GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY
CENTER FOR
SOCIAL IMPACT
COMMUNICATION
at the School of Continuing Studies

ALTRUISM, EMPATHY AND EFFICACY: THE SCIENCE BEHIND ENGAGING YOUR SUPPORTERS

ABOUT THE PUBLISHER

Georgetown University's Center for Social Impact Communication (CSIC) is a research and action center dedicated to increasing social impact through the power of marketers, communicators, fundraisers and journalists working together.

As part of the University's School of Continuing Studies, the Center accomplishes its mission of educating and inspiring practitioners and students through applied research, graduate courses, community collaborations and thought leadership.

To contact the Center, please email csic@georgetown.edu or visit us online at http://csic.georgetown.edu/.

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

What you have in your hands is part applied literature review and part hypothesis on how we can better motivate audiences to support nonprofit causes, using the research of social scientists and the experience of social impact practitioners alike.

Social impact practitioners can take many forms. They can be fundraisers working at a nonprofit or social marketers working on one of the many government-funded behavior change programs. They can be communicators working for socially-driven companies or even journalists working for cause-driven media outlets.

But ultimately this guide is designed to help you—under whatever label best suits you—to make better decisions in how to talk to your supporters.

The social impact space, much like the marketing and communications industry at large, is filled with cautionary tales from "gut" marketers who make decisions based on what they *think* will work best, instead of what we *know* will work best based on the science of human behavior and the measuring of past performance.

With this in mind, every effort has been made to ground this guide in both academic literature and the pragmatic, measured experience of dozens of social impact practitioners—the communicators, marketers, and fundraisers who spend their lives activating audiences to support causes.

The social impact space is a living, evolving industry, wherein best practices have been forged from thousands of individual experiences and immeasurable hours of social science into one conversation.

As a result, at Georgetown University's Center for Social Impact Communication, we encourage you to challenge what you see here—to put the best practices from this guide through the filter of your experience and pull up the 100+ sources cited here to make your own decisions.

With each experience and measure added to the conversation, the social impact sector becomes measurably stronger.

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Every day, social impact practitioners—the marketers, communicators, fundraisers and journalists trying to do good in the world—work to activate audiences based on assumptions the practitioners have about what drives people to support causes.

Often these assumptions come from a little bit of experience and a lot of what social scientists call *confirmation bias*, our tendency to seek out data that confirms what we already believe to be true.[1] We also tend to ignore data that upsets our worldview.

But it turns out that many of the assumptions we make as practitioners are borne out of sound science. People want to make the world a better place. People can and will be charitable, if they think it's the right thing to do. People want to feel like they are making a difference. Emotion drives charity, not logic.

Sometimes, however, these assumptions prove to be a little too simplistic, so we need to update them. We need to challenge them.

People, in fact, want to make *their own* world a better place, not everyone else's, and they want to feel good doing so. People are more likely to be charitable when other people are watching, and if they feel a responsibility to be charitable. If we want people to support our nonprofits, we must ask them, often repeatedly. Emotion drives support for nonprofits, but we need authentic emotion driven by empathy, not superficial emotion driven by sympathy.

Assumptions, Meet the Real World

Even when we've made the right assumptions, built on sound science, we're decidedly not perfect in how we execute our supporter communication strategies. For example:

- How many emails have you received that were laden down with enormous statistics that overwhelm your logic instead of activating your emotion?

- How many posts have you read where an organization crows about all the good they make happen, while leaving little room for the supporter who made it possible?

- How many times have you felt like you were a good person only if you supported an organization blindly and altruistically, and felt guilty if you had other motives?

With everything going on in the world today—the 24-hour news cycle and a constant glut of demands for our attention—now is not a great time to be misjudging what we think will resonate with our audiences.

Porter Mason, Vice President of Digital at National Audubon Society and formerly of the U.S. Fund for UNICEF, sees a related assumption that needs challenging:

> *"Nonprofits assume their work looms larger in their supporters' lives than it actually does. They assume supporters have perfect knowledge of everything the nonprofit is doing day-to-day. In reality, most supporters have a more casual, or at least intermittent, interest. With everything going on in their lives, they can't keep up with a cause generally, much less what a single nonprofit is doing about it.*
>
> *Remember, the people that you're communicating with missed five of your last six emails, and chances are they only skimmed that last one. If you mentioned something twice, as most organizations do, chances are your supporter never saw it.*
>
> *People aren't reading our emails and websites word for word and taking notes in their diary. If it's important, we need to talk to it over and over again. Repeating ourselves is good for them—it helps complex issues sink in—and it's good for us, because it saves resources. New content, and new angles, might not be as compelling, so sometimes we need to just stick with retelling our core stories."*

The Attention Economy

People often talk about today's economy being an information economy.

There are a couple problems with this idea. Information isn't scarce today; in fact, most of us would say there is way too much information for us to keep up with. And if information isn't scarce, then, by definition, it has little value. If you doubt this, think about your own reluctance to pay for content from news and internet companies these days. If information has little value, then it probably isn't the foundation of our economy.

What is scarce in this economy of ours? What has value? What is the foundation of our economy? The answer: our attention.[2]

Attention is limited by the number of minds available to pay attention and the number of hours available in the day in which to do it. Sure, if we add more minds there is more potential for attention, but there are also more people and organizations demanding it.

This is a tough situation for us as human beings, as we have limits on what our brains can process at any given time. Science suggests that we can maintain between four and seven thoughts in our head at once,[3] and we have a limit to the number of stable social relationships we can maintain.[4] And yet, we still manage to consume more than 10 hours of media a day.[5]

For us as social impact practitioners, this mean attention is often a contact sport. To gain attention, we must elbow other people, organizations, and media sources out of the way, because they are competing for that same, limited slice of human attention that we all have.

What Does This Mean for My Nonprofit?

As competition for our supporters' attention reaches new and ever-escalating heights, now is the time when social impact practitioners need to look deeper into what we see as best practices. We need to rethink (and test!) how our current assumptions work in the real world.

That means we should:

- Re-examine what supporters are looking to get out of nonprofits, so we can better meet their needs and break into their active attentions.
- Think through the value that we provide to our supporters and make sure that we're connecting to the values most relevant to them.
- Take a look at how we use emotion (and logic) to engage our audiences to make sure we're connecting with them deeply and authentically.
- Ensure we're communicating with them about how they'll be effective with us and not merely how we'll be effective with them.

We will look at these items in the chapters to come. In the meantime, the best place to start is by looking at the science behind how supporters connect with our causes in the first place.

The Science Behind Support for Causes

There is a growing consensus that all nonprofit organizations are, at their core, supporter-driven:

- Organizations need to raise funds to power their programs, which means they must court supporters (individual donors, corporate partners, foundations or government grant officers) who will provide the needed resources.

- Outside influencers such as thought leaders, the media, and politicians measure an organization's worth by the number of its supporters, whether those supporters are donating, contacting their elected officials, marching at demonstrations, and/or talking on social media.

- When popular opinion turns against a nonprofit organization, the result can be swift and dramatic, resulting in layoffs, cuts to programs, and even bankruptcy.

More importantly, the most resilient non-profits going forward will be those that put their supporters at the center of their narrative. Activating audiences on their terms makes organizations resilient in terms of fundraising, branding, and social media, and it helps the organization future-proof itself against an eroding sense of non-profit "membership" among younger generations.

That means every person working at a nonprofit has a responsibility to cultivate, steward, and engage his or her supporters—from communicators to fundraisers, from executive directors to scientists, from government affairs professionals to program specialists.

In today's 24-hour news cycle, nearly everything we do can be seen by a supporter, and every communication we make (or don't make) could influence whether our supporters continue to support us.

As a result, now more than ever, organizations are putting their supporters at the center of the narrative and making them feel their actions are critical to all their efforts to make the world a better place.

Prosocial Behavior and Nonprofit Organizations

The good news: people do want to make the world a better place.

There is lots of evidence, from anecdotes and sound social science, showing that people enjoy taking *prosocial behaviors*—the day-to-day actions people take to benefit society, such as donating, volunteering, giving blood, or raising a voice in support of a

favorite cause.[6]

Few argue that people are not looking to “do good” in the world, and very often people will use nonprofit organizations to help them do that good. People donate blood during a crisis via the Red Cross. They preserve their favorite hiking trails by donating to The Nature Conservancy. They volunteer at a food bank or soup kitchen to help feed their communities.

The problem is that many of us mistake a person’s support for making the world a better place as support for their specific organization.

We’ve all seen evidence of this in our email inbox, where nonprofits make their organization seem to be the protagonist in the charitable story. Or worse, they use language that makes it seem like the organization is the one that benefits from the supporter’s charity:

- “I hope you'll help us reach our next target…”
- “We’re hoping you’ll help us achieve this goal…”
- “Make a gift to one of our important projects…”

Which is more compelling: a beneficiary with a name, a face, and a story? Or a faceless nonprofit organization that has set an artificial goal that we are responsible for helping them meet?

Karla Capers, Director of Engagement for Union of Concerned Scientists, explains:

> *“We’ve found that the most successful content focuses on how people are being affected by what’s happening, and how our supporters could be effective in changing it. How does climate change affect people in their day-to-day lives? How will budget cuts impact people's lives? Whenever we have stories of impact on people, that’s what we lead with.*
>
> *If you look at people who have supported us for ten years or more, they are the people who tend to identify with the organization. They see our importance in fighting for the cause right along-side the importance of the cause itself.*
>
> *But usually those people are initially motivated by a single issue that concerned them personally—something they really cared about. Over time, we try to convert supporters like this into longer-term members by showing how we have an impact on a broad range of science issues, in the hopes that they will support our work more broadly.”*

Dr. Rob Gould, behavioral economist and advisor to dozens of behavior change campaigns over the last three decades, believes he knows why:

> *"This is about the people themselves. People are the protagonist in their own life story, and you—as the nonprofit—are part of that story. They're not part of yours. They want to say they made difference, to be able to say 'I did this' or 'I did that.*
>
> *This is the same for people who think they are 'members' of your organization and people who are just donating for the good works you do. The more you say the narrative is* their *narrative, the better off you are."*

Amanda Thacker-Heidtke, Director of Strategy and Planning for Freeflow Digital—a mission-driven consultancy that helps nonprofits with their digital and data strategies, says she likes to encourage the creation of evolving content:

> *"When I talk to clients about content, I ask them, 'How do you write content that evolves the reader's thinking from what they came for into what will make the world a better place?'*
>
> *The reader may not be thinking altruistically when they land on your site. They could just want a job at the animal shelter you run. We need to give them that content—but we also need to tell them about all the great things that are happening at that shelter along with the things they can do right now to help the shelter succeed.*
>
> *It's about creating connections for your supporters. What can you talk about that causes your supporter to pivot from where they are toward taking actions that serve the greater good?"*

But, if our supporters aren't actually interested in supporting our organization, what exactly are they supporting?

What Drives Support for Causes and Nonprofits?

There is a mountain of punditry, quasi-self-help books, and social science papers trying to unearth the drivers of a person's desire to do good in the world. For our purposes, we're going to focus on three main ideas.

1. Altruism

People simply want to do good. Some supporters are driven by pure altruism—the desire to make the world a better place purely for the benefit of others whom they will never meet. But that is not the case for everybody, and maybe not even the majority of us.

Some of our supporters instead have motivations a bit closer to home; they want to make the world better for people they know, or even themselves. They want their friends, families, and communities to be prosperous and healthy. They enjoy feeling like they are the types of people who do good in the world, and they enjoy being recognized—by the organization, and by their friends—for doing that good. [7]

This is why it is just as important to help supporters feel good about giving—and the tangible ways their friends, families, and communities benefit from their behavior—than it is to make them feel like they have passed some lofty nonprofit purity test by acting selflessly.

2. Empathy

Our concern for other people is one of the fundamental things that makes us human. Getting supporters to put themselves in the shoes of people who need help is a powerful way to motivate them to do good today and then again and again in the months and years moving forward.[8]

To motivate our audiences, it's critical that this concern is authentic and emotional, not abstract or superficial—that the supporter goes beyond simple pity to the shared emotions that define empathy. It's even more important that our supporters not become overwhelmed to the point they tune out and turn off their emotions to avoid feeling hopeless or taken advantage of.[9]

This is why being on the right side of the line between empathy and avoidance is critical to getting people to make that prosocial behavior we're asking of them.

3. Efficacy

Supporters want to feel like they will make a difference and will be less likely to respond to our call to actions until they do. Outside of some of the social incentives to do good deeds mentioned above, the idea that their effort will be effective lies at the very heart of their desire to do good in the world. [10]

And, that's not all. Our supporters must also feel that they *can* make the effort—that they can answer our call to action and not empty their bank accounts, have their personal lives interfered with, or have whatever resources they're prepared to invest in the cause become overwhelmed.

This leads to the most important challenge social impact practitioners face—being able to put all these notions (altruism, empathy, and efficacy) into one strategy our organization can actually execute.

Your Organization is the Means, Not the Ends

When we look at these drivers of nonprofit support, we notice that they fall into one of two buckets:

- *the self*—helping those we love, feeling like they are doing good in the world, being perceived by others as being a good person;
- *creating positive impact in the world*—altruism, empathy for others, being effective in making the world a better place.

In both these cases, the nonprofit organization is *not* the primary focus. The person is doing something for themselves or for others. If they happen to support a nonprofit as part of the process, they do it as the "means," not the "ends."

We see evidence of this in social science as well.

Over half of Millennials (born 1982–2004) and Generation Xers (born 1961–1981) say that the ability to "see the impact of their donation" has a significant impact on whether they give or not. [11] A different survey found nearly half of Baby Boomers (born 1943–1960) want to direct the usage of their donation to address their specific issues of concern. [12]

We've also seen strong evidence that people respond better to nonprofit appeals that feature a single, relatable individual[13]—as opposed to abstract issues or dense statistics.

In these examples the supporters are most interested in making an impact—to make the world a better place, to act on issues they care about, or to help people they care about—not making an impact for just a particular nonprofit.

Just a Tool in the Toolbox

If people do not see a nonprofit as the "ends" of the donation, how do they see them?

Most of the time, people see nonprofits as the easiest means to fix whatever problem they have already identified. They see the organization as a tool they can use to affect the change they seek.

Melissa Wyers, Executive Director of fundraising and donor engagement platform at EveryAction, uses a similar analogy:

> *"Smart organizations portray themselves as the vessel for the donor's values. If I hate that people are discriminated against because of their sexuality, there*

> *isn't much I can do about it myself, but I can make a $100 gift to an LGBTQ advocacy organization to help change laws. But my attention is on the cause, not on the organization.*
>
> *In fact, I don't actually care about the organization, per say. I don't want to meet their staff, and I don't particularly want to hear about everything else the organization is doing. In that moment, I just want laws to be changed, and I only care about the organization in as much as whether they're going to be effective changing the laws or not.*
>
> *When I go to a grocery store. I'm there because I want to buy organic fruit. I'm not there to support the store's brand."*

The good news is, if a supporter sees our organization as a useful tool, he or she will continue to use us. But, if the supporter doesn't feel like our organization is helping them reach their personal goals, they won't hesitate to look for another nonprofit that will.

What You Can Do: Connect Authentically With Your Audience

One of the most common mistakes we can make is assuming our supporters care about our organization as much as they care about their cause.

This is a danger for social impact practitioners, because, first of all, it's an assumption, and assumptions need to be tested, and second, it's probably an incorrect assumption based on what we know about pure versus impure altruism.

Dr. Rob Gould argues that humans are social animals, and thinking of our audiences as such is critical in our efforts to connect with them:

> *"We are 'animals,' in the way we think, feel and behave. Those are reflexive, primitive elements, and the altruistic behaviors we show generally gain some 'advantage' to us.*
>
> *But we are also 'social' animals, in that our engagement in a cause is always embedded in how we perceive ourselves socially. The consequences of acting or not acting are responses to how we see and judge ourselves, and they are rarely separated from how we see others seeing and judging us."*

Non-profits give people a chance to "signal" to others something—whether it's the fact that they are good people, that they are opposed to bad things, or that they want to see some change in the world.

As a result, it's both critical and effective to use language that puts the supporters at the center of their own story, and to make sure you're making the right assumptions about your supporter's motivations and are putting the supporter into the right context to get involved.

#1: Change the Protagonist of Your Organization's Story

Supporters are not helping us with our mission; we are helping our supporters with theirs. Intuitively we know that people do not wake up in the morning hoping to help an organization meet its internal goals. They wake up looking to address some injustice they've identified in the world, and they want a partner in our organization to help them do so.

David Duncan, Chief Development Officer for the Civil War Trust, points out:

> *"The mission always takes precedence over the organization. My mission is to conduct our business so that our members and donors come to love this organization. And I use that word 'love' intentionally. In this highly competitive environment, it is my belief that unless you are in a donor's top three list of favorite charities, you really don't stand a chance.*
>
> *At the base of everything, this is an emotional transaction for the donor. It's not always a rational fact-based transaction. Emotions are very powerful. And if the donors believe, on an emotional level, that they are doing something important and that we are the best vehicle for what they want to accomplish, then we will achieve our mission."*

To do this, we need to start off by making sure we are using the right pronouns. When we say "us" and "our" we're probably leaving the supporter on the sidelines of the story, as in "I hope you'll help us reach our next target…" Instead use "you" and "we," as in "you want to make the world a better place" and "working together, we can make a difference."

Tactically we know this works for fundraising appeal writing as well. In his authoritative textbook, fundraising expert Mal Warwick lists the use of personal pronouns, specifically "you," as the first of his cardinal rules for writing fundraising appeals. Warwick argues that the use of *you* "provides human interest," which prevents the appeal from devolving into a press release or position paper, and by using "I" instead of "we," we maintain our

supporters "willingness to accept that our letter is a personal, one-to-one appeal."[14]

Duncan agrees:

> *"We put our donor at the center of the story through the very simple technique of utilizing the personal pronouns 'I' and 'you' all throughout our copy. I ruthlessly seek out and destroy the royal 'we' whenever possible.*
>
> *We also write every direct mail appeal, renewal, acquisition letter, thank you, and email as coming from our CEO personally. Over the years, our donors have truly come to believe that they have a personal relationship with him.*
>
> *We operate under the assumption that people give money to people and organizations whom they like and whom they trust, and so by personalizing the message in this way, written deliberately as to be from one person to one person, the donors come to believe that they are an integral part of our success."*

Also, be sure to report on the impact the supporters have on the ground via the donations they've invested, and use this as an opportunity to thank them repeatedly and authentically. We'll talk more about this in Chapter Four.

#2: Use Research to Get the Right Message to the Right People at the Right Time

If your supporters think of your organization as a tool in their "change the world" toolbox, then it becomes incredibly important to give them the right reason to engage with you at the right moment in their lives.

As Emily Anderson, Director of Annual Giving for Catholic Relief Services, points out: "It doesn't matter how many times we use the word 'you' in a letter if that letter is laying unopened at the bottom of the trash bin."

We can strike the perfect balance of altruism, empathy and efficacy in our language. We can find the right balance between emotion and logic in our content. But if we're not there at the right moment with the right message, we're unlikely to activate our audiences.

Unfortunately, the answer here is decidedly not one-size-fits-all. Each organization has its own best messages, its own best audience segments, and its own best timing. There are thousands of examples of social impact practitioners making poor assumptions about their supporters, either by ignoring the social science they have or not by doing

the proper audience research to see how to apply the science to themselves.

What science tells us is twofold: we should question our tactics and assumptions every chance we get, and we must look for proof to refine the best practices of others to fit our own situation.

That's why it's important to use research. It helps us to really understand our audiences, rather than simply implementing a theoretical persona built through hunches and unproven assumptions.

Research doesn't have to be expensive. You can do relatively simplistic surveys of new and current audiences, or just conduct a broad range of interviews with ardent and casual supporters. You can dig deep into your own response data to see how your tests are performing. It can even be as easy as running Google AdWords with a free nonprofit Google Grant to test how different messages and ask/pairs perform against each other.

Begoña Vázquez-Santos, Director of International Memberships for The Nature Conservancy, sees the importance of research in her experience:

> *"To deliver any message effectively, the organization first needs to understand what motivates people to support your cause. Some insiders are completely dedicated to the cause, and they have many ways they're trying to eradicate a problem. But most of the public are outsiders, and are in a completely different place.*
>
> *All our nonprofits are managed by wonderful people, but most of the people outside of the organization don't work on the issue every day, so there is a huge gap between how* we *see the cause and how others do. Insiders talk about the 'how'—how do we fix the problem—and we tend to skip the 'why' because the why is already obvious to us. But to outsiders, the 'why' is really what motivates them.*
>
> *Research is critical in finding balance between the* how *and the* why*, and in determining which* why*s are most important to people. Research is critical in finding opportunities to deliver the* why *and the* what*, and to find the best time in the year or the donor's lifecycle to bring that topic up. Research helps us find a strong link between our targeted audience and what we're asking them to do, letting us give them the right urgency that gets them to act."*

Karla Capers sees the same thing in her work for the Union of Concerned Scientists:

> *"We do a lot of message research, and it is hugely useful. We will draft a couple of different messages, and test them to see which messages resonate with*

> *which people, and which messages put people into a place where they are focused on finding solutions as opposed to scaring them and making them feel overwhelmed by the problem."*

Throughout this document, we'll talk through the best practices for getting people to authentically support your causes.

However, keep in mind that the best way to sift through which practices most apply to your supporter strategy is to do research that helps you sift through the hundreds of audience segments, and tells you how and when to apply these best practices.

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CHAPER TWO

ALTRUISM: YOUR SUPPORTERS' MOTIVES AREN'T AS PURE AS YOU THINK

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Few serious people argue with the idea that people want to do good.

When people think about *why* people want to do good—if they think about it at all—they often attribute this "goodness" to some vague notion that people are just inherently altruistic.

Social scientists have been studying altruism for decades—an "unselfish regard for or devotion to the welfare of others"—and philosophers have been debating altruism for centuries more.

We see evidence of altruism every day, such as the media report of a person jumping onto the subway tracks to save a fallen traveler, and the professor giving his life by shielding his students from an attack by a gunman.[15]

Nonprofits see these virtuous acts, and thousands more like them that we see every day, and assume that this same level of virtue lies in each and every one of their supporters—that each of the billions of dollars Americans give to charity each year is given because it's the right thing to do, to selflessly benefit people that we will never know.

But some social scientists suggest that this pure sense of altruism is not the motivation for everybody—and maybe not even a majority of us.

Selfish vs. Selfless

If our supporters aren't entirely motivated by the purest forms of altruism, then what other motivations might we have?

Some of our supporters instead have motivations a bit closer to home—the desire to make the world better for people they know, or even themselves. They want their friends, families, and communities to be prosperous and healthy.

Other supporters enjoy feeling like they are the types of people who do good in the world, and they enjoy being recognized—by the organization, and by their friends—for

doing that good. [16]

Prosocial Behavior vs. Altruism

The easiest way to suggest that supporter motivations aren't entirely pure is to look at how people *feel* after they do good.

Scientists have found that doing good makes us *feel* good. In fact it activates the same reward centers in our brains that are activated when we look at an attractive face or a beautiful work of art. Incidentally, it also activates the same reward centers that are activated when using cocaine.[17]

When we study "good", what we're really studying is *prosocial behavior*—the broad range of actions people can take to benefit others. Prosocial behavior covers everything we think of when we think social impact—volunteering at a community center, donating in support of tsunami relief in Indonesia, giving blood, or even just spending time with an elderly neighbor.[18]

If prosocial behavior sounds a lot like altruism, that's because both are focused on benefitting other people. But, altruism is a *motivation* in our head, and prosocial behavior is the *outcome* that manifests in the real world.

Not One Motivation, but Many

People can make the world a better place without being altruistic, and they can be altruistic without making the world a better place.

This distinction highlights an important point for social impact practitioners: supporter motivation isn't black and white, and as a result we shouldn't focus on any one motivation as being better than the others.

Ultimately it doesn't matter how many people have which motivation, and it's unlikely that a person could be so simplistic that they have only one motivation for anything they do beyond the simplest of human urges. What matters is that a narrow focus on any one motivation leaves all others (and the supporters who have them) on the sidelines.

So instead of assuming our supporters have one motivation, we should be creating communications that allow people to support our causes regardless of their motivations and not inadvertently limit our supporters by making them pass some kind of purity test.

The Science Behind Basic Human Values

Even if we accept that people can have a range of motivations to do good in the world, we would not necessarily know it by reading most nonprofits' fundraising,

communications, and marketing materials.

How many emails in your inbox right now ask you to:

- donate now, because sick children should have a chance at a normal life;
- take action, because polar bears are drowning from melting sea ice;
- volunteer today, because people are hungry and need your help.

In each case, the nonprofit is creating an *awareness of need*; they are showing their supporters that there is a need in the world that they think should be addressed.

But in each case, the ask depends on an assumption that may not be true—that people have a selfless concern for others (or animals) that they'll likely never meet.

Basic Human Values

In each of the above examples, the nonprofit is appealing to a very narrow slice of what social scientists refer to as *basic human values*; in these cases, they all use *universalism*, a selfless value for the welfare of people (and nature) the vast majority of whom the supporters will never know.

Let's assume that universalism motivates more than its share of supporters. Even so, universalism is just one of ten values that people have that motivate people. With so many other motivations available, universalism isn't always the best option. Consider other values, such as:

- ***Benevolence*** is the value we have that motivates us to preserve and enhance the welfare of family and friends. People don't have to give to a food bank just to help people they'll never meet (universalism), but instead donate to make sure the food bank is there if their friends and family ever fall on hard times.
- ***Security*** is the value we place on protecting the stability of our communities. Instead of supporting afterschool programs solely for the benefit of at-risk youth, people could support the programs because they feel keeping kids off the street reduces crime, increases education in the community, and benefits the local economy.
- ***Conformity*** is our desire to stay within the expectations of those around us. People may support a walk for cancer not only to fund a cure for people they don't know but because they don't want to be the only ones in their office not supporting a coworker's cause.

- ***Tradition*** is our want to respect the customs and ideas provided by one's culture or religion. The reason people donate to a church may not be primarily driven by the benefits the church brings to their community; they may just be following the centuries-old tradition of tithing 10% of their salary.

These are five (including universalism) good examples of the diversity of supporter motivation as seen through basic human values. But the above examples merely showcase the human values that focus on a benefit to others. There are five more basic human values that focus primarily on the benefit to ourselves—which yields a more selfish motivation, standing far outside of our traditional notions of altruism.

- Supporters may be motivated by ***achievement*** and ***power***—hoping *personal* success and elevated social status will result from their support of a cause or a nonprofit. This could include people who donate simply to have their name placed on a building or to have a greater voice in how the nonprofit operates.

- ***Stimulation*** dictates they may be motivated in part by the novelty of a challenge facing them. This could include people who run their first marathon in support of a nonprofit or people who hope to launch a second career by first volunteering with a nonprofit organization.

- The values of ***self-direction*** and ***hedonism*** may inspire someone to act to protect their personal independence or give purely because giving makes them feel good. This could include donations to an organization that works to protect the individual's own human rights or nearly any donation, as we've already discussed, that results in people feeling good about themselves (prosocial behavior).

In his popular theory, Shalom Schwartz of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem argues that each of these basic human values can relate to prosocial behavior in some way, and, perhaps more importantly, that it doesn't matter whether the motivation is altruistic or not. "Once people recognize feasible actions to help another and feel at least a minimum of responsibility," he writes, "their [basic human] values provide motivation to act."[19]

Why Does Universalism Dominate Social Impact Communications?

If there are ten different basic human values that motivate people to make prosocial behaviors, then why do supporter communications seem to focus overwhelmingly on a selfless concern for the welfare of people the addressees may never meet?

The simplistic answer is that we've been teaching ourselves to do it this way for a really long time.

We teach our children at a very young age that selflessness is good, and selfishness is bad; we encourage them to share with others and to think about the welfare of others. These lessons are reinforced as the children are introduced to charity via school fundraisers, or family philanthropy.

This sense of charity is established enough in people's lives that social scientists call it a "cultural norm." We, as humans, feel a responsibility to help those who are less fortunate.[20]

Religions reinforce this norm, too, via its stories and parables.

Christianity has the parable of the good Samaritan. The Quran features the story of the Ansaar in Medina who made great sacrifices for those fleeing persecution, even though they were in great need themselves. Judaism has the story of a sinner who sells the necessities of life to prevent another from living a life of sin.[21]

It's even worth pointing out that Americans have a national heritage that reinforces a desire to seem selfless amongst our friends and family.

Many early settlers of America were Puritans who, despite a strong drive for economic enterprise, were taught that self-interest "was a raging sea that was a sure path to eternal damnation", and this belief may have put a premium on appearing selfless at the very earliest stages of our nation's birth.[22, 23]

With all these influences, it's not surprising that nearly all of us believe it is a virtue to care for others even at the expense of ourselves. Further, much of our social impact communications seeks to take advantage of this basic human value.

On the other hand, these influences have almost certainly had an unintended consequence: we've been conditioned to think we should *appear* to be selfless, even when we're not; otherwise we might not seem like good people. This introduces the idea that what people *say* motivates them may not be what *actually* motivates them—a notion that we'll explore later in this chapter.

As a result, even though selflessness dominates our discourse, we as social impact practitioners need to go beyond universalism and pure altruism, and we need to open our messaging to activate this greater range of motivations that is almost certainly hidden underneath.

Other Not-So-Pure Altruisms

There is little doubt that altruistic messaging works much of the time and with many of our audiences. But for social impact practitioners, in a fractured age of tiny audience segments, majority-wins is not enough.

To be effective, our communications need to appeal to the full spectrum of human values and motivations. This means we need to look beyond the traditional notion of pure altruism as the only driver of support and instead add content that lets people keep the motivations they already have.

Impure Altruism

If pure altruism is doing good in the world with an unselfish regard for the welfare of others, impure altruism is taking the same prosocial behavior motivated by some flavor of selfish, personal benefit.

An example of this is what economist James Andreoni calls “warm glow” giving. He found that people give, at least in part, to feel the positive emotion that arises from helping others. Many, including Andreoni himself, see this as “egoistic” giving, in that the act is as much about benefit to ourselves as to others.[24] And there is good social science to back up this notion.

One study, featured in *Science*, measured brain activity and self-reported “satisfaction” in two groups of people: one group who made a voluntary donation to a charity and another forced to pay a “tax” to support the same charity. Not surprisingly, people who made the voluntary gift showed more positive brain activity and had higher self-reported levels of satisfaction.[25]

The surprising part, however, comes when we think about altruism. If people were *purely* altruistic—motivated only by making the world a better place—then it wouldn’t matter *how* the charity got the money; pure altruists would be just as happy making a donation or by paying a donation via a mandated tax.

The fact that people were happier making a voluntary donation suggests that the *act* of donating was just as important (if not more so) than the benefit the donation brought to others. And that is impure altruism.

Competitive Altruism

If impure altruism focuses on the internal benefit people get from giving, what happens if the benefit comes from how people are perceived by their friends, family or community? In biology there exists a notion of *competitive altruism*, where animals act to benefit others primarily to gain social standing within their community (presumably to increase

their attractiveness as a mate.)[26]

We see evidence of this every day on donor lists posted in the back of an annual report or at the entrance to a museum.

Fundraisers know that if there is public recognition of a supporter's giving level—as in, Mr. and Mrs. John Q. Public are members of the President's Circle, because they donated between $10,000 and $25,000—donations are *not* spread evenly within that advertised range. Instead, people generally give the minimum necessary to attain their desired level—i.e. there are far more donations nearer to $10,000 than to $25,000.

This suggests the supporters are just as (if not *more*) interested in what others think about them (*competitive altruism*) as they are interested in making a certain amount of impact with their donation (*pure altruism)*.

Another good example of competitive altruism in the human world is the Toyota Prius. Even though there are dozens of other hybrid car models, when the Prius launched it grabbed a huge amount of market share—well beyond what had been predicted.

One study suggests that the Prius' success came, in part, from its easy recognition as a hybrid car. While other companies' hybrid cars looked exactly like their less-gas-thrifty like-models (a hybrid Civic looks exactly like a regular Civic, for example), the Prius is instantly recognized as a hybrid, and, more importantly, the Prius *driver* could be instantly recognized as a good person who cares about the environment.[27] Much like the pull we feel to be recognized as good Samaritan, many people want to be recognized as a good citizen of the planet by driving a hybrid; and that is much easier to do in the unique Prius than in the traditional Civic.

One final study demonstrates that churches collecting their offering with an open basket, which allows parishioners to easily see their neighbors' gifts, significantly increases donations as compared with churches using a closed basket that provides no visibility into what has been donated.[28]

In all these cases, a perceived boost in social status is a powerful motivator for human behavior (and, perhaps as an interesting harkening-back to the above example of the animals, studies suggest this motivates men significantly more than women).[29]

Breakout: Reciprocal Altruism and Indirect Reciprocity

> There's another, less discussed, type of altruism—reciprocal altruism—wherein an individual helps another with the expectation that they themselves will benefit at some future date.

> The evidence for reciprocal altruism comes largely from the study of biology. Birds give a warning call when they see a predator—at obvious risk to themselves—in the hope that they will benefit from others giving warning in the future. Closer to home, humans care for the elderly in the hope that others will care for them as they grow older.[30, 31]
>
> As we've discussed, most religions teach that being purely altruistic is a virtue, and if followers put others before themselves, they'll find favor in the eyes of God. In fact, however, if a person is altruistic in the hopes of being rewarded by God, it interestingly becomes reciprocal altruism.

What You Can Do: Let Your Supporters be a Little Bit Selfish

Most social impact practitioners would agree that greed is typically *not* good, and being selfish isn't much better. However, focusing too much on the purity of our supporters' motivations may cause us to overlook the result. Just because they feel some benefit from giving doesn't change the impact that support has on the world.

In fact, science suggests that a little impurity in our supporters' altruism is a good thing: a focus on their own happiness helps people stay involved longer and results in them supporting their favorite causes more fervently.

Nathalie Spenser, Senior Researcher at the RSA's Social Brain Centre in London, suggests that the glow a person gets from a selfish motivation may actually last longer than if the same person had a pure motive, which ultimately increases the likelihood of the person doing more good in the future.[32]

Jerry Johnson, Executive Vice President at Brodeur Partners, a communications agency that has worked extensively with nonprofits and institutions of higher education, is skeptical:

> *"I've heard over the years that 'altruism doesn't exist—it's a myth.' Or, 'everyone donates for some selfish reason.' I don't buy that. There are some absolute and immutable values. There are rights and wrongs. And this is characteristic of many faith traditions.*
>
> *For many of us, it's our responsibility to serve that truth, and to give without any thought of return. This is different from giving because it makes you feel good—that motivation is fine, but I feel it's insufficient, and doesn't tell the whole story.*
>
> *Did Mother Theresa bring herself fulfillment by doing what she did? It would be hard to argue in a worldly sense that there was benefit to her."*

Sue Citro, Chief Digital Officer for Best Friends Animal Society, has a different take:

> *"Even if they're being selfish, the language of altruism is still important to help people do social good. It helps us build relationships, and create meaningful experiences. It helps people be their best selves, and leave the world better than they found it.*
>
> *In some respects, it doesn't matter what someone's motivation is in the end. Their action is what matters. Through a diversity of messages, we can leave room for many different types of people to act, regardless of what their motivation might be."*

Porter Mason, Vice President of Digital at National Audubon Society, agrees:

> *"People don't have to be limited to just one motivation, but we try to foster altruism in our supporters. We need them to have a connection to the mission, something that is altruistic, that's larger than themselves. Otherwise, long-term, it just doesn't make sense.*
>
> *Being an Audubon member means getting our magazine. If they become a member just to subscribe to the magazine, that's fine. But we're not going looking for those people, and we are trying to avoid letting people be so transactional. If none of their motives are altruistic, that's a hollow, empty relationship. Long-term, it's a fragile relationship that will hurt the organization."*

David Zucker, social impact communications consultant and long-time strategist at Porter Novelli, sees all kinds of motivations, each with varying levels of altruism:

> *"There are some people that are more naturally altruistic or who were brought up in a family, community or religion that is more focused on altruistic language and values.*
>
> *There are others who are focused more on how they've been personally affected by an issue. For them, it is personal, but it's also altruistic, such as the desire to help prevent others from enduring what they themselves endured. There are still others who are driven by societal issues and norms—their social status and how they look to peers—which is prompted by their own feeling of being involved.*
>
> *All of this is perfectly okay. It doesn't matter what their motivations are. What matters is in the level of engagement you're seeking from them. For instance,*

> *the ones that are more socially driven could be more 'clicktivist', while the altruistic could be more deeply involved.*
>
> *But, in the end, the motivation doesn't matter. What matters is understanding how those motivations impact their engagement with you."*

If it's okay for our supporters to be a little selfish, what are things that social impact practitioners can do right now to take advantage of the full spectrum of selfish and selfless motivations?

#1: Appeal to "Other" Human Values

As supporters of nonprofits, most of us are hit with so many calls to do good in the world (for the benefit of people we'll never meet) that it's hard to not roll our eyes when we see another one land in our inbox.

But remember, there are a whole range of basic human values—different motivations to attract different people to support our cause.

Dr. Edward Maibach, professor and Director of George Mason's Center for Climate Change Communication, sees this in his work to help scientists better communicate with the public on the threats presented by climate change:

> *"The old model of climate change communications, emphasizing the impact on people and animals far away, doesn't work for most Americans. It reinforces their view that climate change is a distant threat—in space (not here), time (not yet), and species (not us).*
>
> *At the Center for Climate Change Communication, we are working to find ways of reducing this psychological distance problem by showing people that climate change is harming people in their community, right now, and in a variety of ways."*

This, in fact, is why the public is starting to see a much wider range of messages in communications about climate change—beyond animals, the environment, and people we'll never meet—such as:

- The risk to our communities from extreme weather[33]
- The impact climate change is having on our own health[34]
- The importance of a climate solution to our future economic development
- An appeal for the religious to work to protect God's creation[35]

- The interests of American security, power and energy independence

You'll notice that these messages go well beyond a universal appeal featuring polar bears at risk of drowning in the Arctic or highlighting islands in the Pacific that will be lost in the event of predicted rises in sea level. Instead, they are a range of messages that target human values like benevolence, security, tradition, achievement, power and self-direction.

No one message is going to work for everyone—so it's critical to use a range of messages to meet a range of values.

"Even in an ideal world, the 'one message that rules them all' is, of course, a fallacy," Dr. Maibach says. "The regrettable divide between liberals and conservatives on the issue of climate change means that is even more true on this issue."

#2: Don't Confuse Public Posturing with Supporter Motivation

The next time you hear people imply how virtuous they are for supporting a nonprofit to help others, don't think of Mother Teresa—think about a ball player at a press conference saying, "All I really want to do is help the team."

It's possible his motivation truly is to play well and win championships, but it's more likely that those platitudes are just what he thinks people want to hear.

This means our supporters' motivations may be different than what they're telling us, which means it often may feel like we're jumping off a cliff blindly as we make the choice between targeting pure and impure motivations.

Choose the Motivation that Matches the Context

In one study, researchers found that language featuring pure altruism and impure altruism were both effective, but each only in certain contexts.

They found that pure altruism was more effective "when consumers were publicly accountable for their responses," meaning the consumers were at public events and/or volunteer opportunities with others.

On the other hand, the more impure, selfish form of altruism was more effective "when consumers' responses are private," as they would be in direct mail or email/online appeals.[36]

Dr. Rob Gould, behavioral economist and advisor to dozens of behavior change campaigns over the last three decades, ties his approach back to the balance between pure and impure altruism:

> *"People have lots of motivations, and pure altruism is just one of them. But, there's no reason for us to enforce any kind of purity test with people. We're social animals, and it is important for people to* look *altruistic, regardless of whether or not altruism is motivating them.*
>
> *As a result, never lead with selfish motivations. If you do, you're signaling to people that they're selfish people if they respond. Instead, start out with the altruistic reasons and how they can help the cause. After they are already engaged,* then *you can start to introduce more selfish benefits to finish the deal or retain people over time.*
>
> *You're talking about the same person with same motivations but when it's public, and their motivations are on display, they don't want to demonstrate impure, altruistic motives. It's basic social science of self-presentation. They want to be seen in the best light and present themselves in that best light, because social norms are guiding their response.*
>
> *They want to seem communal, and interested in the greater good. They don't want to be seen as making a commercial transaction, where they are 'buying' something of value from a nonprofit, while others are doing something out of the good of their heart."*

Amanda Thacker-Heidke, Director of Strategy and Planning for nonprofit digital and data consulting firm Freeflow Digital, provides another example:

> *"Think of the Ice Bucket Challenge from the summer of 2014. I didn't really know much about ALS before the challenge, and no one in my family was affected by the disease, but getting 'called out' by so many people made it really awkward for those of us who hadn't yet participated.*
>
> *I had no clear motivation to participate otherwise, but the very fact that someone was watching me, calling me out, led me to join in. Would I have broadcasted the real reason why I participated? Would I have told people that I was really only doing it because of peer pressure? No, never in a million years. I did what most of us did—I did the challenge, then told people I did it because of how concerned I was for the cause."*

Regardless, even if supporters feel a warm glow from donating (or donates to avoid feeling bad about not doing so), they still see themselves as altruistic—and want to believe that others see them that way, too.

People are Skeptical of Motives

Researchers from The Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania found that people are inherently skeptical about other's motivations for making prosocial behaviors. For instance, what do you think when an energy or chemical company makes a large donation to an environmental nonprofit? Do you view it as a legitimate charitable act or as greenwashing?

Because of humanity's inherent skepticism, the researchers found we're likely to convince ourselves that our generosity is pure, and present our generosity that way to others, even when that might not be the case.[37] This makes it very important for us to provide potential donors with a virtuous, altruistic reason to give—even if it means showing them how they benefit, too.

Dr. Gould sees this as an extension of what social scientists refer to as *attribution theory*:

> *"As humans, we go through a process where we make attributions for why people (or organizations) are behaving the way they are. If you do something good, and there is no other explanation, others will infer that you are a good person. If there* is *another explanation, that you could be benefiting from the action in some way, others will dismiss or discount your action as being self-interested."*

David Zucker, social impact communications consultant, agrees that intent is an important driver of perception here:

> *"If a company's action is tied to a public relations effort, the lines between 'good' and 'self-interested' become blurry for most observers. One way for companies to address this issue is to choose good works with a very clear, credible link to the company's business, so they are doing more than just writing a check. So they're applying their business expertise and assets to developing innovative solutions.*
>
> *For example, if a large, nationally-known home improvement company donates to help people after a natural disaster by donating equipment or materials to help rebuild a home, there is less skepticism because it's the 'natural' thing for them to be doing. It's leveraging the core of who they are as a business.*

> *To avoid the appearance of greenwashing. Instead of just writing a big check, an oil company would want to provide a grant to an environmental organization on an issue that is in both their interests, like developing technology that can capture CO_2. That's seen less skeptically than just writing a check.*
>
> *But in the end, how a company behaves on a daily basis determines whether their prosocial efforts are seen skeptically or not. There can't be a disconnect between external prosocial efforts and how a company treats its employees, for example."*

Dr. Gould sees another possibility:

> *"Oil companies often give a lot to the arts, because there is no nefarious motive, and it shows locals that they care about the community. Interestingly enough, the arts are also a great way to ingratiate themselves to the powerful, wealthy people who attend theater and impress them."*

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CHAPTER THREE

EMPATHY: GETTING PEOPLE TO FEEL IS AS IMPORTANT AS GETTING THEM TO THINK

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Our ability to emotionally relate to others is core to our human identity.

Being emotionally "there" for others is something we love about our friends and family, and we seek help for people whose ability to relate to others is impaired.

Some of our most beloved stories in pop-culture center on this ability to relate emotionally, from the Tin Man in *The Wizard of Oz* to science fiction epics like *Blade Runner* and *2001*.

Our innate ability to relate is also a critical part of people's support for causes and nonprofit organizations.

In the last two chapters, we discussed how people want to make the world a better place and are willing to engage in "prosocial behaviors" to do so, such as donating money, volunteering, taking action, or giving blood.

Sometimes this desire to do good is driven by a purely altruistic concern for people whom we'll never meet, but sometimes the motivation is a bit more selfish in that we want to make the world a better place for our friends, family, and community—even ourselves.

Regardless of their motivation—selfless or more selfish—getting supporters to put themselves in the shoes of the people who benefit from our organization's work is essential to acquiring new supporters and keeping them engaged over the long haul.

As social impact practitioners, we must be careful to not overwhelm our supporters with emotion, causing them to tune out or turn off their emotions.[38, 39]

So, how do we activate these emotions and help people be passionate for the causes we care about? More importantly, how do we do we activate our audiences authentically and in a way that doesn't drive supporters away?

To begin, let's look at the science beneath our sense of concern for others.

The Science Behind Empathy

For the sake of simplicity, we'll divide our pop-culture notions of "concern for others" into two buckets: what social scientists refer to as *empathy* and *sympathy*.

Empathy is when one person perceives another's emotions and then feels that same emotion themselves.[40, 41] When we feel true empathy for someone, we feel what they feel based on our own personal experience. We project ourselves into the situation or circumstance, and their fear begets our own fear, their anger becomes our anger, and their joy leads us to feel joy of our own.

Sympathy is more like what we'd expect in the greeting card aisle of a store: a "feeling of care and concern for someone," with a "wish to see her better off or happier."[42] With sympathy, there is no *shared* emotion—instead, the emotion is detached.[43] Their fear, distress, or grief aren't met with the same emotion from us but is instead met with sorrow, concern, or pity.

The difference between empathy and sympathy really comes down to our perspective—or, frankly, lack thereof. With empathy, there is a deep, emotional connection that pulls us out of our world and puts us into theirs. With sympathy, we stay within our own world and see their emotion from the outside.

For social impact practitioners, empathy and the compassion it can lead to is powerful because the supporter is motivated as if the situation is affecting them personally, which allows us to tap more deeply into our supporters' motivations.

Breakout: What is Compassion?

> It's difficult to get social scientists to agree on ambiguities in a concept as amorphous as "concern for others", but Dr. Neel Burton suggests there is an emotion even further engaged than empathy—compassion.
>
> He associates compassion with "an active desire to alleviate the suffering" of another. Dr. Burton writes, "With empathy, I share your emotions; with compassion, I not only share your emotions but also elevate them into a universal and transcending experience." [44]
>
> Others define compassion as the act that comes out of empathy and (less often) sympathy, and many list prosocial behavior as the act that comes out of pure or impure altruism. In both cases, however, compassion happens when empathy turns into action.

Empathy Drives Prosocial Behavior

Social scientists have plenty of examples wherein high levels of empathy have turned into increased prosocial behaviors:

- People who see vivid, emotional stories of natural disaster victims are more likely to donate than those who only see simple facts and figures.[45]

- People who see "gory" scenes of whale hunting (versus less vivid content) are more likely to empathize with whales and, in turn, support Greenpeace's work on the issue.[46]

These examples won't be surprising to social impact practitioners but, in the last few decades, we've started to discover the biology behind these behaviors.

In the 1990s, researchers studying autism—a disorder often characterized by a difficulty in empathizing with others—began to investigate so-called mirror neurons.[47] Essentially, the same part of our brain that fires if we are poked with a needle will also fire when we see *someone else* get poked.[48]

Our brains seem to be hard-wired for empathy.

Another research study found that once empathy is triggered, a hormone in our brain takes over and give us the "feeling" we experience when being empathetic. That hormone, oxytocin, is connected to the feelings parents have for their children and spouses have for each other.

In one study, researchers saw a 47% rise in oxytocin levels when subjects watched a video about a father losing a child to cancer. This increase in oxytocin (and subsequent empathy) had a real impact on charity, too, as participants showed greater generosity when asked to donate at the end of the experiment.[49]

Primatologist Frans de Waal also sees a clear line between empathy and prosocial behavior in our biology. Prosocial behavior is not cheap, he argues, and "it is unclear what could motivate the extremely costly helping behavior" we see in charity, if not for the "emotional engagement" driven by our empathy for others. [50]

Language that Drives Empathy

So how do social impact practitioners encourage empathy in others?

We see empathy used every day, especially as nonprofits use the vivid story of a single compelling victim to ask for money. This language is specifically designed to engage

our emotions and "trigger empathy towards the victim."[51]

The success of this tactic, however, clearly depends on how well the language is executed.

Let's look at two simple examples of empathetic language designed to activate someone in support of a cause. The first:

> Many children have no home. They try to attend school while their families are living on the streets. They must choose between going to school and finding food. [52]

Social impact practitioners may argue this language is designed to be empathetic, but it's actually more of a sympathy play. If emotions arise from this statement, it's likely pity or some amorphous concern about the plight of others. In the above language, the reader does not personally connect with the distress of being homeless or the fear of not knowing where their next meal will come from.

This language also violates a lot of the rules of good storytelling. There is no clear character, as we are talking about *people* (in the aggregate) instead of one person specifically. It's also not told in a way that compels us to learn more about the situation. It is purely factual (though, mercifully, it does not use indecipherable statistics). For all these reasons, it is not effective in giving a supporter much to become engaged with.

The second example, from the same study:

> Imagine that you are a child with no home. Imagine that you try to attend school when your family is living on the streets. Imagine that you have to decide whether to go to school or to find food.

Granted, the language here is a bit ham-fisted, and the "imagine…" construct can only be used so many times before a supporter's eyes roll out of their head.

But, the language *does* give the readers the opportunity to project themselves into another's situation. They have the chance to feel the fear and distress as if it were first-hand. And while it does not solve the storytelling issues of the first piece, it sidesteps them enough to provide a stronger impact.

Unsurprisingly this language worked significantly better than the first—both at triggering empathy in the reader and in making the reader want to donate.

Melissa Wyers, Executive Director of non-profit fundraising and engagement platform EveryAction, has seen this over her three-decade-long fundraising career:

> *"The best way to raise money—really, to do anything—is to generate a deep feeling within a human being. People act based on emotion. Our values as people tie closely to our emotions; our values don't come from the end of a reasoned debate.*
>
> *Donors are most likely to have those emotions if they feel similar to the people in need. The way Americans see refugees is an example of this. They respond better to happy kids, playing despite their conditions. Kids that are sweet and healthy-looking. Parents can't imagine their kids under duress, so when they see other kids under duress, they instinctively feel a disconnect—thinking that 'maybe that refugee family isn't much like my family after all.'*
>
> *And it works the other way too. In my experience, men and women in the military strongly empathize with refugees and other civilians caught in the crossfire in war-torn countries. They've been there as soldiers and have seen the same bullets fly. Having this shared experience makes them much more empathetic with refugees—the people who are still suffering from war.*
>
> *The hardest thing to raise money for are the things prospective donors have never met/dealt with directly."*

Matthew McClellan, Director of Development for the Equality Federation, sees both empathy and sympathy in his organization's work advocating for LGBTQ equality:

> *"Most of the people who support us are deeply empathetic with our cause and the people who'd benefit from equality. That's because the people who fund our work, who respond to our actions, are, for the most part, part of the LGBTQ community. They feel the same impact, they want the same legislation, and they have the same response to hate crimes against the community.*
>
> *There was less empathy and more sympathy during the pre-marriage era. People without friends in the LGBTQ community would see us, and feel 'bad' that we didn't have what others had. If they didn't have a lot of exposure to us, there weren't a lot of ways for the issue to hit them personally.*
>
> *Younger generations today are a good example of this. Good liberals, younger republicans—they just don't care about someone's sexual orientation. To them it's an absurd issue. In the last ten to fifteen years in the movement, people have come out of the closet younger, and when you're exposed to different sexual orientations early in life it's just not as 'scary.' It stops being an issue, and it's just a given."*

Sue Citro, Chief Digital Officer for Best Friends Animal Society, finds empathy important even when the people who benefit aren't people:

> *"We focus the story on the animals we rescue, and the hope and joy that the animal brings. We show their viewpoints and share that view with the world. There are a lot of messages out there that seem forced, using dogs/cats shivering in a cage. We don't use that sort of approach because it leads to shock and pity—neither of which is a shared emotion.*
>
> *We share great stories—what's special about the animals at our sanctuary and regional centers—and then we see who that connects with. You never know what speaks to someone, but there is something about the pureness of that hope and that story that will eventually connect with someone deeply.*
>
> *Empathy, even if it's not with humans, is really powerful when it's real and you know instantly when it's not. It must come from a good intent, or it won't work because people will dismiss it as manipulative."*

Breakout: Big Numbers

> Humans aren't great with numbers, and studies have shown that it's especially difficult for us to comprehend especially large numbers. When nonprofits use large numbers (or percentages, for that matter) in appeals, they don't work because many people just can't wrap their heads around them.
>
> For instance, have you ever knowingly seen 45 million of anything? How does someone comprehend what 45 million people looks like? Is that a lot or a little? How about in the context of a country with 325 million people? Or in the world of 7 billion people? And how many people is 13 percent of Americans?
>
> When Feeding America talks about hunger, they rarely (if ever) say that there are 45 million people in the U.S. who aren't sure where their next meal will come from. Instead they use the term "1-in-7 people". It's the same statistic put in a way that people can, by simply looking around themselves, intuitively place into context.
>
> The 1-in-7 approach also helps people think that the problem surrounds them and may be impacting the people sitting immediately to the right of the left of them. When we say "45 million", it's too easy for people to dismiss that number as all being un-decipherable or that it refers to a heap of people all packed into a couple of cities far, far away.

How Do We Trigger Empathy?

Since we don't have the ability to simply push a button to activate our supporters' mirror neurons or to infuse them with a rush of oxytocin, we as social impact practitioners instead need to put together words, visuals, and experiences to achieve the same effect. But how do we do that successfully?

Storytelling

If you've been paying attention, you've noticed that social impact communicators are telling seemingly endless numbers of stories each day—about their organization and about the people their organization is benefiting from their work.

This isn't happening by accident. It's happening because the telling of stories offers a simple, effective way to connect deeply with supporters because stories tap into our brains at an almost primordial level.

Robyn Castellani, behavioral economist and President and CEO of narrative agency Castle and Spark, explains:

> *"I can't count how many times I've had an organization say to me, 'Tell people about our cause! Just give them the facts, and they'll respond!' That doesn't work. Our brains aren't designed to respond to information; they're designed to respond to stories.*[53]
>
> *The reason stories exist, the reason that we've been using them since we were cavemen sitting around a campfire, is because stories are survival instruments. People come to you because you are telling a story that could help them survive in their world.*
>
> *When you look at a picture and something in your brain responds instinctually—like seeing the movie poster for* Jaws *and feeling a sense of fear, or hearing that theme music—that's called an 'as if' experience. Every time we hear a story, there is part of our brain that responds as if what we are seeing is actually happening. This is how we practice having certain kinds of experiences and going through certain kinds of challenges, without having to actually put ourselves in danger."*

The lesson for social impact practitioners? According to Castellani, the experience is triggered by stories and narrative, and not by facts and figures. "This is why we see so many stories told by social impact communicators, and it's why it's so important to tell good stories."

The Identifiable Victim Effect

The first rule of empathy is to give the reader someone to empathize with, and storytelling is a great way to start. One of the easiest ways to do this is to tell the story of a single, representational person who would benefit from the supporters' prosocial behavior.

In social science, this best practice is driven by what social scientists call the identifiable victim effect—that people are willing to do more to save the lives of "identified victims" than they would be to save "unidentified or statistical victims."

This is another reason why we see so many personal stories in social impact communications, and it's another reason why social impact practitioners are beginning to rethink overwhelming supporters with tons of facts and statistics.

Think about September 11th for a moment. More than fifteen years after the attacks, many people aren't able to recall the exact number of fatalities. Even when they're told that the number is 2,977, most people may feel something briefly and then forget it again.

What if, instead, we ask people to think about Todd Beamer on United flight 93 and how he led passengers in the fight to retake the plane ("Let's roll!") before it crashed in Pennsylvania? Or if we see the image of the solitary "Falling Man" plummeting from the North Tower of the World Trade Center before it collapsed? Now we start to feel something that will linger in our minds and our hearts longer than a simple statistic would.

The Certainty Effect

Eliciting empathy isn't the only benefit to featuring a single person's story in our communications. Stories of individuals also take advantage of the "Certainty Effect," wherein people see the outcome of an individual as more certain than the outcome of a larger group.

For instance, our brains see the phrase "For just 99 cents, you can save Johnny's life" as more certain, and more compelling than "3.1 million children die from hunger each year"—even if both are equally true, and even if Johnny is one of the 3.1 million children.

Putting a face and a name on a problem makes the situation concrete, turning something our brain sees as amorphous into something that can be stopped if you "just act now."[54]

A logical extension of these storytelling best practices is to avoid hypotheticals. When people get the sense that a situation—or, worse, the person—is hypothetical, it is easy

for their brains to dismiss the story, its premise, and the likelihood of it actually occurring.

For example, studies have shown that a person gives more to support orphans when they are depicted by actual photographs, as opposed to silhouettes or no photo at all.[55] Without pictures, supporters often believe the orphans simply don't exist.

Why? Successful storytelling requires us to emphasize a one-to-one humanity—to put a face on the cause—and that connection between empathy and prosocial behaviors weakens if the protagonists are unknown or undefined.[56]

Breakout: Another Reason Why Your Next Donor Will Likely Be Over 50

> For most social impact practitioners, our next donor will be over the age of fifty. Older supporters simply have more money, are more likely to make donations, and are more likely to make larger donations.[57]
>
> What is unexpected, however, is that the next donor will likely be over fifty, because people become more empathetic with age.
> In one study, a range of participants watched uplifting or distressing films that depicted people in need. Participants were given money that they could contribute to help the people in the films.
>
> Older supporters "won" on all counts. They had higher self-reported empathy, had stronger physical responses to the movies (measured by cardiac and readings from their skin), and gave more often to support those depicted in the film. [58]

What You Can Do: Use Empathy to Authentically Motivate Your Supporters

In some ways, coming up with communication tactics—stories—that nurture supporter empathy is the easy part. The hard part is the balancing act that is inherent in nonprofits' use of empathy in their supporter communications.

There is a thin line between putting the most empathetic light possible on our cause and manipulating our supporters' emotions. One person's love for the child they have "adopted" for the cost of a cup of coffee, turns into another's disillusionment that the same child's picture could be hung on hundreds of different refrigerators around the world.

So as we seek to put our causes in the most empathetic light possible, we also need to find balance between empathy and being overwhelmed, so we can authentically use empathy to engage our supporters.

#1: Tell Better Stories

As we learned earlier, humans empathize with other humans. And that does not mean facts about humans or hypotheticals about humans. To respond authentically, our supporters need to "meet" individuals who will benefit from our organization's work—through stories we feature in our communications.

The qualities of great storytelling are complex enough to deserve their own report, and such research already exist, including "Stories Worth Telling" from Georgetown University's Center for Social Impact Communication.[59]

But for our purposes, there are a handful of storytelling best practices specific to empathy to keep in mind in our nonprofit communications.

"Perception-action Model for Empathy"

Researcher Stephanie Preston and primatologist Frans de Waal suggest, in their "perception-action model for empathy," that empathy between two people increases if they are similar people, or if they have shared past-experiences.[60]

As social impact practitioners, we can use these criteria to boost our supporters' empathy with the people featured in the stories we tell and, in doing so, boost their likeliness to support our causes.

Focus on Shared, Universal Experiences

Empathy increases if our supporter has similar past experiences to the person depicted in our stories.

For instance, a person who has experienced hunger or uncertainty about where their next meal will come from will more likely empathize with people depicted in an appeal for a food bank. The closer a story, appeal, or communication is to what someone has experienced, the more likely that person will empathize with the situation.

The trick is finding characteristics in which our donors and our beneficiaries have shared needs and experiences. For instance, food banks often feature stories of someone who needs *temporary* food assistance—for example, because of an unexpected injury or job loss—instead of on-going or permanent food assistance.

Most people who donate to food banks can't imagine needing food assistance every day of their lives, but they can easily imagine missing a paycheck or two, and needing

some assistance for a short period of time.

Feature Similarities Between Supporters and the People Who'd Benefit
In much the same way, empathy increases if the person feels similar to the people depicted. This could be demographic similarities but also similar experiences or similarity in "personality, temperament, and socioeconomic status."

People are more likely to intervene on behalf of another if they feel a similarity, and they are more likely to make prosocial behaviors on behalf of someone to whom they feel similar.

This is why social impact practitioners often lead off stories with phrases like, "Little Susan loves science and playing soccer with her friends" or "Billy's family is just like any other—he has two parents who love him and work long hours to make sure he has food, clothes, and a roof over his head."

These phrases are specifically crafted to establish a similarity between the supporter and the people who'll benefit from their support.

Reducing Social Distance

Focusing on universal past experiences and shared similarities helps us reduce what we call the "social distance" between supporters and those they'd support.

This is important because when supporters feel they are distant from the people in need—not just different in location but different in personality, life choices, etc.—then telling their story may not be the most compelling option.[61]

Promote a Sense of Relatedness
This introduces the idea of *relatedness* as a driver of nonprofit support. According to researcher Louisa Pavey, relatedness is the "extent to which a person feels connected to the people around him or her."

Studies show that increasing a sense of relatedness makes supporters more likely to donate, and they often donate significantly more money when they do.[62]

Rick Scott, Senior Vice President of Philanthropy for Comic Relief USA, promotes a sense of relatedness as part of his organization's Red Nose Day Telethon, where comedians come together on national television to raise money for children in need in the U.S. and internationally—to ensure they are safe, healthy, and educated. He says:

> *"We are constantly looking for what we call 'gold standard stories' to feature. They are personal stories of a child who was touched by a project funded by Comic Relief.*

> *All these stories feature real kids with real pictures—not nameless, or hypotheticals—and the stories talk about the kid having a real life, making real choices, and working with the charity partners we fund to make their situation better. These types of personal stories are critical for us to break down the distance between our supporters and the people touch by our projects."*

Comic Relief and its Red Nose Day campaign also use celebrities as a sort of "everyman" to help break down the distance as well:

> *"Jack Black visited Africa for us, and we filmed him spending the day with a boy named Felix, who was living on the street. We can't take each and every donor with us, so we took someone to represent the donor. That way, they can have the experience, and transfer that experience onto our supporters. Doing this helps our supporters feel closer to kids like Felix and makes them much more likely to respond."*

In all these situations, the primary goal is overcoming social distance—promoting a sense of relatedness (and similarity and shared experiences) between the supporter and the beneficiary.

Show How People Have Been Treated Unfairly

A sense of fairness also seems to be a key part of people's decision to make prosocial behaviors. From studies, we know that people empathize more with people whom they perceive to be fair,[63] which is something seen all the time in the stories nonprofits tell:

- people who need help only because they had a stroke of bad luck (i.e. lost their jobs and need food assistance),
- people who are struggling with something out of their control (i.e. a child battling cancer)
- people who have been swept up in man-made events not of their own making (i.e. innocent families who lost their homes during the civil war in Syria).

In each of these situations, the nonprofit needs to point out how this could "happen to anyone." This reduces social distance and promotes empathy, which we know increases people's desire to do good in the world.

This approach is not only important for conversion, it's also important for your relationship with the people who benefit from the work of your organization.

Emily Anderson, Director of Annual Giving for Catholic Relief Services, explains:

> *"We are respectful of the dignity of each human being. We do not put up distressing or disturbing images to provoke through shock, because we respect the dignity of the people we serve. This isn't a choice we make based on the situation, it's built into who we are as an organization.*
>
> *We do work hard to create a connection between our supporters and those we support. They are a family, just like yours. They are people, just like you. But we build a connection that is authentic, not something that's artificially designed to provoke a response."*

Rob Gerth, formerly the Director of Digital Media for the Christopher & Dana Reeve Foundation, sees this in the community of people living with paralysis:

> *"What's interesting about the Reeves' Foundation is that the community they serve have a very specific way they want to be thought of. They don't want sympathy or pity. They want empathy. We featured stories of people living with paralysis, their families, and their supporters. But they didn't want to be portrayed as the poor man or woman in the wheelchair. They aren't disabled, but living with a disability.*
>
> *Much of our communications were about what it's like to live with paralysis, telling their stories. 'I'm not just a person you bend down to talk with. I'm a real person. I still have a real life, but here is why research is important, because I don't want to deal with the things I have to deal with every day.'*
>
> *When we reached outside of our community, we had to build that understanding from scratch. And, when we structured that outreach, we were cognizant and respectful about what our existing community would think."*

Matthew McClellan, of the Equality Federation, agrees:

> *"The last thing we want to do is to present ourselves as pure victims. We're not victims, we are citizens of this country like everyone else. That's why we talk about our resilience, our grit, our determination to make things better."*
>
> *If you put yourself in a subservient or a 'please give us the rights we really want' position—that's just not going to work. We're strong, resilient, brilliant, beautiful people who are going to get equality eventually, and we're going to work on it our way."*

Breakout: Empathy and High Dollar Audiences

> There is some evidence that less informed donors, often lower-dollar donors, are more likely to respond to empathetic appeals. The inverse would then also be true—that more informed donors, often higher-dollar donors, are less likely to respond to empathetic appeals. 64
>
> Why might this be the case?
>
> Higher-dollar donors are better informed about the issues in play, and they often don't need nonprofits to create an "awareness of need" for them. Also, higher-dollar donors likely don't have the problem with the big numbers problem we discussed earlier. They understand percentages and have less of a problem bending their mind around statistics.
>
> They don't need emotional stories to convince them to act; they need to know which organization is the best fit for the action they already want to take. And if their Elephant is already engaged, then the focus of our communications should be on convincing their Rider.
>
> More research (and testing) is needed, but make sure that to think about donor audiences individually, and don't over-generalize what they need at this point in their lifecycle.

#2: Don't Overwhelm Your Audiences

As with all things, the use of empathy can go too far. There is a balance between what social scientist Nancy Eisenberg refers to as "arousal and empathy." When there is too much arousal—if someone's empathic responses are too high—people become *less* responsive.

In social science, these are called *maladaptive responses*. It's easy to determine when a maladaptive response happens, because people stop listening to the message, and they focus instead on coping with the unpleasant feelings that have been evoked by the message.[65, 66]

Most late-night television watchers who have seen Sarah McLachlan talking about abused animals or Sally Struthers talking about starving children know what a maladaptive response is. As soon as we see the first image or hear the first notes of music from each's respective direct response television ads, we change the channel—a bit of avoidance so we don't get "too emotional" and feel compelled to give yet another midnight donation.

People might get overwhelmed by the call to get a mammogram or a prostate exam and dismiss it, thinking "that disease will never happen to me." Others might listen to a whole argument to get involved on an issue, but find one tiny bit that, in their minds,

stretches credibility, and they will use that to dismiss the whole task outright.

The most dangerous of these may well be our reaction to negativity. The nature of empathy is strongly emotional, and researcher Stephanie Preston points out that it can be "inherently distressing to attend to the distress of another." [67] We find it stressful to see others in distress.

This means we as social impact practitioners need to be careful with the two most common sources of negativity in social impact communications: guilt and fear, and the maladaptive responses they can cause.

Balance Guilt Versus Responsibility
Studies show that guilt can be a powerful driver of prosocial behavior, and we see evidence of this everyday:

- For less than the price of a cup of coffee, you can save this little girl's life.
- Take action today, or baby polar bears will drown as climate change melts the icebergs they need to survive.
- Only you can prevent forest fires.

The implication in each of these examples is that bad things are happening because the person has a responsibility but chooses to not intervene. He or she is choosing coffee instead of saving a girl's life or is sitting idle and letting polar bears die. If there is a forest fire, the person's inaction let it happen.

Nonprofit organizations are guilt-tripping people. And we know intuitively that if we guilt trip our supporters, they will eventually stop listening to us. But guilt is an especially tricky emotion, because our supporters can still feel guilty even when we don't *intend* to guilt trip them. It is a cultural norm in our society to help the less fortunate, so supporters may feel guilty *just by being asked* to donate, if they (for some reason) don't want to help at this time.[68]

There is even some evidence that the very fact the message is a nonprofit appeal immediately lessens its impact, as people *expect* to feel guilt.[69]

Guilt takes advantage of a sense of responsibility, but this sense of responsibility works the other way, too.

One study of the public's response to natural disasters saw that people were less likely to donate if appeals focused on the random "act of God" nature of a disaster. In this case, people thought, the victims were just unlucky. It could have happened to anyone,

so why should I be the one to fix it?

But when the focus was placed, instead, on human failure—like the seeming inability of the U.S. government to provide relief after Hurricane Katrina—people were measurably more likely to offer support and donations.[70] In this case, the public discourse dictated that we as a nation had failed, which in turn made it our responsibility to step up.

Fundamentally guilt only works when the supporter has a feeling of responsibility, so it's important to phrase our call to actions in a way that they feel their own responsibility. We felt responsible for our fellow Americans in Louisiana after Katrina, so we wanted to help them. Maybe we feel a little less responsibility for drowning polar bears, so maybe we feel a little less like we want to help them.

Without a feeling of responsibility, guilt-driven appeals—actually, almost any appeal—won't work.[71]

Breakout: Persuasion and Guilt

> In his book, *The Power of Persuasion*, social scientist Robert Cialdini tells the story of a solicitor giving away flowers in an airport, refusing to take the flower back, and guilting the flower-recipient into a donation.[72]
>
> Cialdini is sharing a story about the power of reciprocity. If the supporter keeps the flower, he feels compelled to do something in return. But Cialdini is also telling a story about guilt: You gave something to me, and I feel guilty if I don't return your "kindness."
>
> Ultimately the flower-recipient might make the donation, just to make the flower-giver (and the guilt) go away, however the donor is completely burned out by the experience and will now go to great lengths to make sure he or she is never put in such a situation again.
>
> Sure, they've given a first gift, but there will never be a second.

Balance Fear Versus Hope
We have also seen lots of examples where nonprofits use fear to mobilize prosocial behavior:

- Donate today, or this poor, hungry, orphan girl may not live to see tomorrow.
- Take action now, or the nature you love will be gone forever.
- This is your brain on drugs. (Shown with the image of an egg frying in a skillet.)

While social impact practitioners certainly use fear quite a bit, it is surprisingly

complicated to use fear effectively.

For fear to be effective, supporters need to understand the severity of the threat, believe that it is likely to occur, and (most importantly) feel that it is within their power to address.[73]

Returning to one of the examples above—in order for fear to be effective, the person has to believe that people are dying from hunger, that the orphan girl could die, too, and that if he or she donates the girl's life will be saved.

While the mechanisms are different, fear and guilt actually share quite a few similarities. They are both negative emotions, actively seeking to "elicit displeasure" in the individual. Both use a dark, ominous concern for future events as a motivation to get involved. [74]

Fear and guilt both use a simple call-and-response mechanism, where a single bit of negative emotion is designed to provoke someone into an immediate response.

When using fear, make sure the case isn't overstated, because the supporter must buy into the severity of the threat and think that it is likely to occur. More importantly, make sure the donors think they can be effective at resolving the issue, or the use of fear will almost certainly be counterproductive.

There is an important distinction, however, between the use of fear that's focused on someone else's plight and the use of fear that you know the audience shares. To take advantage of the distinction, science communicator Bob Lalasz suggests there's a standard copywriting template that is very effective: problem, agitation, and solution. To begin, you work to identify the problem as seen from your supporter eyes, and at the end you present them with a solution.

"Agitation is a critical part of that formula," he says. "But it's agitation that's based on understanding the audience and giving voice to their fears, instead of simply showing them a situation that elicits maximum fear. If it's about their fears, then your solution becomes more about helping them succeed."

This last part—feeling hope that we can fix the issue—is arguably the most critical one for social impact practitioners, and it will be the focus of the next chapter (Chapter Four: "Efficacy: Help Supporters Understand Their Impact").

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CHAPTER FOUR

EFFICACY: HELP SUPPORTERS FEEL THEY'RE HAVING AN IMPACT

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Nonprofit organizations are very good at creating what social scientists call an *awareness of need*, which is basically about determining what is broken and needs to be fixed.

Many times, even when organizations are trying to create awareness of need, they barrage supporters with big numbers and incomprehensible statistics as "proof"—an approach that can be counterproductive at making people feel as if any action they take will be worth the effort.

What supporters want is a feeling of *efficacy*—that they can do something, and that doing something will make a difference—to nudge them into making prosocial behaviors.

Before we spend time exploring how we can help supporters feel effective, let's first examine how people make decisions in the first place.

The Science Behind Supporters' Decision-Making

We make tens of thousands of decisions each and every day. One study from Cornell University suggests we make 200 decisions each day about food alone.[75]

As human beings, we are incapable of simultaneously concentrating on everything happening around us. Danish science writer Tor Nørretranders estimates that our brain is faced with up to 11 million bits of information each second, but that the cognitive side of our brain can only process 30 to 60 bits per second. [76,77]

The vast majority of data that we process through our brains—the color of the sky, the fact that we are sitting in a chair, that we must inhale and exhale—passes through without any real effort. If we had to focus on each little bit of information, we would be paralyzed trying to pass 11 million bits of information through a pipeline that is 99.999% too small.

The Two Halves of our Decision-Making Brain

There is a growing agreement around how our brain makes decisions, examined in several books by *New York Times* best-selling behavioral economists like Daniel Kahneman (*Thinking Fast and Slow*) and Chip & Dan Heath (*Switch*).

While the specifics vary from author to author, most of the theories focus on the idea that there are two competing systems in the brain for decision-making. [78, 79, 80]

The first system is a dominant, intuitive, emotional function, which works in an automatic, rapid-fire way to consider inputs without active concentration. It uses impressions, intuitions, and feelings of what is good and bad in the world. The Heath Brothers call this side of the brain "the Elephant."

The second system is a rational function for choice, which works with more active concentration to exert control over the first system. It steers us towards better decisions by inhibiting our urges and resolving conflicts in our heads about the right thing to do. The Heath Brothers call this side of the brain "the Rider," who clings onto the Elephant's neck and hopes to steer it towards better decisions.

When walking through the grocery store, the intuitive, emotional side of the brain is what causes us to gaze longingly at the box of Lucky Charms or Fruit Loops that we loved as a kid. The rational function is what makes us decide to walk past those distractions and focus instead on fruit and yogurt, which was the reason we came to the grocery store in the first place.

How do we know these sides exist? Social scientists have spent time researching patients with different types of brain damage, and have studied how that damage impacts their ability to make decisions.

Damage to the intuitive side of the brain can cause a person to become paralyzed with options, as the brain generally uses the intuitive side to create a narrower set of options by marking a small handful as being more emotionally "salient" than the others. [81] Damage to the cognitive side of the brain can be just as severe, as the brain is unable to stop leaping from urge to urge to urge.[82]

As neuroscientist Jan Gläscher writes, "Both networks need to be in balance to function properly together. If one fails, then other one gets out of step as well, and problems are likely to arise."[83]

We see this need for balance as social impact practitioners, too.

To get our supporters to take a prosocial behavior, we need to whet the appetite of the supporter's emotional "Elephant," through either their empathy or their sense of

altruism. But we also need to appeal to the supporter's rational "Rider," to help them mentally justify the emotional decision they're making.

Facts Versus Feelings

One reason we start with feelings is because feelings are easier. As implied above, using the second, rational system for choice is actually more effort for our supporter. It's relatively easy for someone to get emotional about something, and comparatively hard for someone to be logical.

Another reason we start with feelings is because we know that throwing facts and figures at supporters to appeal to their rational brain may be counterproductive. One particular study found that the generosity arising from the impact of an individual victim's story is reduced when additional statistics about other victims or the scope of the problem are added.[84]

That's not to say there is no role for facts. Statistics are the proof you provide that your organization can be effective and can serve as a trusted tool for the supporter. When used alone, story-after-emotional-story can seem over-the-top, or even manipulative.

Robyn Castellani, behavioral economist and President of Castle and Spark, explains the right way to think about the two:

> *"When people have their identity invested in something, there are no facts or figures that can convince them to change their mind. If you want to change someone's perception, you have to give them a better narrative.*
>
> *Using the 'elephant' and the 'rider' analogy, the 'elephant' is the narrative part of the brain. The 'rider' only justifies beliefs that we've already decided we've had. So when you try to convince someone to support your cause, or vote for your candidate, you can use facts and figures, but only after the 'elephant' is already on board.*
>
> *Another way to think about it is that once you've been invited inside someone's house, you can have a great conversation. But to get inside the house, you have to get by the emotional guard dog. The guard dog doesn't care what you say, it only perceives what it feels. Are you a threat? Are you a friend? You can't use statistics to get past the guard dog."*

So, what the human brain needs is a balance—enough story to energize the "elephant" and enough logic and statistics to prevent the "rider" from undoing the decisions the "elephant" has already made. That's how you help supporters feel that their actions are going to be effective.

Prerequisites for Prosocial Decisions

In an early study of supporter behavior, social scientist Bonnie Guy suggests there are four prerequisites for someone deciding to make a prosocial behavior, three of which we've mentioned before: [85]

- Create an awareness of need (the altruism conversation we had in Chapter Two)
- Create an understanding that the need is worthy and urgent (the value conversation we had in Chapter One)
- Create a feeling of responsibility to help (the empathy conversation we had in Chapter Three)
- Create a feeling that the supporter is able to help

This last point of discussion, our missing piece of the puzzle, examines how we must create a feeling that the supporter is able to help. Social scientists refer to this as *efficacy*—making supporters feel like their effort will be effective in fixing the identified need.

A person can be aware of the need, and be motivated to respond, but unless the supporter "feels there is something he or she can do that will be effective" then help is "unlikely to come." [86] The desire for efficacy is the desire to have an impact and, more importantly, the desire to *understand* one's impact.

The Types of Efficacy

Unfortunately, the notion of efficacy is complex, and this complexity can hamper our ability to put the principle into practice. When social scientists talk about efficacy, they usually break it into two parts—*self-efficacy* and *response efficacy*.[87]

Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy is defined as the supporters feeling they have the ability to do the task at hand at a cost that is meaningful but not overwhelming. We hear a self-efficacy argument every time the television tells us that we can do something without a significant impact on our daily budget—e.g. "for less than the price of a cup of coffee, you can save a child's life."

Researchers found that feeling people have the ability to help, the very definition of self-efficacy, increases the likelihood of supporters feeling they *should* help. It also helps create a sense of responsibility for the supporter, as they understand they can help and therefore feel responsible for what happens if they choose not to.[88]

Rob Gerth, former Director of Digital Media for the Christopher & Dana Reeve Foundation explains:

> *"Self-efficacy is the whole science behind the donation form. We build the ask string based on what we know about the donor. When was the last time you were there? What did you give? How do we increase it enough to be attainable? But not too much that they are overwhelmed. How do we nudge them in an upward direction?*
>
> *Most organizations try really hard to offer something that is both attainable for the donor, and something that will have a concrete impact. Something like Nothing But Nets' S*end a Net, Save a Life *effort. 'All I have to do is give $10 and a life will be saved? That's perfect!'*
>
> *We tried to make similar, tangible asks. But bench science is hard. It's hard to put a value on what you'll get from $10 of paralysis research. But we worked on one program—Life Rolls On—where we transported people with spinal cord injuries to beaches and then give them the chance to go surfing. This was a very easy ask for donors. You give $30, and we can take someone who would never be able to go otherwise, surfing. It's very tangible and people can relate to it, at a 'cost' and value proposition that people are very comfortable with."*

Begoña Vázquez-Santos, Director of International Memberships for The Nature Conservancy, sees a similar problem with other causes as well:

> *"People are motivated to make sure all kids have an education. It's hard for them, and for any of us, to understand how much that costs. It's the same thing with recovering a forest. How much work needs to be done?*
>
> *For practicality, we need to figure out the price, to understand how much it'll cost to give someone an education or restore a coastal barrier. Our supporters likely have no concept of this price, it's not something they could possibly know."*

But at the same time, you can't make the cost too easy, she says:

> *"It's important for people to feel like they're stretching. The ask string is an important way to do that. We do our best to provide several options that we think are appropriate for that person, at that time, and for their motivation—but ultimately it's their call.*

> *"If we are doing our job right, and we give them reasonable ask, people will generally see the lowest as too cheap, the highest as too much of a stretch, and the middle option will be just right. We give them options, and then let them choose what is meaningful to them."*

Dr. Rob Gould, behavioral economist and advisor to dozens of behavior change campaigns over the last three decades, very much agrees with the idea of stretching:

> *"An appeal to self-efficacy is self-defeating.*
>
> *We tend to love what we have to suffer for. If we're asked to do something small to resolve something large, it creates dissonance. If we give them an easy way, such as only paying the cost of a cup of coffee, it diminishes the gratification they get from the act.*
>
> *What you really want people to do is to stretch to make a difference. 'Give until you feel good,' is the way to think about it. If you're giving the minimum, you haven't really suffered. This is why people ask for one-and-a-half times the amount of their last gift.*
>
> *People don't want to waste your own assets on something that isn't going to yield much return. So, people need to feel like they can take the action, but it needs to be a stretch for them to feel the most good out of the act.*
>
> *Otherwise they might think to themselves, 'How good could I be if I didn't go to any effort, or make any sacrifice?'"*

Self-efficacy also limits the chances of supporters having a maladaptive response—where they stop focusing on the cause and instead focus on their own feelings about the cause. When people feel they have the ability to make a difference, there is simply less chance of them feeling overwhelmed.[89]

Response Efficacy

If self-efficacy is focused on a person's ability to do a particular task, response efficacy is the supporter's belief that doing the task will actually make a difference. Response efficacy is the belief that if we choose to donate the price of a cup of coffee, the child will in fact live.

Dozens of studies have shown that supporters are more likely to donate if they feel like their contribution will make a difference, with examples including everything from alumni contributions in America[90] to bequests for nonprofits in Australia.[91]

Experimental studies, not to mention everyday testing from social impact practitioners worldwide, have shown that providing donors with information about the effectiveness of contributions makes those contributions larger and more frequent.[92, 93]

Response efficacy not only helps a supporter choose to make a prosocial behavior the first time but also helps retain our supporters over the long haul.

Rick Scott, Senior Vice President at Comic Relief, focuses on efficacy throughout the year, especially in the organization's Red Nose Day campaign:

> *"In the beginning, all our efficacy was in the future tense. We'd tell our audiences that there is a need, and this is what we're going to do to solve it, and we'd promise that we'll be effective.*
>
> *But, work is best proven by the impact it has. Everybody can promise they will be effective. But we have to show that we* have *been effective. There are so many great causes doing great things, and if you don't show you've been effective, then some other organization will, and they'll get the funds to do the work.*
>
> *As a result, in later years, we've switched the story. We are now featuring how the money you've donated [in the past] is impacting the lives of children in need.*
>
> *We always want to tell people what a 'new' dollar will do moving forward, but now we also tell the story of efficacy through the work our charity partners have done, and are doing, with the public donations — how many lives we've touched and what difference it's made."*

Karla Capers, Director of Engagement for the Union of Concerned Scientists, has a similar view:

> *"We've found it's essential to report back to people on the results of the actions they've taken, or the money they've given us. In some cases, it's really hard to show progress, especially when you work on Federal policy which tends to be slow moving, but it's something that we work really hard to incorporate into our supporter communications.*
>
> *In the current political environment, it can be discouraging for people to see us just stopping bad things from happening, instead of being more proactive. So we work hard to showcase successes wherever we have them – like important developments happening on the local level, to show people that there is progress still happening.*

> *Even if we ultimately fail at passing a piece of legislation, for example, we will still report back with the progress we did make. If we were successful in getting a senator or representative to change their opinion on an issue, and this will make our next effort more successful, that's the sort of small success we will share with supporters.*
>
> *We try to break down what's happening behind the scenes so even if we don't get a big victory, there are smaller victories that show we're using their time and money effectively and keep people motivated."*

When a supporter is faced with a decision to either take an action or not, a feeling of efficacy will help push people towards prosocial behavior. A feeling of self-efficacy helps them decide that they can take the action, and a feeling of response efficacy makes them feel as if the decision to take action will be meaningful, because it will actually make a difference to the cause they support.

What You Can Do: Show Your Supporter They'll Have an Impact

We established early on that supporters see nonprofits not as the "ends" of a donation but as the easiest means to fix the problem they see in the world. The nonprofit organization is just a tool in the supporters' "make the world a better place" toolbox, and if our organization isn't the right tool they'll just find another.

With that being the case, it's easy to see why demonstrating efficacy is critical to ensuring that our supporters' motivations—altruistic, empathetic, or otherwise—turn into the prosocial behavior our organization is hoping to drive.

Efficacy is also important in overcoming what we call *free rider* reasoning—the idea that "an additional dollar does not solve the problem," so people give themselves a pass if they decide not to give.[94]

By making it clear that their support will have effective outcomes, though, we provide a reason for them to believe in a donation's efficacy, which also drives future support. This focus on efficacy is important, but it's equally important in presenting the organization as a critical partner in the supporter's effort.

Science communicator Bob Lalasz, President of Science + Story Communications, points out:

> *"We have to walk a fine line when making the narrative about the supporter's journey to self-efficacy and response efficacy. It's important to show the supporter has a role to play, and that playing that role will be effective. But we*

> *also have to show that they aren't able to do this without the organization's assistance. This is a critical nuance in content marketing — you want to help, and we help you help in a way you couldn't help yourself."*

Emily Anderson, Director of Annual Giving at Catholic Relief Services, sees the same thing with her organization's donors:

> *"Our donors give to us because we are a way of helping them live their faith overseas, where they can't reach. We are their conduit for doing things they couldn't do alone. The fact that they trust us to do this for them is a critical part of why they donate to us."*

Fortunately, there are a number of things we can do right now to help our supporters develop feelings of efficacy, and highlight the role of your organization.

#1: Make the Problem Solvable

For a need to be compelling, it needs to be really big, right? Not exactly. It might be counter-intuitive, but decades of studies have shown that if the problem is too massive, potential supporters are *less* likely to respond.

We talked earlier about the identifiable victim effect—that when appeals are focused on a single, isolated case, rather than the whole broad scale of the problem, they are more successful. [95]

In much the same vein, more people act on a problem that can be fixed in the short term than act on a larger problem that is far away from being solved.[96] Intractable, long-term problems—with dozens of steps needed over a long period—can cause supporters to question if there is enough likelihood of success to make it worth taking even the first step.

David Zucker, social impact communications consultant and long-time strategist at Porter Novelli, agrees:

> *"When you point out a problem, you need to present the problem as clearly linked to some kind of action you can take right now. The action doesn't have to solve the problem completely, but you're going to get more people engaged if they feel the action is part of a larger solution.*
>
> *This is one of the deficits on the climate change front. The solutions are so complex and systemic that the average person doesn't see how they could possibly have an impact, so they don't know what to do next. They think,*

> *'Yes, I'm already recycling and I'm already monitoring my home energy use—what else do you want me to do?'"*

Unfortunately, the preponderance of issues facing us *don't* have a really easy solution—if they did, they'd have been solved long ago. That's why organizations break problems up into smaller pieces, and show movement there.

Karla Capers, Director of Engagement for Union of Concerned Scientists, explains:

> *"Take cleaning up our energy sources, or cleaning up vehicle emissions, for instance. Both seem like huge, massive undertakings. How do you get a country that loves their cars, that's always used fossil fuels, to clean those things up? We can only do it by breaking these bigger issues down into more manageable steps.*
>
> *For example, instead of telling people to stop using their cars, we talk instead about increasing production of hybrid and electric vehicles, strengthening fuel economy standards so the cars we have go father on a tank of gas, and cleaning up the fuels we put into our cars.*
>
> *Each of these steps is critical to achieving the overall goal of reducing vehicle emissions but is easier to explain and feels more manageable to people, like something we could actually achieve. Even when the cards are stacked against us, we can still make (and show) that positive progress is possible if we break up the steps into smaller pieces."*

If you can't break up the steps, or there just isn't a solution, it then becomes important to show that you are the organization that is carrying the torch, as Jerry Johnson, Executive Vice President at Brodeur Partners, explains:

> *"When you say something is problem, you imply that there is a solution. I'd argue that the Middle East isn't a problem, it's a situation. It is something that you have to fight for and manage and deal with.*
>
> *When you think about organizations working the big issues—freedom of speech, hunger, etc.—are they solving a problem, or are they fighting a cause that could never be solved? Sometimes you just don't have a problem to solve, you have a cause that you need to forward.*
>
> *In this case, it's the cause, the idea, the ideal that's important. You show that your organization is committed to the ideal, that it was important yesterday, today, and tomorrow. You show that your organization has the principles to fight the good fight and be the organization that will stand up and be counted."*

This leads to another reason we have to be careful of bombarding people with statistics. It turns out that statistics get people thinking about an issue analytically (instead of emotionally) and there is almost always a problem with comparably worse statistics.

"Faced with almost any disaster of any magnitude, it is almost always possible to think of worse things that have happened," one study's author notes. "The deaths of 9/11, for example, compared with the slaughter in Rwanda, seem almost inconsequential. But the slaughter in Rwanda, in turn, is dwarfed by the problem of AIDS in Africa."[97]

If our supporters start to spiral, being told the problems they need to solve are larger and larger, they will quickly get to a point where they see the problem as simply unsolvable.

Breakout: Restricted Giving

> Nonprofit fundraisers could see the need to "Make the Problem Solvable" as a justification to restrict donor options to a particular program, but the evidence, at least from social science, is decidedly mixed.
>
> One study shows that allowing donors to restrict their gifts will result in higher gift amounts, reinforcing the prevailing wisdom that higher-dollar donors are more likely to prefer restrictions on what problems their money can be used to fix. However, the same study was unclear on whether offering lots of "restricted giving" options made donors more (or less) likely to give.[98]
>
> Anecdotal evidence suggests wealthy donors are often "very concerned about whether a monetary gift to a particular cause will be spent effectively", and some of them likened making unrestricted donations to throwing money into a pond. [99]
>
> When we look outside of the nonprofit markets, to how consumers grapple with a large range of choices, we also see mixed results. Studies have shown that people with too many choices can become paralyzed, but the same studies could not reliably identify the conditions where too many options might cause choice paralysis.
>
> According to one of the studies' authors, Benjamin Scheibehenne, the issue may come down not to the number of choices a person faces but instead to how much understanding they require to understand the choices before them.[100]

#2: Stay Positive, Avoiding Maladaptive Responses

In the previous chapter, we discussed the need to be careful using guilt or fear, because too much of either may cause our audience to become overwhelmed.

If we push guilt too far and stretch our supporters' sense of responsibility beyond what they feel is reasonable, they are likely to have a negative response. If we push fear too

far and overwhelm people with doom and darkness they don't see as reasonable, they are likely to have a negative response.

Social scientists call this reaction a *maladaptive response*—the supporter has stopped thinking about the issues our organization is raising, and they are focusing only on their own overwhelmed feelings.

When we use guilt or fear, we need to make sure that we know—often with the help of market research of our audiences—that we understand the motivations of our supporters, and that we're agitating them just enough to provide a path to efficacy. Any use of guilt or fear that is an overreach or ham-fisted is nearly certain to be counterproductive.

What is interesting is that a strong sense of efficacy can reduce the likelihood of maladaptive responses in the first place.[101] A sense of efficacy makes people more likely to take prosocial action, and the fact that they feel they have the means to be effective makes them significantly less likely to become overwhelmed by our requests.

The opposite is also true. Too much negativity can create a sense of fatalism wherein people think that nothing can be done to solve the problem—there is no chance of efficacy—and that there is little reason to even bother trying.[102]

Studies have shown that undermining efficacy isn't the only problem. Negativity has all sorts of other adverse impacts as well:

- ***Negativity Suppresses Response***—The use of negative images can depress our supporters and suppress their response.[103]

- ***Negativity Is Short-Lived***—Studies of television ads that use these tactics show that after multiple screenings, they simply stop working.[104]

- ***Negativity Leads to Avoidance***—Repeated exposure to negative messaging leads to declining responses, increased annoyance, and eventually avoidance of the messages all together.[105]

- ***Negativity Damages Our Brand***—Long-term exposure to negative messages may damage the entire organization's reputation and cause the organization to be irretrievably linked with that negativity.

Melissa Wyers, Executive Director of non-profit fundraising and engagement platform EveryAction, sees this in fundraising every day:

> *"I can definitively say that so much more money comes from showing the good than from showing the bad, that there is no reason to go negative. People who go negative aren't building a base of donors, they're just getting a quick hit of money and burning the file.*
>
> *Good stands out in peoples' minds, compared to the death and distractions that surround them in the media. And, if you just focus on the 500 people who died in a famine, the donor can't have an impact. If you go the other way — there was a terrible famine, but here is one girl who lived—you have hope, a reason for the donor to act, and a story that you can build upon.*
>
> *Negative usually means anger, and you can't be angry all the time. If you only focus on the negative, people won't stay with you and their lifetime value is non-existent. It's not all that complicated. If I do something that makes me feel terrible, I'm not going to do it. If I do something and it feels good, then I'll do it again."*

Rick Scott, Senior Vice President of Comic Relief, looks for balance:

> *"Of course, we lead by identifying the need to be resolved—which is often showing someone in a desperate situation—and when we do so there is a spike in donations.*
>
> *But, once you've established the need, it's much more effective to show hope, and show that the donor has the ability to have impact. This is our most powerful message: the positive outcome of what we've done.*
>
> *In a broadcast like the Red Nose Day special, when we only have a second to jump-start action, we often have to go negative to grab their attention. But we always do it with hope. When we go back to them after the campaign is over, we showcase the positive. There is a space where showing the 'need' is useful, but we can't let our supporters get overwhelmed and drop off."*

Besides just grabbing people's attention, David Zucker sees another time that "going negative" is necessary—albeit for a short while:

> "*If there is an issue that's not on anybody's radar screen — like the impact of toxic chemicals on babies' brain development—you have to start with the negative impact, because the problem isn't evident otherwise.*
>
> *Of course, you need to quickly follow with the positive that there is hope for a solution, and to show the bright spots. But first, you do need to shake people up a bit that there is something that is causing problems.*

> *But this approach doesn't work for issues that are already on the public's mind.*
>
> *Continuing to show more scenes of violence against women doesn't move the conversation forward. It's already out there, and virtually everybody knows it's a problem. To get engagement on the issue, it's much more effective to highlight the hope—how certain women have been able to get out of their situation—and then talk about how donors can help put more women in the position to do so. Showcasing the hope is going to get us further than just focusing on the negative."*

This last part—feeling hope that we can fix the issue—is arguably the most critical one for social impact practitioners, and it will be the focus of the next chapter (Chapter Four: "Efficacy: Help Supporters Understand Their Impact"). And, the long-term damage of going negative may very well outweigh the short-term benefits of compelling people to act through guilt, fear or negativity.

#3. Report Back as a Way to Say "Thank You"

Saying "thank you" is, of course, a nice gesture, and this is true in the social impact context, too. Studies have shown that being thanked for doing something good promotes even more prosocial behavior in the future. [106]

Thanking people is also a critical component of a two-way relationship with our supporters—a relationship that helps supporters feel a part of our organization, making them happier and keeping them around longer.[107]

One would hope that none of this comes as a surprise to our nonprofit's communications, marketing, or fundraising departments.

What is interesting, however, are the nuances behind saying "thank you"—how that one simple act can reverberate through our relationship with the supporter, creating good results long after the thank you letter has been read and recycled.

Gratitude actually gives people a feeling of efficacy; actions they take are, or will be, effective. When people feel a sense of efficacy, they are willing to invest more of their lives and livelihood into prosocial behavior, because they feel it will be worth the effort.[108]

Gratitude also gives people a feeling of value and worth, which in turn drives a feeling of belongingness—the same feeling that helps people feel committed to our organization and its cause. This feeling of value motivates people towards prosocial behavior, because they feel empowered to do something to improve the well-being of those

around them, which is itself a form of efficacy.

Showing gratitude to supporters—not just immediately, but in the weeks and months that follow—is also important for reasons that go beyond efficacy.

It gives the organization a chance to talk about the great work that the supporter's action has funded. The organization can temporarily place itself at the center of the narrative; it turned the supporters' good deeds into a tangible benefit for the people who needed it most.

Saying "thank you" also provides an opportunity for the organization to tell the stories of the people who benefited from the action—an opportunity to help with empathy—and share validation from third-party experts who saw the good for themselves.

Finally, saying "thank you" gives us one more chance to show how effective our organization is and also how effective the supporter is by choosing our organization as a partner.

Sue Citro, Chief Digital Officer of Best Friends Animal Society, says thanking people is one of those things that most nonprofits just don't do enough of:

> *"Organizations often assume that their supporters will always be there. As a donor, I can be committed to your mission and work, but I still need to hear 'thank you.' If I don't hear it enough, and I don't hear it authentically enough, one day I'm just going to go elsewhere.*
>
> *Saying 'thanks' once on a tax receipt is not enough. We're constantly trying to find new ways to say thank you. Not just to say it. To make sure our donors really know we mean it because without them, where would we be?*
>
> *One of our co-founders makes approximately 10,000 thank you calls a year. Those called are often surprised and ask what does he really want. He explains he's happy they donated, and it will mean a lot to the animals. Those donors are shocked it's truly a thank you call. Nothing else.*
>
> *Saying thank you inspires more giving and helps make people long-term supporters of the organization. But it has to be genuine, and it has to be the first act in a long relationship together."*

Porter Mason, Vice President of Digital at National Audubon Society, agrees:

> *"Saying 'thank you' is important, and I feel there is never enough time devoted to it. We're looking at our retention strategy now, and a big part of what we're studying is whether or not we are thanking supporters enough.*
>
> *We do some stuff. We know that our people love bird photos, so we say thank you by sharing great pictures. We're always looking for how we can get people to take some medicine along with their sugar, so our thank-you's tend to be something like that—something that reinforces what we do, and why. 'Here's your beautiful bird photo, and did you know climate change is threatening this beautiful bird?'*
>
> *I find supporters getting thank-you's from the field is very powerful, from the people on the ground who are actually doing the work, or from those who benefit from the work. It's harder when your organization works with birds, because birds don't talk—so we have to get more creative with it.*
>
> *When I donated to a presidential campaign a few years back, I got thanked by five other supporters, and I was asked to thank five more supporters myself. I think that kind of approach can be very powerful. It connects a single donation to a larger community and movement."*

David Duncan, Chief Development Officer of Civil War Trust, also sees great value in using saying "thank you" to tie together many of the principles of good stewardship:

> *"For us, thank-you letters serve a double duty. The donor feels good when they get a personal acknowledgment on the subject that drove them to donate. Then, when they pull that same letter out the following spring when they are working on their taxes, they get that same nice jolt of 'wow, these guys really appreciate my gift.'*
>
> *As a result, we take thank-you letters very seriously, with several of us on staff—including our President—hand-signing and personalizing up to 200 thank-you letters each week for high-value donors.*
>
> *Of course, our stewardship goes well beyond thank-you letters—especially reporting back to the donors when a project they've supported is over and the land is saved.*
>
> *We used to do this primarily through our magazine, but we found that a lot of people missed the good news. So now it is part of our ongoing donor development and stewardship efforts that when a project is over we pull the list of all the donors, and we close the loop reporting back to them on what their gift*

> *accomplished. We do not enclose another ask or a return envelope. This is exclusively a stewardship effort, and they seem to appreciate it.*
>
> *These messages are always written in the vein of, 'You did this. You are the hero of the story, and we can't thank you enough. There is no way the organization could do this important work without you, the generous donor.'"*

Melissa Wyers, Executive Director of EveryAction, agrees:

> *"Everyone should spend more time saying thanks. Your donors have parted with their hard earned money. Nothing gives them a hit of 'good' more than us saying thank you. And the better the thank-you is—the more authentic—the better they feel. So, thank them a lot.*
>
> *We find that, for donor retention, there is a direct correlation between the number of times a donor has been thanked, and how long they stay with the organization. It's not until six thank-you's in 12 months that the return on saying 'thank you' levels out. And, very few organizations are saying thank you that much."*

Breakout: Efficiency vs. Efficacy

> One term efficacy should not be confused with is "efficiency"—the prevailing wisdom that an organization should be as conservative as possible when spending donor's funds.
>
> While demonstrating the efficient use of donor funds is an often-cited justification for donor support, it turns out that it is a weak driver of giving by itself. Efficiency statistics ("94% of funds go straight to our program!") are no different than other statistics, and they inherently include all the problems that come with numbers, statistics, and percentages, as we discussed in Chapter Three.
>
> Also there is growing concern that a draconian focus on efficiency is stifling nonprofits' ability to innovate and raise more funds for their causes, which suggests nonprofits may have a vested interest in rethinking how it talks about efficiency. (See Dan Pallota's TED Talk, "The Way We Think About Charity Is Dead Wrong" for more on this topic.)
>
> While reports on efficiency strategies vary, we have seen that expensive fundraising tactics can backfire. Experiments have shown that donors react less positively to "flashy" fundraising materials.109 Also, similar tests on direct mail letters and envelopes have shown mixed results, with only a handful of cases (often ones that incorporate more expensive-looking materials) performing well.[110, 111]

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CHAPTER FIVE

THE CASE FOR SUPPORT: DELIVERING YOUR BEST MESSAGE TO YOUR SUPPORTERS

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Sophisticated social impact practitioners know that there is no silver bullet—no single "right" answer—to communicating with supporters.

Some supporters are motivated by pure altruism—a desire to make the world a better place for people they'll never meet. Some are motivated by something less pure, such as making the world a better place for their family, their friends, or even themselves (or to improve their standing in the community).

Some supporters need to hear stories of individuals in order to be inspired to give (i.e. the "identifiable victim effect"), while others are already inspired and just need to find the organization that will make their support most effective.

When choosing between motivations or strategies, or even tactics, the answer always seems to be "all of the above." As a result, the most useful thing we as social impact practitioners can do is to serve up a full spectrum of content that allows all our potential supporters to find themselves within us.

We also have to be ready with content that checks our supporters' boxes, regardless of where they are in their supporter lifecycle: Do they have an awareness of the need? Do they understand the need is worthy and urgent? Do they have a feeling of responsibility to help? Do they have a feeling of efficacy that they will be able to help? [112]

But in order to do this, we need to set up a strategy that uses the full range of altruisms, empathy, and efficacy; we need to build the best case to motivate our supporters.

Build A Comprehensive Case for Support

One of the many "old-school" skills that non-profit fundraisers are taught early in their careers is how to write a Case for Giving. At one point these cases were big formal documents that cost organizations tens of thousands of dollars (or more) to create and would run dozens, if not hundreds, of pages long. And, as with all things written but never used, they were kept in big binders on shelves above desks.

In the abstract, however, a good Case is just the building block of why our supporters should care. When we have a Case for Giving—or for those of us who aren't fundraisers, a Case for Support—we have the foundation for your next communication strategy.

Once written, the case for support can be used for pretty much everything—website landing pages, direct mail appeals, individual blog posts about people who've benefited from our organization's work, elevator pitches, press releases, and speeches by the Executive Director. And once you start looking, you'll notice that nearly all great content produced by social impact practitioners speak, in some way, to each of the five points below.

Emily Anderson, Director of Annual Giving at Catholic Relief Services explains:

> *"There is a clear formula fundraisers follow.*
>
> *Here is the challenge. This is who benefits. This is how our organization can intervene. Here's how you, the donor, can help — by helping us expand our work to reach other families, or other countries. The beneficiaries may change, or the issue may change, but the most successful content we produce follows that one timeless formula."*

A Case for Support is, by definition, the most compelling argument for a supporter to donate to an organization and/or the campaign that organization is running. It's also a vehicle to bring to life all of the drivers of pro-social behavior we've been discussing in this whitepaper to connect with prospective supporters, regardless of their motivations.

And remember, a Case for Support doesn't set out to crow about the great work that the organization does but instead demonstrates the great outcomes that the organization can help the supporter achieve; the protagonists in the story aren't our organizations, they're our supporters.

#1: Establish "The Need"

A good case for support opens with creating an "awareness of need" for the situation our organization is looking to address. This is a statement that appeals to the altruistic motivations of our supporters, serving both as motivation for the pure altruists among us and as a good justification for the rest of us.

What is the "need" in the world that should be accomplished?

The best needs are public and universal—a shared need that is attractive to all people. This isn't the need of our organization ("Our Organization needs $50,000 by midnight!")

but the need of our supporters ("I want to live in a world with clean water" or "I want my dad to have the chance to recover from leukemia").

Good needs often have an adversary working against us—a disease, some soulless corporations, or a gaggle of self-serving politicians.

Obviously, the need our organization identifies is going to be related to the mission, but it must be phased in a way that a potential supporter has an authentic, emotional response, because they want to see the need addressed.

While our need is going to be a paragraph, rather than a sentence, below are some good examples of a good (versus a not-so-good) approach for a "need" statement:

- GOOD: Trash is clogging our oceans. Every day, it ruins the beaches you love visiting with your families, and it fouls the air, food, and water we all need to thrive.

- NOT-SO-GOOD: Our Organization needs $50,000 by midnight, so we can stop careless people from clogging our oceans and killing wildlife.

This is a pretty good execution of what we mentioned when talking about the need, but notice that we've also taken advantage of some of the lessons we discussed even earlier.

In the good example, the protagonist is the supporter. In the bad example, the protagonist is the organization. Remember, supporters want to change the world in some way, and they want to be in the driver's seat. In our supporter's eyes, our organization is just the means, not the end. Mentioning the organization here is almost certainly an incorrect tactic.

The good example is phrased in such a way that the supporter wants to do something about it and wants to be take up the mantle of seeing the need addressed. There is no need to talk about the organization yet—showing that your organization is a critical partner in the effort comes later.

The good example appeals to a wide range of altruisms and human values, including those that are pure (saving the oceans for everybody) and those that are more impure (we're saving the ocean, but for ourselves and our families, so we can keep on living). The bad example appeals only to pure altruism (we're saving the ocean to protect wildlife we'll never meet).

We must stay positive and show an opportunity to solve a problem instead of using a bit of fear—essentially saying "donate now, or the cute baby seal is going to get it."

Finally, the good example, leaves the door open to empathy, mentioning the human element of the ocean (and the beaches) where we connect with our families and friends along with all the nostalgia wrapped up in the time we spend there together.

What are compelling proof points for the need?

To make the need even more impactful, we need compelling proof points to make sure people understand the need and the benefit that addressing it would bring.

One point of caution: this is the point in the need where social impact practitioners are tempted to shove in lots of numbers and statistics to help people "understand" the severity of the problem, but this isn't a great idea, for two reasons:

- When people are alone, they are more focused on how the need impacts them directly than how it will impact millions of people they may never know.[113]

- We also know that people are horrible with numbers, especially ones that are too big for them to comprehend.

This, as we mentioned in Chapter Three, is exactly why organizations like Feeding America say "1 in 7 people struggle with hunger in the U.S." instead of "45 million people". Also, "1 in 7" implies that someone *in the room with us right now* is struggling with hunger, whereas it's pretty easy for us to dismiss the statistic of 45 million hungry people; they could all be elsewhere.

To have a good need, it should: be intuitively understandable by the supporter, be something they inherently want to see fixed, and have good proof points so supporters understand the severity of the threat.

#2: Introduce Compelling Beneficiaries

Now that the need has been established, it's important to give our supporters a compelling idea of who will benefit if the need is addressed. In fact, fundraising expert Mal Warwick argues that needs are best described through their beneficiaries, because they keep the supporter focused on the positive impact of their actions.[114]

Telling the stories of the people who benefit from "the need" being addressed is key to using empathy to encourage our supporters' action.

Who does fixing "the need" help, either directly and indirectly?

The best beneficiaries are distinct groups of people who will benefit if the need is addressed—such as kids who need S.T.E.M. skills or would benefit from leadership

skills, or at-risk kids who need a place to go after school. The key is to identify vivid groups of compelling people, so that we build empathy with the supporter when we share their stories.

Good beneficiaries don't necessarily have to benefit directly. Sure, after-school programs benefit at-risk kids by giving them a safe place to play and study, but it's possible that the most compelling beneficiaries in that scenario are not kids but their parents, who would benefit indirectly from being able to stay at work longer and with less worry. It's also possible that the most compelling beneficiary is not the parents, but the community as a whole; better education leads to less crime, and it boosts the local economy.

As a result, there are often many groups of beneficiaries we can feature: students and their parents, cancer patients and their families, and at-risk kids and their communities. Featuring different groups of beneficiaries helps us activate a full spectrum of audiences with the widest range of basic human values. This activates supporters with the motivations they already have.

Whose stories can you tell to compellingly showcase your beneficiaries?

To make the best Case for Support, we need to tell compelling stories not about groups of people but of actual individuals who'd benefit if the need is addressed. In doing so, we both trigger the identifiable victim effect discussed earlier and give our supporters someone compelling to empathize with. When we're choosing compelling beneficiaries, the first thing we need to do is think about social distance.

In our chapter on empathy, we talked about how focusing on beneficiaries with shared, universal experiences—and clear similarities between donors—makes the beneficiary seem familiar and empathetic. This sense of relatedness is also helped by showcasing people who have been treated unfairly.[115, 116]

It's best to come up with five to ten stories to illustrate a good Case—a couple of great stories for each of the groups identified. The following examples have been (overly) simplified, but they are a good illustration:

- GOOD: Ben is just like the kids who live in your neighborhood. He loves science and playing soccer. His parents, Mark and Daisy, work long hours to make sure Ben has what he needs to keep with his friends and with school. But Mark and Daisy didn't have a safe place for Ben to go after school until…

- NOT-SO-GOOD: Ben, aged 13, grew up in the toughest neighborhood of Oakland, California, and didn't have a safe place to go after school last year, until...

In the first example, we promote universal experiences and similarities between Ben and the person reading his story (normal kid, likes science and soccer). We also promote a shared experience with Ben's parents, as nearly all people are familiar with parents working hard to give kids what they need to succeed.

In the second example, we needlessly create distance between the supporter and Ben by giving Ben's exact age and where he lives. We're also taking a path that is decidedly less positive, using the place where he grew up as a kind of boogeyman (which, incidentally, citizens of Oakland surely don't appreciate).

Our ability to relate to each other is a key part of what makes us human, and the ability to empathize one-on-one has been a critical part of how we as humans have evolved into the people we are today. That's why we focus the story on one person. It takes advantage of our biology—the reality of our beneficiaries and their situation—and makes the "need" into something concrete that we can relate to.

#3: Show the Supporter How They Are Essential to the Solution

Once the need and the beneficiaries established, we've created a comprehensive, compelling "awareness of need" for our supporters. What we haven't done yet, though, is show them how they are a critical part of the solution. Additionally, we must show the amount of good that the supporters will bring into the world through acting for others and for themselves.

What benefits will the supporter bring to the world by acting?

Remember, our supporters see themselves as the protagonists in the story of making the world a better place. As a result, the best "supporter involvement" will be measured not from the point of view of the organization, but from the point of view of the support.

The supporters are looking to make a difference on the ground and not just make a difference for the organization. Building on Nothing But Net's excellent "Send a Net, Save a Life" tagline, here is an example of supporter involvement:

- GOOD: By sending a mosquito resistant bed net today, you'll help protect kids from mosquitos that carry deadly malaria.

- NOT-SO-GOOD: Your donation will help us reach our goal of giving bed nets to 50,000 kids.

In the first example, we tell the supporters what they accomplish when they donate

(they send a bed net), and we are clear about the what good comes from that action. In the second example, the focus is not on helping kids but on helping the organization—and we're making the supporter think they are just a cog in a wheel that requires an additional 49,999 people to be successful.

What is the benefit to the supporter when "the need" is addressed?

We are trying to put the supporter as close to the beneficiaries (and the need) as possible, because it encourages supporters to not only respond to this call to action but to similar calls to action in the future.

That is critical in how we *describe* the benefit, too:

- GOOD: By supporting after-school programs, you'll keep kids off the streets, giving them a safe place to play and making your neighborhoods safer.
- LESS GOOD: When you support after-school programs, you'll feel great that kids in your neighborhood have a safe place to play.
- NOT-SO-GOOD: When you support after-school programs, you'll get a great tote bag to remind you of happy kids.

In the first two examples, notice that we are taking advantage of location to imply a similarity and a relatedness: the kids in question are near the supporter. Notice also that while we're implying the benefit to the kids, we're also coming out and telling the supporter the benefit that *they* will get—safer neighborhoods, and the "warm glow" of giving. Also in the first two example, it's clear the benefit that comes from a supporters' involvement is something deep and meaningful…and not just a tote bag.

When we're talking about benefit, remember that we're talking about something deeper than premiums and tchotchkes. This is not to imply that we can't ever use premiums as part of a communications or fundraising tactic, but at the higher level of a Case for Support, simply featuring a trinket as a benefit can come across as unseemly, and it will likely undermine the altruism that supporters use to justify their action to others.[117]

It's also good to keep in mind that our best, most dedicated supporters are put off by material incentives,[118] and at this point in the process, we don't yet know which supporter is which, so it's best to focus more on impact and efficacy, and less on more mundane benefits.

Breakout: Reciprocity in Communal vs. Exchange Relationships

> When we think about reciprocity, the social science term that covers doing something in exchange for something else, there are two types of relationships: communal and exchange relationships.[119]
>
> In communal relationships, we give and receive things of value as ways to maintain our relationships with one another. In these relationships, the relationship is the priority—think family, friends and partners—and the reciprocity is just part of keeping the relationship healthy and vibrant.
>
> Exchange relationships, however, are more transactional. The relationship is based on the exchange, and based on both sides considering the exchange be of equal value. A person gives $10 to Netflix, and the person gets $10 of programming. Without the exchange, there is no relationship.
>
> For social impact communicators, reciprocity language performs better when it's communal (e.g., "we'll give you a tote bag as a 'thank-you' gift for giving more") than when it's exchange language (e.g., "give today, you'll get a tote bag"), and for obvious reasons.
>
> If you are going to be a partner for your supporter's prosocial behavior, it's important to treat them like a partner, and not treat them as if they are a consumer making a simple transaction.

#4: Demonstrate Urgency

Now that we've proven that there is something that the supporter can do to help address the need they've identified, we need to show them that *now* is the time to act. Urgency can be either positive or negative, focusing on the positive reasons to act quickly or on the negative impact if the supporter fails to act.

What is the best reasoning a supporter has to act now?

Some organizations have good, positive urgency, wherein it's clear that if a person acts now there is a special opportunity to do good ("Recent discoveries in medical research show we're on the brink of a successful treatment," for example). Many organizations, however, don't have good urgency, which is why we see them trying to piggyback on current events or use artificial urgency like countdowns or thermometers:

- Cecil the Lion's story isn't unique. Tens of thousands of animals are poached every day, but you can protect them if you act now.
- The school year is starting, and kids will be left behind if you don't act now.
- An anonymous donor has pledged to match all donations we receive before December 31st.

In social science literature, urgency is tied very closely to a sense of responsibility. Sometimes this responsibility comes from our own commitments to care for those we hold dear, or just from the "cultural norm" that we should help those who are less fortunate.[120]

But this feeling of responsibility isn't the be-all-end-all for getting people to support our causes, as it's easy for people to become so overwhelmed by their emotions that they stop thinking about the cause. If we push beyond what the supporters think is reasonable, they can mentally pass-off their "responsibility" to others, or decide "too bad, there's nothing I can do right now" or dismiss the facts we use in our case for giving.[121]

If you're thinking of following the path of Sarah McLachlan (talking about animals who will suffer if we don't donate), or Sally Struthers (talking about children who will die), just remember that there are people out there who will change the channel in order to "protect" themselves from the negativity—the guilt, the fear—inherent in what's being said. This is why it's generally best to stick with positive urgency.

Repeated exposure to negative messaging leads audiences into declining emotional responses, annoyance, and eventually avoidance of the messages all together. And there is even some evidence that our organization's brand can become damaged in the process—at least in the eyes of the audience who isn't already a true believer of our message.[122]

#5: Use Differentiators to Show Supporters Your Organization is their Best Partner

At this point in the Case for Support, we've done nearly everything. We've created an awareness of need. The person has decided that the need is worthy and urgent, and that they (as a supporter) have a role to play. The only item left is to show that there is an organization, *our* organization, which can help supporters be effective in bringing that benefit to the world.

What is it that makes your organization uniquely able to address "the need"?

As the organization's best representative, we want to make it clear that we are uniquely qualified to help the supporters address the identified need and bring benefit to the beneficiaries they are empathizing with.

Good differentiators are the home of the efficacy language we talked about in Chapter Four, and they will include language to support both self-efficacy (showing that the supporter can take the action) and response efficacy (showing that the action will have

the desired impact).

Differentiators can be nearly anything, but there are a couple of things to keep in mind—the most obvious is that if other organizations have the same differentiator, then it's not a particularly good differentiator.

For example:

- GOOD: We have 500 medical researchers on staff who specialize in taking the latest medical research and turning it into treatments you can use to live your life better.

- NOT-SO-GOOD: We use smart science to make real solutions.

- NOT-SO-GOOD: We are the only research and treatment non-profit with in-house advanced neuromodulation systems.

In the first example, we're helping the supporter know that if they donate, their funds will have the desired impact (presumably, getting treatments into hospitals). It also shows that there's something that makes our organization special: we have researchers (not everybody does), and we're focused on turning research into treatments (which is not easy to do).

In the other examples, the language that is so abstract that it could apply to any of a hundred nonprofit organizations ("we use smart science"), or the language is so technical that we need a Ph.D. to truly understand it ("in-house advanced neuromodulation systems").

It's unlikely that the supporters get a feeling of efficacy from either of these examples. That said, nearly anything can be a good differentiator—so long as it makes the supporter understand what makes us special and explains why supporting us will give them the best, most effective return on their investment.

What are good proof points that showcase what makes your organization special?

In addition to differentiators, the Case will need to be supported by specific proof points that are intuitively understandable to our supporters.

Proof points can be any type of legitimizer that helps the supporter understand that we are not a fly-by-night organization, that we aren't making empty promises, and that we will be able to help their actions be as effective as possible.

With that in mind, good proof points can be nearly anything that validates the organization, from anecdotes about past work to endorsements by third parties to rigorous impact analytics.

- GOOD: One-in-five American women have used our women's health care services via our 650 community health centers around the country. That's over a dozen centers for every state in the Union.

- GOOD: We have reduced the number of deaths to kids under the age of five by 50% over the last 25 years. Every day we save 17,000 lives—enough to fill an NBA basketball arena.

In these examples, we're talking about our past work or our current reach in an interesting way. We're demonstrating how we can be effective (reach, impact, and longevity) with the support of our supporters. We're also being careful with big numbers to ensure we have lots of ways for people to understand the context behind them (one-in-five women, a dozen centers for per state, a basketball arena full of kids saved per day.)

Also notice that none of these examples includes language around efficiency. Besides the questions about efficiency as a driver of nonprofit support, efficiency statistics ("94% of Funds Go Straight to Program!") are rarely true differentiators—as most organizations fall in a relatively narrow band of efficiency percentages.

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CONCLUSION

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REMEMBER, ETHICS ABOVE ALL ELSE

One of the great things that comes from talking about social science, neurology, and patterns of human behavior is that we really start to think about who we are and what makes us tick.

Speaking to people in the way they yearn to be spoken to gives us all—supporters and practitioners alike—a great feeling. We are, in effect, helping people have better interactions with our organizations and helping them derive more meaning from the limited budget of time, attention, and money they can devote to charity.

There is a dark side, however—a fine line between talking to people in the most effective way and using someone's biology against them. Just because we can push a button to trigger a response, doesn't mean we should. Some of these strategies, if used for ill, aren't far from the manipulations that hucksters use as they try to sell us stuff we don't actually want.

Begoña Vázquez-Santos, Director of International Memberships for The Nature Conservancy, ties it back the acts at the center of a supporter's experience:

> *"We call them gifts, and that's exactly what they are," she says of the donations that people make towards a cause.*
>
> *All the donors have motivations—to make the world a better place, or something else—but what they're doing is truly a gift.*
>
> *As with any gift we need to be respectful of the person, and why they are giving it to our organization. We need to honor the gift and the giver. How we obtain that gift is important—we need to uphold the principles of the people who are willing to give us that money. We know our donors are satisfied, but we can't abuse that satisfaction.*
>
> *They are trusting us, that we'll use their gift effectively, and that our communications on the issue are true and transparent. We are never going to be perfect, and there are many things that will prevent us from being fully effective. We have hard missions, and we fail sometimes. That's okay. We're not perfect. What matters is our intent—that we are honest and transparent with our donors, and that we treat what they are doing for us as the gift that it is."*

Sue Citro, Chief Digital Officer of Best Friends Animal Society, agrees:

> *"You never know what speaks to someone, but hopefully there is something about the pureness of our hope and our story that resonates and connects them to our cause. This must be from a good place; otherwise it's manipulation.*
>
> *Messages are really powerful when you are authentic to your cause, but people know instantly when they're not. A lot of newer and younger organizations do this really well because they are still close to their beginning—close to what motivated them to start the organization in the first place.*
>
> *They communicate clearly about what's driving them. There is honesty there, a heart-felt story. They have that passion and they have that meaning.*
>
> *Supporters expect more from us every day. They want us to be meaningful and real, and we'll all get better at delivering this to survive. Each day, I want to show up, do the hard stuff and build an actual relationship with our supporters. I'm hopeful. We can all do this, across all of our causes and nonprofits."*

At Georgetown University as a whole, and at the Center for Social Impact Communication specifically, ethics is a fundamental part of our philosophy. We encourage our students to carefully think through their own values, and we challenge them to commit to their own code of ethics.

We encourage you to do the same. All of the strategies examined above—from the various forms of altruism to promoting a sense of empathy to helping people find their efficacy—will be both counterproductive and amoral if we don't do it authentically and with our supporter's best interests in mind.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND METHODOLOGY

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Altruism, Empathy and Efficacy: The Science Behind Engaging Your Supporters is the result of nearly three years of applied research and over fifteen months of writing, encompassing:

- Pre-writing interviews with dozens of academic and practitioner experts on the science behind activating audiences for causes.
- A literature review of more than 200 published papers and whitepapers, including both peer reviewed articles and industry reports/publications.
- Interviews with nearly two dozen organizations and thought leaders, from a diverse array of program areas and with strong supporter communications backgrounds.
- Post-writing review by academic and practitioner experts.

This document is not intended as a peer-reviewed scientific paper, but instead a well-researched, well-cited whitepaper to argue a particular point of view that has coalesced around two decades of shared supporter engagement experience.

Special thanks to Denise Keyes, John Trybus, Bridget Pooley, and the team at the Center for Social Impact Communication, and the faculty and staff of the Georgetown University's School of Continuing Studies.

The author would also like to thank: Sue Citro, Begoña Vázquez-Santos, and Melissa Wyers, for much of the applied fundraising model upon which this whitepaper is built; Robyn Castellani, Dr. Rob Gould, Jerry Johnson, and David Zucker for the behavioral economics and brand messaging strategies that frame this study; Dr. Rob Gould, Bob Lalasz, Collin J. Parker, and Tasha S. Parker for reviewing and challenging the theories in this document; Emily Anderson, Karla Capers, David Duncan, Rob Gerth, Dr. Edward Maibach, Porter Mason, Matthew McClellan, Betsy Pursell, Rick Scott, Amanda Thacker-Heidtke, Robyn Castellani, Sue Citro, Dr. Rob Gould, Jerry Johnson, Bob Lalasz, Begoña Vázquez-Santos, Melissa Wyers, and David Zucker for their patience and brilliance during the interview process;Peter Davis and Stu Trevelyan, and the rest of the teams at Freeflow Digital and EveryAction, whose daily greatness supported the writing of this document in ways they may never want to fully understand.

Finally, to my family, without whose love, support, patience and immeasurable flexibility

this paper would have never been written. (Hi, Rory! Hi, Kate!)