ONLINE TICKET PURCHASERS DONATE TO CHARITY IF IT STOPS THEM FEELING BAD ABOUT THEMSELVES: But if you exploit their self-image this way, they're less likely to come back

When online buyers of opera tickets were offered the chance to donate to a children’s charity, adding a check box forcing them to confirm that they would not donate created extra revenue for the charity, but it also discouraged some customers from returning. That is the central finding of a study by Maja Adena and Steffen Huck, which has valuable lessons for fundraisers. Their research will be presented at the annual congress of the European Economic Association in Geneva in August 2016.

We know that how we appear to others affects how much we give to good causes, but this experiment examines how we appear to ourselves. Online customers for opera tickets were offered the chance to donate as they checked out. In one version of the experiment, the customers could ignore the request and proceed to payment. In the other, they were asked to check boxes that said ‘I have donated already’ or ‘No, thank you’ to refuse the request.

The effect of forcing people actively to refuse to donate increased donations by a factor of six or seven for that transaction. But there is also evidence that customers learn to avoid this situation in the future, even though the refusal is private: infrequent customers spent, on average, €16-32 less on tickets in the next season than those who were not exposed to the fundraising campaign. The researchers find evidence that this effect is permanent.

They conclude: ‘Strategies that exploit a customer’s desire to maintain or improve their self-image may boost short-term fundraising, but they may also discourage those customers from coming back.’

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People like to think about themselves in good terms. When asked for donations they have difficulty in turning down the ‘ask’. But they also do things to avoid being asked in the first place. Rather like kids playing ‘If I Don't See You, You Don't See Me!’, they pretend to have not seen the ask or, in the longer term, avoid situations they associate with fundraising. This behaviour has consequences for fundraisers, as this study by Maja Adena and Steffen Huck from the WZB Berlin Social Science Center shows.

The study provides the first field evidence for the role of pure self-image, independent of social image, in charitable giving. In an online fundraising campaign run on an opera ticket booking platform with over 13,000 visits, the study documents how individuals engage in self-deception to preserve their self-image.

In one treatment, opera customers asked to donate to a fund for children could click on the ‘proceed’ button ignoring – vis-à-vis themselves – the (implicit) decision not to give. This was changed in another treatment that forced customers to check one of two boxes – ‘I have donated already’ or ‘No, thank you’ – if they wanted to proceed without a donation.

In the first treatment, clicking on ‘proceed’ without ticking one of the two boxes allows, after all, for some potentially attractive self-deception. The ‘proceed’ button might be
perceived as an invitation simply to proceed with the purchase and the fact that the decision to proceed implies the decision not to donate can potentially be conveniently overlooked. Non-donors are not forced to admit to themselves that they are non-donors. This treatment resulted in meagre response rate and donations.

In the second treatment, this option was shut down. The magnitude of the detected self-image motive in charitable giving in this study is quite meaningful – increasing the return from fundraising six- to sevenfold.

The study also documents how customers ‘learn to avoid the ask’ by comparing ticket purchasing behaviour in the next opera season of customers previously facing the online fundraising campaign with those who visited the platform before or after. Infrequent customers who faced the online fundraising campaign return less often to the opera in the next season and spend on average €16-32 less on tickets than those who were not exposed to the fundraising campaign. This compares with donations of just €0.26 from the same group of customers raised during the campaign.

The study presents evidence that this effect does not fade over time but becomes permanent. This suggests that especially other arts companies linked to charities might be better off rethinking their fundraising strategies.

Beyond that, the study analyses grids setting in fundraising. In this context, the customers choose donation ‘tickets’ that make up the total donation. Increasing ‘ticket’ prices from €10, €20, €50, and €100 to €20, €50, €100, and €100 had dramatically negative effects: customers donated less often and the overall return from them was significantly lower.

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The study of Maja Adena (WZB) and Steffen Huck (WZB, UCL): ‘Online fundraising, self-image, and the long-term impact of ask avoidance’ is available as WZB Discussion Paper SP II 2016–306, 2016


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