

## Nonprofit Blog

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# Why Donors Give

by **Jim Wilson**

Time, Talent, Treasure. Those are the three big things we have to give in this world. We give them to others, we give them to organizations, and we give them to causes. But the big question, particularly for those working in nonprofit fundraising, is: Why do we give? And the follow-up to the question is: How do I leverage those reasons to activate donations for my organization?

## So, Why Do Donors Give?

Do a Google search on “Why donors give” and you’ll find the usual listicles with things like “[15 Reasons Why People Donate](#)” or “[Six Reasons Donors Give Away Their Money](#).” These listicles provide good, quick hitting insight. That insight boils down to two main categories of reasons: acting from the heart and acting from the head.

### Acting From the Heart

Giving, be it time, talent, or treasure, is a deeply personal act. While there are as many reasons as there are people and causes, I feel there are three primary reasons when acting from the heart: personal choice, personal experience, and social influence.



- **Personal Choice**—This is all about causes that directly matter to the donor. It’s when they have a passion for the mission of the

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organization. As a result of this alignment with their personal beliefs, they want to support the organization's work in any way they can. By far the easiest method is through direct donations. A good example is the starving child in Africa that needs financial support. The heart says you need to support the disadvantaged.

- **Personal Experience**—While closely related to personal choice, in this case the cause or organization has had a direct impact on the prospective donor, on their family, or on those they know. Given that direct personal experience, they are highly motivated to donate to those organizations. A sterling example here is cancer research or cancer support services. So many have direct personal experience in this area and they are driven to help.
- **Social Influence**—The primary motivator here is that someone close to the donor has made a donation, and they expect the donor to follow suit. Or it could also be that a celebrity has stated that they support a particular cause or organization. Either way, the donor wants to be seen acting in a virtuous way as perceived by friends, family, or following the lead of that big name celebrity.

## Acting From the Head

Even though giving is a deeply personal act and so often comes from the heart, many donations are driven by thoughtful consideration. Plus, continued regular donations to a cause or organization, while quite often started from the heart, need further thought to keep them going.

There are many reasons, but to me the three big categories are: making a difference, personal benefit, and an improved personal financial situation.

- **Making a Difference**—In this situation the donor is thinking about how they can use their funds, and perhaps their volunteer hours and skills, to make a direct difference for others. A key aspect that can motivate this type of donor is information that proves the impact of their contributions. Another method is matching donations from celebrities or organizations. This combines the social influence noted above with a rational desire to essentially double your donation because of the match.
- **Personal Benefit**—Often this includes considering the tax benefit of making a donation. It can also extend to building an individual's influence within the organization. Or it can include recognition for their donation and, as a result, being seen as doing the right thing.
- **Improved Personal Financial Situation**—Many are motivated to give back when good fortune comes their way. This could be from a financial windfall, promotion, or even an annual salary increase. Of course the opposite can also be true when an individual comes on hard times.

Whether acting from the heart or acting from the head, the reasons for donating also vary by generation. The Wall Street Journal reported in "[How America Gives to Charity](#)" that 72% of those over age 69 and 70%

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of those aged 49 to 67 felt it was their responsibility to give back. However, just 48% of those aged 21 to 36 shared that sense of responsibility.

## What Motivates My Donors?

Motivation and reasons to give can vary by age and can vary significantly by cause. For example, in the Wall Street Journal article cited above “helping the less fortunate” ranked number one for all age groups. However, religious organizations ranked second for those above 49 and third for those between 38 and 48, but didn’t make the top five for those between 21 and 36.

Your cause or organization, if it’s lucky, might have a high ranking. But how do you know? Ask your prospective donors. Conduct a survey, invest in focus groups to dig deeper. Endlessly test your appeals to donors to find what works with your audience. But also test what works with your audience today. Attitudes are constantly changing.

## How Do I Activate Those Reasons for My Donors?

Whether it’s from the heart or from the head it takes a direct request to activate that all important giving response. Plus, that giving response needs to be fulfilled right now, before their motivation flags or something else moves onto their radar.

While the relationship with your donor will, hopefully, be long term, you want to get them started right now when the impulse is upon them. That’s why so much of what you do in fundraising is making sure your donation systems, from phone line to online, is ready and available as well as very easy and quick to use.

For more information, I recommend Blackbaud’s [Donor’s Perspectives: An Investigation into What Drives Your Donors to Give](#). It digs into motivation and does so across age groups, one time versus regular gifts, and also addresses the impact of mobile technology.

## Next Steps

I also recommend reaching out to the experts. Campaign Now has substantial experience and expertise working with a wide range of nonprofits and their donors. They can work with you on surveys to determine the best motivators for your donors. They can also conduct every aspect of your fundraising with data, contact services, text message marketing, direct mail, email marketing, digital development, and media advertising, as well as public and media relations.

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**Written by Jim Wilson**

Jim Wilson is the founder of PathForeWord, a freelance writing and communication consulting service. He has over two decades experience working for the largest youth membership organization in the USA as director of communication services. He's written on nonprofits, associations, journalism, technology, and the job search process.

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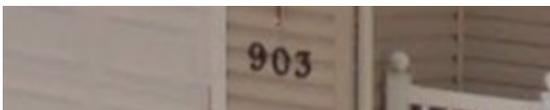
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