

What Secular Nonprofits Can Learn from Religious Donors

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Abstract

This article provides an analysis of what secular nonprofits can learn from religious donors. The research provided an understanding of how and why religious organizations secure more than other secular nonprofit organizations, how secular nonprofits can increase their philanthropic resources, and how to identify strategies to help secular nonprofit organizations be more successful in securing a greater share of the philanthropic dollars. The emphasis of this research was to offer fundraising professionals in the nonprofit community an examination of the literature that will guide their organization's strategic fundraising plan. The research provided analysis on what motivates U.S. philanthropists to give donations to both secular nonprofits and religious nonprofits.

Keywords: philanthropy, nonprofits, religious donors, secular donors, motivation

Introduction

Professionals dedicated to identifying, cultivating, and ultimately soliciting donations for charitable and philanthropic causes, as well as the leaders of these respective organizations, regularly miss opportunities to earn financial support because they highlight the organization and the work it does instead of understanding and capitalizing on the reasons donors give. According to research on donor motivations, factors that do not relate to the organization or cause to which they are giving move often donors. For most donors, internal and social considerations such as self-satisfaction and social standing within their peer groups are far more determinative than the recipient of their generosity, up to and including whether the organization can even accomplish any proposed or promised benefits. When it comes to successful philanthropy, it may be less about the cause and more about the donor and what moves donors to open their checkbooks.

The gap between what donors want, and respond to, and what organizations and charities do to solicit and collect donations is perhaps most visible by examining how donors respond to

appeals from religious causes and charities, as opposed to secular ones. Comparatively, religious giving far surpasses cause-specific secular giving in the United States. In raw dollars, estimates for religious giving in the US were nearly \$123 billion in 2016 or nearly a third (32%) of all charitable giving that year, while other secular non-profits share a disproportionate disadvantage. For example, 15% (\$60 billion) Education, 12% (\$47 billion) Human Services, 10% (\$41 billion) Foundations, 8% (\$33 billion) Health, 7% (\$30 billion) Public-Society Benefit, 6% (\$22 billion) International Affairs, 5% (\$18 billion) Art, Culture and Humanities and 3% (\$11 billion) Environment/ Animals (Giving USA, 2017). Over time, religious giving remains the largest single category of charity. McKeever (2015) provided outstanding grounding for the premise of giving disproportionality by demonstrating that just 6% of registered non-profit and charity organizations are religious in nature. Taking McKeever and the national donation data at face value, just 6% of charitable organizations are receiving nearly a third of all charitable giving – a clearly disproportionate balance.

This imbalance in favor of religious giving, sparks the unavoidable question – if donors are making their philanthropic decisions based on the organization and impact-related considerations, are religious charities that much more effective or efficient in delivering on their missions than secular ones? Or is it more likely that donors who support religious causes and institutions are responding to an entirely different set of cues and rewards than those being offered by secular groups and causes? Research supports the latter conclusion and, to the extent it is accurate, leaders of charitable secular efforts are likely to be missing out on billions of dollars in potential support simply because they are using the wrong words and the wrong language to communicate the wrong things to their donor targets.

Religion Does Not Singularly Drive Religious Giving

An examination of religious versus secular giving must start by dispensing with the premise that donors to religious causes give because of religion. If that was correct, leaders of secular endeavors could be excused for not wanting to compete with divinities or consider rewards and motivations on par with salvation or damnation. But, they are not so easily excused because, overall, the research does not support direct causality between religion and religious giving, which is to say that just being religious does not mean you disproportionately give to religious groups or causes. Looking only at people in the U.S. who give to charity, for example, McKittrick, Landres, Ottoni-Willihelm, and Hayat (2014) found that more than half say their religious affiliation or religiousness is an important factor in their giving. However, importantly, McKittrick, et al., are clear that religion is only one factor in their decision-making and only a factor in *whether* they give, instead of a reliable indicator of the causes or organizations they support.

Gerstein, Landress, and Avedon (2014) explain this loose connection between religion and cause or focus of giving, finding that U.S. donors with “strong religious connections” were more likely to support charities and groups with wide, diverse missions and impacts, instead of religious groups that primarily or exclusively served those with a shared religious ideology or values. If religion drove religious giving, we may expect that the philanthropic receiving organizations as well as the intended beneficiaries are religious. Gerstein, et al. and McKittrick, et al. are not alone. Wiepking, Bekkers, and Osili (2014) also found no direct correlation between the depth or passion of belief and overall giving.

Research does show a correlation between the depth or passion of a donor's religious conviction and their exclusive giving to that religious order, but this phenomenon tends to exist mostly at the upper and narrower end of the conviction spectrum. Strengthening both the rule of loose affiliation between religion and religious giving and the exceptions, Forbes and Zampelli (2013) described that deeper levels of religious affiliation increased giving to both religious and secular causes. Overall, however, the link between religiousness and religious related giving is weak.

If religiousness does not primarily drive religious giving, we must consider other causes for the disparity between religious and secular giving – in particular, what donors to religious activities are getting for their generosity. In addition, more specifically, we should consider what givers to religious groups and causes are getting that they do not find in secular giving.

What Donors Really Want

While it is inaccurate to say that donors do not care about the causes, groups and leaders they give to, the research supports that two factors are far more powerful indicators of donor behavior – self-worth and social networks.

Tsipursky (2017) explained that most donors, regardless of whether they give to religious causes, secular ones, or both, give to receive a feeling of self-satisfaction or social prestige. Although others dissent, most of the research exploring why donors give coalesces around the idea they do so because it makes them feel good. How the prospective donor feels about him- or herself because of making a contribution is far more important than other factors, including what that contribution may accomplish. This donor emotional space of self-satisfaction is most powerful when the donation aligns with a deeply held personal value, allowing the donor to feel good that their donation is a direct manifestation of their commitment to and sacrifice for this value. In other words, while making a donation to any cause may produce a boost in self-value, when that donation is tied to a cause or institution the donor cares deeply about, that feeling is compounded.

The values component is a key ingredient in the self-worth calculation. Nathan and Tempel (2016) described that linking charitable activity to an expression of values of the donor going so far as to outright label philanthropy itself as having an “expressive purpose.”

Those who disagree about self-worth being the primary motivator of charitable giving tend to favor the potency of social status, not the impact of the donation, as the lead motivator. Campbell (2013) described that the “secret ingredient” to what causes religious-minded donor's giving is not the religion but the strong and deep social networks in and around their religious institutions. Specifically, Campbell found that the more friends and connections someone has – whether in a religious setting or outside it – the more likely they are to be donors. Going even further, Campbell almost dismisses the importance of religiousness outright in finding that those with abundant “prosocial” networks were even more likely to be philanthropic than those who were deeply religious but had fewer personal, social connections.

Galen, Sharp, and McNulty (2014) reinforced Campbell (2013) directly and suggested that religious belief too often “conflated belief in God with group involvement” and demonstrated that the benefits of social networks are equally available to religious and secular group members. And although giving a bit more weight to the religiousness of the networks than others, Lewis, Macgregor, and Putnam (2013), nonetheless conceded that the correlation

between religion and charitable engagements, is often explained by religious social networks, not beliefs of affiliation.

In understanding the power of social networks, it is important to distinguish that the giving correlation in these networks is not simply that peers or close connections ask for a donation or otherwise directly spur it. Instead, related to self-worth calculations, donors with strong and large social networks tend to consider how those in those networks will view the donation – whether, in other words, it will make them appear more favorably to their peers and connections.

It is worth noting, though, that in my original research on donor motivations, when donors received a direct prosocial network link to motivate a donation, they did not agree entirely. The direct connection of, “I am most likely to give to [an institution or nonprofit] because someone I respect asked me to do so” scored only modestly among other potential motivations for giving when donors were asked directly. If, as Campbell, Lewis and others suggest, peers are a major mover in giving, we may expect this direct peer-ask question to score better than in the bottom third of available responses. At the same time, this finding may reflect a limitation of the research in that the response is self-reported. Accordingly, if a sense of self-worth and reflected values are primary motivators, as the literature and research affirm, those contributing to the research by completing my survey may have been reluctant to acknowledge the role played by outside influences, especially people in their peer and social groups. In addition, the research question asked only about a solicitation originating from a peer or peer group, not the donor’s relative standing within it by having given, which the research indicates may provide a more powerful inducement.

It is Not Efficacy

That all donors probably share the key motivations of self-worth and social standing is the first important lesson that should guide better outreach on behalf of secular causes and organizations. The second lesson is that, if they intend to appeal to donors who are otherwise motivated to give to their religious competitors, those donors are at least somewhat likely to devalue the impact an organization may make related to its mission.

The above underscores the relation of values to giving motivations, due to the way religious givers recognize authority, they specifically do not make donations to affect solutions. While this impact consideration is not negative – they do not give to have no impact – impact is not a leading or even major motivation for religious givers. Consistently, Thornton and Helms (2012) also found this among those whose faiths had strong beliefs in an afterlife (Christians, Mormons, and Seventh-day Adventists as examples). Further, Gerstein, et al. (2012) indicated that American Jewish donors are twice as likely (42% to 21%) to support charitable efforts of organizations that are specifically unproven or new, further bolstering the idea that religious givers prioritize institutional strength or impact. In these cases, the donation itself, as well as the reason to make it, is a reflection of values and their relative places in their social networks.

The combination of these views, as related to messaging, strongly implies that secular organizations that advertise their longevity, efficiencies and successes are missing opportunities to connect with donors who may otherwise be receptive. In addition, secular charities that deploy messages about the percentage of funds that find their way to programs and activities as opposed

to administration or other expenses, for example, may be similarly missing opportunities with these donors.

We can further conclude that, among the many donors who discount impact as a motivation and favor more social and self-regard benefits, and especially those who give to religious groups and initiatives, rewards and recognitions do link to giving. The more rewards or benefits that a charity or organization offers related to a donation, the more likely a donor is to give. For most organizations, these rewards and inducements include recognitions and publications of gifts, actual gifts, events and social gatherings, longevity in the form of naming rights and networking opportunities. To varying degrees, both secular and religious charitable efforts deploy these tactics. Seeing these benefits as lowering the cost of a donation, expense minus reward, makes clear that, if donors were exclusively, or even primarily, motivated by what their donations accomplished, lowering the cost would have a negligible impact on whether they give and to what degree. However, this is not true. Therefore, the excellent work their donations may affect cannot be the sole motivation for donors to both secular and religious efforts.

The Double Edge of Rewards and Recognitions

Because rewards and recognitions work as donor motivators, charitable causes, especially secular ones, use them. However, they can overdo this and unintentionally undermine their outreach to potential donors who may be inclined to support religious efforts.

Even though they work, donors engage cognitive dissonance on this point. In my original research, donors rated “donor rewards and activities” that specifically linked to gain or recognition as among the least powerful reasons to give. This finding strongly implies that, although donors may respond positively to being rewarded, even more strongly than the organizational mission or impact, they prefer to think of other reasons for giving as being predictive. It is not that they do not want rewards and recognitions; they probably just do not want to admit they want them because it cuts against the primary motivation for giving – feeling good for having given.

More consequentially, some have found evidence that, in some cases, donor recognitions and rewards can actually dissuade donor engagement. Specifically, Wang, and Tong (2015) found that recognitions as innocuous as publication of donor gifts can make donors less likely to give in the future by triggering reputation benefits – the idea that the gift may enhance one’s reputation or social standing. Nearly parallel to donors wanting recognition but not wanting to admit it, the negative consequence of reputation benefits is that donors want their donations to enhance their standing within their peer groups, but they do not want their peers thinking they made the donation for this reason alone. Therefore, when given the choice between no recognition or reward and high self-esteem and recognitions and rewards that may trigger reputation benefits, many donors reject the benefits. In addition, with a warning to charities and their leaders, when making a donation carries explicit or outsized recognitions or benefits, many donors simply avoid the donation altogether rather than risk the reputation benefits.

Research on charitable behavior (both donating and volunteering) by Winterich, Mittal, and Aquino (2013) also showed that recognition for philanthropy is only of value when the recipient has a low moral identity internalization, meaning that they do not view their own contributions as highly valuable or overly recognized. Strikingly, the Winterich, et al. also explained that for those individuals with high moral identity internalization, those who already

feel they are making valuable contributions, donor recognition is useless. Recognition for these potential donors may be counterproductive.

What Secular Non-Profit Leaders Overlook

At the highest level, non-profit leaders and fundraising professionals frequently misplace their focus – putting it on their organization and its accomplishments instead of on the donor. Considering that most donors give for reasons that are intrinsic rather than altruistic, believing that people give to do good can be a costly mistake.

All non-profit and charitable organizations and efforts would be well served to recalibrate their donor outreach and solicitations to fit a donor-centered approach instead of an outcome, effectiveness one. Keeping in mind that, almost without differing view, researchers have found that increased self-esteem and a confirmation of donor values are the top motivators of donor activity, charities should, for all donor messaging, ask whether the core value is doing good or making the donor feel good. There are benefits in the latter approach.

In addition, secular non-profits should consider taking up affirmative strategies that mimic or even replicate the signals and messages and experiences that attract donors to religious charities. These including identifying and promoting leaders with strong personalities, highlighting ritual and concentrating on shared values. Secular organizations, regardless of their missions, should have no trouble adopting and using messages of shared values. Even more, they should message and promote those values directly and publicly.

Replicating or co-opting the strong social networks of groups would also be beneficial in bringing more religiously inclined donors to secular causes. Those networks are, without question, the biggest, most impactful lesson that secular non-profits can take from the success of religious philanthropy. Leaders of secular non-profits, when seeking donors, should connect to and within existing, strong social networks created and maintained by other organizations or around other causes. At the same time, they should account for the fact that not all social networks are equal. Although the literature is not determinative, it is unlikely that secular definitions of strong social networks run parallel to religious ones – a local Chamber of Commerce likely does not maintain the same social network strength as a local Catholic Church, for example. Actual religious groups, fraternities, sororities – groups with shared values and rituals – are more likely to afford the strong social bonds and pressures that could be directed to support secular giving.

The power of prosocial networks in giving motivations also implies that secular organizations would benefit by creating them regardless of whether they exist in other places. Campbell (2013) did not equivocate in finding that, if secular organizations could imitate the somewhat close, interlocking friendship networks created within religious organizations, they too would spur a comparable level of charitable giving.

Finally, all non-profits, but especially secular ones, should re-evaluate their donor recognition and reward incentives, realizing that these efforts can actually motivate donors not to give if the non-profits do not handle them appropriately. Finding ways to lower the donation cost without triggering reputation benefits will likely be successful.

Secular non-profits would benefit by recalibrating their donor outreach and solicitation efforts around and in line with these core ideas. Because some donor-centered approaches cross secular and religious lines, self-worth and social standing as examples, investments in these areas

will likely strengthen an organization's existing donors. Those strategies, coupled with investing in tactics such as replicating networks, reflecting shared values and minimizing a focus on organizational strength, stability and impact, can simultaneously open doors to new donors, donors who may have previously supported religious initiatives.

Without deploying at least some of these strategies and tactics, it is implausible to think that continuing to build organizations and philanthropic outreach campaigns in ways that have attracted the existing donors, donors who are, by definition, supportive of secular causes, will entice donors who rely on different frameworks, messages and experiences to make their charitable decisions. As such, they will continue to watch the lion's share of American philanthropy go to religious causes – even to those that share similar missions to their secular counterparts.

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Discussion Questions

1. What are some donor behaviors that will help professional fundraisers understand ways to increase their organization's philanthropic resources?
2. What are the similarities in the giving practices between religious donors and secular donors?
3. What motivates philanthropy in the U.S.A.?

To Cite this Article

Pulido, R. (2018, Spring-Summer). What secular nonprofits can learn from religious donors. *Journal of Multidisciplinary Research*, 10(1-2), 129-136.

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