling preferences lies in its ability to leverage any valued identity—whether a Star Trek fan, chocaholic, or lefty—to increase prosocial giving.

More information: Jacqueline R. Rifkin et al, Penny for Your Preferences: Leveraging Self-Expression to Encourage Small Prosocial Gifts, *Journal of Marketing* (2020). [DOI: 10.1177/0022242920928064](https://doi.org/10.1177/0022242920928064)

Provided by American Marketing Association

Citation: How to boost tips and donations with the dueling preference approach (2020, August 10) retrieved 10 May 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2020-08-boost-donations-dueling-approach.html>

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