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Toward an Optimal Donation Solicitation: Evidence from the Field of the Differential Influence of Donor-Related and Organization-Related Information on Donation Choice and Amount

The present research decomposes consumer donation behavior into two components: donation choice (i.e., whether to donate) and donation amount (i.e., how much to donate). It then considers how information related to the donor and information related to characteristics of the soliciting organization may differentially influence the two decisions. Results from four field experiments suggest that donor-related appeals have a greater effect on the donation choice decision (vs. organization-related appeals), whereas organization-related appeals have a greater effect on the donation amount decision (vs. donor-related appeals). This might lead one to conclude that presenting both types of appeals in a solicitation is ideal. However, the studies presented herein also suggest that this strategy may backfire. The simultaneous presentation of donor- and organization-related appeals can hamper both donation response rates and average contribution amounts. To address this issue, the authors identify and test an alternative solicitation strategy for maximizing solicitation effectiveness. This strategy involves a multistep request process that capitalizes on an understanding of the differential influence of donor- and organization-related information on donation choice and amount decisions.

Keywords: charitable solicitations, donation behavior, field experiments, fund-raising, nonprofit marketing

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According to the National Center for Charitable Statistics (2015), there are over 1.4 million nonprofit organizations in the United States, which collect over \$358 billion in donations annually. Despite these massive numbers, nonprofits continually report that fund-raising represents a major challenge preventing them from meeting demand for their services (Nonprofit Finance Fund 2014). Furthermore, many people in charge of fund-raising for nonprofits readily admit they do not know how to stabilize their donor base or revenues (Bell and Cornelius 2013). Given this, it is unsurprising that

marketing scholars are increasingly interested in the topic of charitable giving.

Nevertheless, we note three limitations in this literature. First, most existing research does not account for the fact that donation decisions are multidimensional; with the exception of Dickert, Sagara, and Slovic (2011), prior work does not differentiate between consumers' decision to make a donation (choice) and their decision of how much to give (amount). Rather, previous studies consider only one decision, leaving readers to assume, implicitly, that results apply to both (e.g., Shang, Reed, and Croson 2008; Winterich, Mittal, and Aquino 2013) or to consider the two dimensions interchangeably (e.g., Lee and Shrum 2012; Winterich, Mittal, and Ross 2009).

Second, there are two groups writing about the issue of solicitation effectiveness, with little apparent interaction. The first, composed primarily of marketing and consumer behavior academics (e.g., Shang, Reed, and Croson 2008; Winterich, Mittal, and Ross 2009), focuses on the role of donor-related factors (i.e., how appeals that influence a donor's sense of self motivate prosocial behavior). The second, composed largely of practitioners and public policy researchers (e.g., Abramson and

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McCarthy 2003; Gill and Wells 2014), focuses on the influence of organization-related (henceforth, “org-related”) factors (i.e., how imparting information about an organization and its cause influences giving).

Third, within this domain, there has been an emphasis on establishing internal validity, using well-controlled lab experiments, at the potential expense of external validity (e.g., Winer 1999). While the insights garnered from this work have been indispensable in laying the groundwork of our theoretical knowledge of this topic, evidence of how findings might be successfully implemented by practitioners remains sparse. Such failure to balance rigor (i.e., internal validity) and relevance (i.e., external validity) in research can lead to findings that are potentially “uncoupled from the real world” (Tushman and O’Reilly 2007, p. 770).

The current research deconstructs consumer donation behavior into two dimensions—donation choice and amount—and offers a series of four field studies, which, taken together, help address the aforementioned limitations. The first three studies examine the relative influence of donor- and org-related information on donation choice and amount. In support of the idea that donation behavior is multidimensional, we find that consumers weigh donor-related information more (less) heavily than org-related information when facing a donation choice (amount) decision. An intuitive conclusion to draw from this distinction between donor- and org-related information and their differential effects on donation behavior is that nonprofits should include both types of information within a solicitation to maximize the total number and monetary value of donations. Our findings, however, indicate that this idea may be incorrect. When donor- and org-related appeals are simultaneously presented, both donation choice and amount numbers can decline. Our fourth study therefore proposes a less obvious solicitation strategy for enhancing overall solicitation effectiveness.

Conceptual Background and Hypotheses

The Distinction Between Donor- and Org-Related Information

We contend that factors influencing donation decisions can be classified into two distinct groups: donor- and org-related. Donor-related factors involve the intrinsic characteristics of the donor and his or her self-perception. Org-related factors reflect characteristics of the charitable organization and the cause it supports and are thus extrinsic to the donor’s sense of self. This conceptualization is similar to that of Webb, Green, and Brashear (2000), who identify two distinct attitudinal measures influencing donation behavior: attitude toward helping others (an intrinsic, donor-related factor) and attitude toward charitable organizations (an extrinsic, org-related factor) (see also Sargeant, Ford, and West 2006).

Although these scholars distinguish between donor- and org-related factors, no research has systematically examined whether and how these factors might differentially relate to the specific dimensions of donation behavior. Furthermore, investigations into the influence of these factors have depended on analysis of preexisting donor- and org-related attitudes. At best,

managers can only indirectly affect attitudes. Thus, to ensure more practical insights, we use solicitation content, which is under managers’ precise control, to manipulate the presence of donor- and/or org-related information and examine their influence on the two donation decisions.

We also consider a specific solicitation scenario: one in which consumers are approached by an organization, presented with an unsolicited donation appeal, and asked to make an unplanned contribution. Practitioners maintain a relatively high degree of control in this context, suggesting the greatest potential for application. In this circumstance, we expected that donor-related appeals (e.g., moral identity and self-proximity) primarily affect perceptions of donation self-relevance, whereas org-related appeals (e.g., severity of victimization and organization effectiveness) primarily affect perceptions of donation impact (for validation, see the pilot study in Web Appendix A). Importantly, this suggests that the relative influence of donor- and org-related information on donation choice and amount decisions may vary.

The Influence of Information Type on the Two Donation Decisions

Choice is a behavior through which individuals overtly express self-relevant preferences and values (Kim and Drolet 2003) and through which an individual can reinforce his or her identity (Belk 1988; Tafarodi et al. 2002). As a result, people make choices that they feel reflect their actual or desired self-view and make inferences about themselves and others based on their choices (Calder and Burnkrant 1977). In addition, choice decisions encourage an egocentric frame of reference (Frith and De Vignemont 2005), increasing consideration of self-related information (Sood and Forehand 2004).

The emphasis on self-expression associated with the choice decision suggests that consumers seek information about the self-relevance of a potential donation when they consider whether to contribute. Given that donor-related appeals significantly influence perceptions of donation self-relevance but org-related appeals do not (Web Appendix A), we hypothesize the following:

H₁: Donor-related information has a greater effect on the donation choice decision than organization-related information.

Whereas consumers emphasize self-expression when making choice decisions, they emphasize decision outcome when making amount decisions (Lichtenstein and Slovic 1971). In the donation context, potential outcome is perhaps best reflected by the expected impact of a donation (Sargeant, Ford, and West 2006). Org-related appeals communicate the information necessary for an individual to estimate the possible impact of a donation (Web Appendix A). The emphasis on donation impact associated with the amount decision, along with the ability of org-related information to significantly influence perceptions of a donation’s impact, suggests that org-related information influences donation amount decisions. Following this logic, the inability of donor-related appeals to significantly influence perceptions of donation impact (Web Appendix A) suggests that donor-related information is unlikely to be considered in the context of a donation amount decision and therefore has limited effect on donation amounts. This leads us to our second hypothesis:

H₂: Organization-related information has a greater effect on the donation amount decision than donor-related information.

We offer two points of caution with these hypotheses. First, our hypotheses are specific to the context wherein consumers are presented with an unsolicited donation appeal and asked to make an unplanned contribution. Second, note that H₁ and H₂ are comparative. It is not that we expect no influence of donor-related appeals on amount and no influence of org-related appeals on choice; we hypothesize only that the effect of donor-related (org-related) appeals on choice (amount) is greater than that of org-related (donor-related) appeals.

Combined Effect of Donor- and Org-Related Information

An additional factor that should be considered is the simultaneous presentation of donor- and org-related information. Given H₁ and H₂, one might predict that presenting donor- and org-related appeals together would result in both higher donation rates and amounts. Indeed, when presented together, both types of information may complement each other. Donor-related information emphasizes donation self-relevance and motivates potential donors to contribute, while org-related information maximizes perceptions of donation impact and motivates higher contribution amounts. There is, however, room for doubt.

First, the simultaneous presentation of donor- and org-related appeals may increase the absolute amount of information given. Research on the effect of information overload suggests that providing too much information upfront may overwhelm an individual and negatively affect donation behavior (Reuters 1996; Shenk 1997). Second, a solicitation featuring a mix of donor- and org-related appeals may be perceived as more complex than a solicitation featuring only one type of information. Consumers generally react negatively to increases in information complexity. Indeed, information complexity can increase disengagement (Pritchard, Havitz, and Howard 1999) and encourage suboptimal decision making (Bhargava and Manoli 2012; Loewenstein et al. 2013); it may also enhance inferences of manipulative intent (Diamond and Noble 2001).

Given these conflicting possibilities, we do not make a formal hypothesis about the cumulative effect of donor- and org-related information. However, in recognition of its theoretical and managerial relevance, we investigate the effect of this factor on donation behavior in the following studies.

Study 1a: Direct Mail Solicitations

We ran Study 1a in conjunction with a national nonprofit, Communities in Schools (CIS). We manipulated whether the mail solicitation sent out by CIS included donor- and/or org-related information and then examined subsequent donation behavior.

Method

Participants and design. CIS allowed us to send donation appeals to a random selection of 669 members (50%) of their mailing list, including past donors, potential donors referred by current donors, and people who had shown interest through the organization's website. The design was a 2 (donor-related

information: present vs. absent) \times 2 (org-related information: present vs. absent) between-subjects study, resulting in four conditions. In the control condition, the solicitation included only basic information about the organization; both donor- and org-related appeals were absent. In the donor-related condition, additional appeals highlighted that people who received the solicitation were known for their generosity (moral identity) and that CIS operated in local communities. In the org-related condition, additional appeals emphasized the negative consequences of dropping out of school (severity of victimization) and the success of CIS's program (effectiveness of the organization). In the mixed-appeal condition, the solicitation included both these donor- and org-related appeals (for full language of the letters, see Web Appendix B).

Procedure. Before sending the solicitations, we randomly assigned members of the sample population to one of the four conditions described previously, balancing for the number of prior donors and the amounts of prior donations. The appeals were sent out by CIS; CIS volunteers, who were blind to our hypotheses, tracked both response rates and donation amounts.

Results

Overall response. The overall response rate was 2.69%, which, according to CIS, compared favorably with previous attempts. Donations ranged from \$20 to \$10,000, with a mean donation amount of \$1,652.72 (\$1,161.70 without the \$10,000 outlier), a median donation amount of \$100.00, and a mode of \$50.00. The results for donation amount were skewed (skewness of 1.88, SE = .54); thus, we log-transformed donation amounts before further analysis.

Donation choice. A binary logistic regression analysis using donation rate (i.e., whether the participant made a donation) as the dependent variable and donor-related information, org-related information, and their interaction as independent variables revealed a significant interaction between donor-related information and org-related information ($\beta = -2.47$, SE = 1.28, $p = .05$). First, we examined the effect of donor-related appeals. In the absence of org-related information, donor-related information led to a directional increase in donation rate ($\beta = .98$, SE = .62, $p = .10$). In the presence of org-related information, donor-related information had no significant effect on donation rate ($\beta = -1.49$, SE = 1.12, $p = .18$). Next, we examined the effect of org-related appeals. In the absence of donor-related information, there was no significant effect of org-related information on donation rate ($\beta = .19$, SE = .72, $p = .79$). In the presence of donor-related information, org-related information decreased donation rate ($\beta = -2.28$, SE = 1.06, $p < .05$).

To further test H₁, we compared the donation rate achieved by the solicitation featuring only donor-related information (no org-related information) with the donation rates achieved by the other three solicitations. The solicitation featuring only donor-related appeals received the highest response (5.56%). This response rate was marginally higher than that achieved by the control (no information) solicitation (2.16%; $\chi^2(1) = 2.76$, $p < .10$) and significantly higher than that of the mixed-appeal solicitation (.60%; $\chi^2(1) = 6.91$, $p < .01$). However, this

TABLE 1
Study Results by Condition

Study and Condition	Choice Decision		Amount Decision	
	N	Donation Rate	N	Mean Donation (SD)
Study 1a^a				
Donor-related present, org-related absent	162	5.56%	9	<i>2.24 (.75)*</i>
Donor-related absent, org-related present	154	2.60%	4	<i>3.27 (1.06)</i>
Donor-related present, org-related present	168	.60%	1	1.30 (n.a.)
Donor-related absent, org-related absent	185	2.16%	4	1.98 (.48)
Study 1b				
Donor-related	209	12.92%*	27	<i>\$9.20 (7.50)*</i>
Org-related	217	6.45%	14	<i>\$21.00 (14.69)</i>
Mixed-appeal	150	6.00%	9	\$14.67 (8.68)
Study 1c				
Donor-related	11,732	1.24%*	146	<i>\$1.09 (.81)*</i>
Org-related	10,633	.80%	84	<i>\$2.26 (6.68)</i>
Mixed-appeal	12,800	.81%	104	\$1.30 (1.77)
Study 2				
Match	34,679	1.96%*	680	<i>\$1.37 (4.60)*</i>
Mismatch	36,608	1.61%	588	<i>\$1.02 (.35)</i>
Mixed-appeal	41,336	1.57%	648	\$1.06 (1.02)

*Significantly greater than comparison cell at $p < .05$.

^aMean donation amounts in Study 1a are log-transformed.

Notes: Boldface values in the same study indicate cells compared in test of H_1 ; italic values in the same study indicate cells compared in test of H_2 .

response rate proved only directionally higher than that achieved from the solicitation that featured only org-related information (2.60%; $\chi^2(1) = 1.75, p = .18$).

Donation amount. Nondonors were omitted from all analyses of donation amount, across all studies. We did this to prevent donation likelihood from having a downstream influence on average donation amount and potentially confounding our results.

A linear regression analysis using log-transformed donation amounts as the dependent variable and donor-related information, org-related information, and their interaction as independent variables revealed a significant interaction between donor-related appeals and org-related appeals ($\beta = -2.23, SE = .99, p < .05$). Again, we first examined the effect of donor-related appeals. In the absence of org-related appeals, donor-related appeals did not influence average donation amount ($\beta = .26, SE = .47, p = .59$). In the presence of org-related appeals, donor-related appeals led to a decrease in average donation amount ($\beta = -1.97, SE = .87, p < .05$). Next, we examined the effect of org-related appeals. In the absence of donor-related appeals, org-related appeals increased average donation amount ($\beta = 1.30, SE = .55, p < .05$). In the presence of donor-related appeals, org-related appeals had no significant effect on average donation amount ($\beta = -.94, SE = .82, p = .28$).

To further test H_2 , we compared the donation amount raised by the solicitation that featured only org-related information (no donor-related information) with the amounts raised by the other three solicitations. The solicitation with only org-related appeals resulted in a significantly higher average donation amount (3.27 [log-transformed]) than did the solicitation with only donor-related appeals (2.24; $F(1, 14) = 4.89, p < .05$), the control (no information) solicitation (1.98; $F(1, 14) = 5.51, p < .05$), or

the mixed-appeal solicitation (1.30; $F(1, 14) = 5.09, p < .05$). Table 1 provides results by condition.

Discussion

Study 1a provides mixed support for our hypotheses. The solicitation featuring only donor-related information led to only a marginally higher donation rate than the control solicitation; moreover, it led to only a directionally higher donation rate than the solicitation featuring only org-related information. Thus, H_1 is not supported. The solicitation featuring only org-related information led to a higher average donation amount than either the control solicitation or the solicitation featuring only donor-related information. Thus, H_2 is supported. Despite these divergent findings, it is worth noting that, in accordance with both H_1 and H_2 , the solicitation featuring only donor-related information resulted in the highest number of donations, while the solicitation that featured only org-related appeals raised the most funds (\$20,050); this is the case even if we exclude an outlier who donated \$10,000.

It is also worth noting that the solicitation featuring a mix of donor- and org-related appeals was, by far, the least effective. This solicitation resulted in the lowest number of donations and the smallest average contribution. Moreover, any positive effect of donor-related information on the donation choice decision occurred only in the absence of org-related information. Similarly, any positive effect of org-related information on the donation amount decision occurred only in the absence of donor-related information. This suggests that, at a minimum, the simultaneous presentation of donor- and org-related information is not a viable strategy for maximizing solicitation efficiency. In the next studies, we continue to explore the effect

of mixed appeals by including solicitations featuring both donor- and org-related appeals.

Indeed, the designs of Studies 1b and 1c are almost identical to that of Study 1a, except for the following differences: First, for Studies 1b and 1c, we partnered with a different organization and used new solicitation platforms to offer a more comprehensive test of our hypotheses. Second, whereas Study 1a included some solicitation recipients who were previous donors and/or who had a preexisting relationship with the organization, the remaining studies involve campaigns targeting people unfamiliar with the organization; we expect our hypothesized effects to be strongest under these circumstances. Finally, the next two studies do not involve a condition that has neither donor-related nor org-related appeals.¹

Study 1b: In-Person Solicitations

We ran Studies 1b and 1c in conjunction with Go Foster, a regional nonprofit focused on recruiting and retaining foster and adoptive families. For Study 1b, Go Foster set up a booth in an area of high foot traffic, with a large sign indicating that they were seeking donations. We varied the information content of this sign, as well as the information offered by the stand attendant.

Method

Participants and design. The design was a 3 (solicitation information: donor-related, org-related, mixed) \times 1 (between-subjects study, resulting in three conditions). In the donor-related condition, the solicitation sign featured appeals pertaining to moral identity and self-proximity. In the org-related condition, the solicitation sign featured appeals pertaining to severity of victimization and effectiveness of the organization. In the mixed condition, the sign featured one donor- and one org-related appeal. Note that within the mixed condition, the specific donor- and org-related appeals used were randomized: the solicitation sign included either appeals pertaining to moral identity and severity of victimization (mixed solicitation A) or appeals pertaining to self-proximity and effectiveness of the organization (mixed solicitation B) (for full language, see Web Appendix C). This campaign had a reach (exposure) of 576.

Procedure. The study took place over the course of three nights; each night, the study ran between 5 and 8 P.M. Each condition ran one hour per night. Donor- and org-related solicitation signs were each displayed for one hour per night, and each mixed-solicitation sign was displayed for 30 minutes per night. The order of presentation was randomized across nights.

Two research assistants helped with data collection. One assistant did not interact with participants and only tracked the number of individuals who passed the booth. The second sat at the booth and recorded both the number and amounts of donations made per condition. This research assistant restricted interactions to inquiring whether participants who approached

the booth were interested in donating and thanking those who made a contribution. They were extensively trained to transmit only condition-appropriate information if questioned.

Results

Overall response. The overall response rate was 8.68%. Go Foster had never done an in-person campaign before and had no basis for evaluating the relative success of this campaign. Among participants who donated, the mean and median amount were both \$13.49 (SD = \$11.22).

Mixed conditions. Within the mixed condition, the specific type of donor- and org-related information presented did not have a significant effect either on donation rate (mixed A: M = 7.25%; mixed B: M = 4.94%; $\chi^2(1) = .35, p = .55$) or average donation amount (mixed A: M = \$16.40; mixed B: M = \$12.51; $F < 1$). Therefore, when analyzing our results, we collapsed across these variations.

Donation choice. A chi-square analysis revealed that donation rates varied depending on the solicitation presented ($\chi^2(2) = 7.46, p < .01$). Participants in the donor-related condition were more likely to make a donation (12.92%) than those in the org-related condition (6.45%; $\chi^2(1) = 5.12, p < .05$) or those in the mixed-appeal condition (6.00%; $\chi^2(1) = 4.63, p < .01$).

Donation amount. Among participants who donated, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) on donation amount revealed a significant effect of solicitation type ($F(2, 47) = 6.27, p < .01$). On average, donors in the org-related condition (M = \$21.00, SD = 14.69) donated more than donors in the donor-related condition (M = \$9.20, SD = 7.50; $F(1, 47) = 12.38, p < .01$) but not more than donors in the mixed-appeal condition (M = \$14.67, SD = 4.68; $F(1, 47) = 2.12, p = .15$).

Discussion

As H_1 predicts, the solicitation sign emphasizing donor-related information led to a higher donation rate than the solicitation sign emphasizing org-related information. In contrast, and in line with H_2 , the solicitation sign emphasizing org-related information led to a higher average donation amount than the solicitation sign emphasizing donor-related information. Thus, using a different solicitation platform, in-person solicitations, and a new nonprofit organization raising money for a different charitable cause, Study 1b supports the idea that donor-related (org-related) information has a greater influence on donation choice (amount) than does org-related (donor-related) information.

Our analysis also reveals that the solicitation sign emphasizing donor-related information led to a higher donation rate than the solicitation sign with mixed appeals. In line with results from Study 1a, this suggests again that donor-related information can benefit donation choice only in the absence of org-related information. However, in contrast to the results for Study 1a, the solicitation sign emphasizing org-related information did not lead to a higher average donation amount than the solicitation sign with mixed appeals; this suggests that org-related information can positively affect donation amount regardless of whether donor-related information is simultaneously presented.

¹The organization we partnered with for Studies 1b and 1c requested that we omit a control condition in order to conserve resources.

Study 1c: Online Solicitations

In Study 1c, we continued working with Go Foster to test our hypotheses in the field. The design of Study 1c was identical to that of Study 1b, but donations were solicited online via sponsored Facebook posts.

Method

Participants and design. The design was a 3 (solicitation information: donor-related, org-related, mixed) \times 1 between-subjects study, resulting in three conditions that varied on the type of information presented in both the solicitation post and its associated landing page. In the donor-related condition, the post and landing page emphasized appeals pertaining to moral identity and self-proximity. In the org-related condition, the post and landing page emphasized appeals pertaining to severity of victimization and effectiveness of the organization. In the mixed condition, all donor- and org-related appeals were included in the post and landing page (for sponsored post and landing page language, see Web Appendix D). This campaign ran for one week and achieved a reach of 35,165 exposures (i.e., individual Facebook users exposed to one of the three posts).

Of note, Go Foster was campaigning to raise awareness for their annual underwear drive, during which they collect new items of clothing for children in foster care. Since this campaign could be supported either through a monetary donation (made online or in person) or by dropping off items (in person), we targeted Facebook users located near drop-off locations.

Procedure. Participants were randomly exposed to one of three sponsored posts. All three posts included a “Donate Now” button. Clicking on this button served as our measure of donation choice. If participants clicked on this button, they were directed to one of three different landing pages on the Go Foster website wherein condition-specific information was re-emphasized. On the landing page, consumers were asked to pledge a specific total amount they would contribute to this campaign, accounting for any monetary donations and the approximate value of any donated items. The default donation pledge was \$1, though donors could pledge any amount. The amount pledged served as our measure of donation amount.

Results

Overall response. The overall response rate of .95% was comparable to past Facebook solicitation campaigns from Go Foster. Among participants who pledged a donation, the mean pledged amount was \$1.45 (SD = \$3.55); the median and mode were both \$1.00.

Donation choice. A chi-square analysis revealed that donation rates varied depending on the solicitation post presented ($\chi^2(2) = 16.28, p < .01$). Participants in the donor-related condition were more likely to pledge a donation (1.24%) than those in the org-related condition (.80%; $\chi^2(1) = 11.32, p < .01$) or those in the mixed-appeal condition (.81%; $\chi^2(1) = 11.32, p < .01$).

Donation amount. Among participants who pledged a donation, a one-way ANOVA on pledged donation amount revealed a significant effect of solicitation type ($F(2, 331) = 3.09, p < .05$). On average, donors in the org-related condition ($M = \$2.26, SD = 6.68$) pledged more than donors in the donor-

related condition ($M = \$1.09, SD = .81; F(1, 331) = 5.89, p < .05$) and marginally more than those in the mixed-appeal condition ($M = \$1.30, SD = 1.77; F(1, 331) = 3.47, p = .06$).

Discussion

The particulars of this campaign forced us to consider pledged donations rather than actual donations. However, pledged commitments to nonprofits remain extremely relevant to fundraising practitioners (Varadarajan 2003). Moreover, despite this variance in procedure, results replicated those of Study 1b: the solicitation emphasizing donor-related information led to a higher response rate than the solicitation emphasizing org-related information (H_1), while the solicitation emphasizing org-related information led to a greater (expected) contribution than the solicitation emphasizing donor-related information (H_2).

Also, the solicitation emphasizing donor-related information led to a higher donation rate than the solicitation with mixed appeals, suggesting that donor-related information only benefits donation choice in the absence of org-related information. Likewise, the solicitation emphasizing org-related information led to a marginally higher donation amount than the solicitation with mixed appeals, suggesting that the positive effect of org-related information on donation amount may be weakened in the presence of donor-related information. While not conclusive, these findings, along with those of Studies 1a and 1b, suggest that offering mixed appeals may hamper the effectiveness of both donor- and org-related information.

Indeed, across these studies, providing donor- and org-related information together consistently resulted in lower response rates and, at times, lower average contributions. One implication of this finding might be that solicitation campaigns should maintain only one goal—to maximize either donor base or average contribution amount—and messaging should be tailored accordingly. However, maximizing donor base and average contribution amount are both critical to the success of a nonprofit; thus, a nonprofit manager may hesitate to make such a trade-off. As such, in the next study, we test a solicitation strategy specifically designed to capitalize on the benefits of both donor- and org-related information while avoiding the potential drawbacks witnessed in mixed-appeal conditions.

Study 2: Matching Appeal Type to Donation Decision

Like Study 1c, Study 2 involved an online campaign by Go Foster using sponsored posts on Facebook to solicit donations for the organization’s underwear drive. Participants saw a sponsored post for Go Foster’s underwear drive featuring an appeal as well as a “Donate Now” button. Clicks on this button served as our measure of donation choice. Potential donors were then directed to a landing page offering additional appeal language before they were asked to give their pledge amount. The pledge amount served as our measure of donation amount.

Across three conditions, we held the information content constant but varied whether particular appeals were offered in the sponsored post, and thus in the context of the donation choice decision; and/or on the landing page, and thus in the context of the donation amount decision. We predicted that

presenting only donor-related information in the initial post when decision makers are considering whether to make a donation, then presenting only org-related information on the web page when decision makers are considering how much to donate, would lead to both the highest donation rates and the highest average donation amounts. This strategy was expected to be the most successful because it would separate out the presentation of donor- and org-related appeals while still ensuring each was presented in the more appropriate decision context.

Method

Participants and design. The design was a 3 (solicitation: match, mismatch, mixed) \times 1 between-subjects study, resulting in three conditions. Information content was held constant, but the placement of the information on the sponsored post and/or its associated landing page varied across conditions. The campaign ran for three weeks and had a reach of 112,623 individuals (individual Facebook users who saw one of the three posts).

Procedure. In the match (mismatch) condition, participants saw a version of the sponsored post that featured donor-related information with appeals pertaining to moral identity and self-proximity (org-related information with appeals pertaining to severity of victimization and effectiveness of the organization). If they indicated that they would like to make a donation by pressing a “Donate Now” button on the ad, they were taken to a landing page on the Go Foster website where they were presented org-related information with appeals pertaining to severity of victimization and effectiveness of the organization (donor-related information with appeals pertaining to moral identity and self-proximity). On this page, participants could pledge a specific donation amount. In the mixed condition, participants viewed both donor- and org-related appeals on the post (order randomized; for stimuli, see Web Appendix E). If they indicated a desire to make a donation, they were directed to a landing page that re-emphasized donor- and org-related information, where they could pledge a specific donation amount. All else was the same as in Study 1c.

Results

Overall response. The overall response rate was 1.70%, which is on par with the response seen in Study 1c and comparable to the average response rate of solicitations made via social media (M+R Strategic Services and The Nonprofit Technology Network 2013). Among participants who pledged a donation, the mean pledged amount was \$1.17 (SD = \$2.82); the median and mode were both \$1.00.

Mixed conditions. In the mixed condition, whether donor- or org-related information appeared first did not have a significant effect on either donation rate (donor first: $M = 1.50\%$; org first: $M = 1.60\%$; $\chi^2(1) = .61$, $p = .43$) or average donation amount (donor first: $M = \$1.11$; org first: $M = \$1.03$; $F < 1$). Therefore, we collapsed across these variations.

Donation choice. A chi-square analysis revealed that donation rates varied depending on the solicitation structure presented ($\chi^2(2) = 20.36$, $p < .01$). Participants in the match condition were more likely to pledge a donation than those in the

mismatch condition (1.96% vs. 1.61%, respectively; $\chi^2(1) = 12.82$, $p < .01$) or those in the mixed condition (1.57%; $\chi^2(1) = 16.99$, $p < .01$).

Donation amount. Among those who pledged a donation, a one-way ANOVA on pledged donation amount revealed a significant effect of solicitation type ($F(2, 1,913) = 3.04$, $p < .05$). Donors in the match condition ($M = \$1.37$, $SD = 4.61$) pledged, on average, more than donors in the mismatch condition ($M = \$1.02$, $SD = .35$; $F(1, 1,913) = 4.85$, $p < .05$) and those in the mixed condition ($M = \$1.06$, $SD = 1.02$; $F(1, 1,913) = 4.08$, $p < .05$).

Discussion

Across the three solicitation strategies, tested information content was held constant. The only variation was in the order of presentation and, thus, the context in which decision makers considered donor- and org-related appeals. Nevertheless, there were significant differences in both the number of donations made and their average amount. As expected, the solicitation strategy wherein donor-related information was offered only in the context of the choice decision and org-related information only in the context of the amount decision led to the highest response rate and the greatest average pledge amount. These results not only substantiate our hypotheses but also help support the idea that presenting donor- and org-related appeals together does not optimize solicitation effectiveness. Indeed, across conditions, the mixed-appeal solicitation led to the lowest response rate and the smallest average pledge amount.

Meta-Analyses for H₁ and H₂

To test the overall validity of H₁ and H₂, we performed a series of single-paper meta-analyses (SPMs; McShane and Bockenholt 2017). The first SPM was conducted to determine whether donor-related information had a greater effect of on donation choice than did org-related information. In support of H₁, a significant difference was found between conditions including only donor-related information (donor-related conditions of Studies 1a–c and match condition of Study 2) and conditions including only org-related information prior to choice implementation (org-related conditions of Studies 1a–c and mismatch condition of Study 2) (estimate = .39%, SE = .001; $z = 4.88$, $p < .01$). The second SPM was conducted to determine whether org-related information had a greater effect on donation amount than did donor-related information. In support of H₂, a significant difference was found between conditions including only org-related information (org-related conditions of Studies 1a–c and match condition of Study 2) and conditions including only donor-related information postchoice and prior to amount commitment (donor-related conditions of Studies 1a–c and mismatch condition of Study 2) (estimate = .70, SE = .33; $z = 2.12$, $p < .05$).

Here, we must acknowledge that, managerially, the SPM effect size estimates are difficult to interpret. This is due largely to differences in the solicitation platform (mail in Study 1a, in-person in Study 1b, and online in Studies 1c and 2) and dependent measures (log-transformed donation amount in Study 1a and absolute donation amount in Studies 1b–2) used across

studies. Thus, while these meta-analyses offer strong evidence for the idea that donor-related information has a stronger influence on choice (H_1) whereas org-related information has a stronger influence on amount (H_2), they do not offer a clear managerial takeaway about how to interpret the size of each effect. We do not necessarily interpret this as a significant failure, given that effect sizes are also likely to vary across soliciting organization, target population, and solicitation language used. We discuss this as well as other practical implications of our findings next.

General Discussion

Fund-raising professionals face the ever more difficult job of generating the resources their nonprofits need to sustainably provide services, part of which requires maintaining and growing a significant donor base. It is not surprising, then, that top development positions are notoriously difficult to fill, with many remaining vacant for years (Bell and Cornelius 2013). The present research utilizes extensive field experimentation to provide key insights that we hope will contribute to the survivability of such positions by helping practitioners work smarter.

Across four studies conducted using varied solicitation media (i.e., mail, in-person, and online), we show that donor-related appeals have a stronger influence on the donation choice decision than do org-related appeals (H_1), whereas org-related appeals have a stronger influence on the donation amount decision than do donor-related appeals (H_2). Our studies also suggest a negative effect on solicitation effectiveness of offering both donor- and org-related information simultaneously. Taken together, all this implies the following: to maximize donation choice decisions, one should focus on donor-related information; to maximize amount decisions, one should focus on org-related information; and, importantly, one must be cautious of trying to get “the best of both worlds” by throwing both types of information together in a single solicitation.

In response to our findings regarding mixed-information solicitations, we identify the split-match solicitation strategy as an effective solution (Study 2). This strategy involves separating the presentation of donor- and org-related information such that donor-related information is considered prior to donation choice and org-related information prior to donation amount. This allows each dimension of donation behavior (i.e., choice and amount decisions) to be treated separately and, critically, aligns the presentation of donor- and org-related appeals to the dimension of donation behavior over which each has the greatest influence. As demonstrated, this split-match solicitation strategy optimizes both choice and amount outcomes.

Theoretical Implications

Our theoretical implications are straightforward but important. At the most basic level, we validate the concept of multidimensional donation behavior, confirming prior work that suggests donation choice and amount decisions may be conceptually distinct and differentially motivated (Dickert, Sagara, and Slovic 2011). Moreover, although research has shown that consumers give for donor-related reasons (e.g., Shang, Reed, and Croson 2008; Winterich, Mittal, and Aquino 2013), our work is the first to suggest that considerations of the self may

primarily influence donation likelihood. Similarly, while nonprofit managers seem to understand that org-related information can affect donation behavior, ours is the first work to imply that its influence may be primarily on the donation amount decision. Given these differential effects, and the counterintuitive results of combining donor- and org-related appeals, our findings should encourage scholars to explore issues related to donation behavior in far greater theoretical specificity. Admittedly, our work may prompt more theoretical questions than it answers—a fact that we address in more detail in our discussion of future research opportunities.

Managerial Implications

At the broadest level, our research findings should prompt two critical considerations for fund-raising professionals. First, they must resist the temptation to manage their solicitation efforts by intuition alone. If a cause is important enough to prompt the formation of a nonprofit organization and the development of an inevitably complex solution to a social problem, then the organization’s fund-raising efforts deserve just as much deliberate consideration. Ultimately, donors will not engage with a nonprofit simply because the organization’s mission appears to be good; the way a solicitation request is communicated makes a big difference.

Second, and related, fund-raising professionals must avoid the trap of being satisfied with campaign results merely because they achieve a positive number of donations. The approach to managing fund-raising under a satisficing strategy—where positive results are deemed “good enough”—does a great disservice to the nonprofit community. Indeed, given that we observe variance in choice and amount decisions that is based on rather subtle differences in solicitation content, we would encourage fund-raising professionals to adopt an optimizing approach to their solicitation efforts. Specifically, we would encourage them to engage in the type of active experimentation demonstrated herein. If one’s cause is important enough to ask others to donate to, then it should be important enough to treat in a systematic, evidence-based manner that enables practitioners to continuously improve their efforts. From these broad insights, we offer the following specific recommendations.

When to emphasize donor-related information. When soliciting potential donors, nonprofit organizations generally have multiple goals. One goal may be to maximize donation participation. Having a large number of donors is advantageous for several reasons: it minimizes the overall risk associated with each fund-raising attempt, increases awareness of the organization, and can be leveraged to identify new donors (Kurre 2010). For example, for universities, alumni donor participation rate is of critical importance because it is used as a measurement of satisfaction in rankings and can also be used to garner additional funding opportunities (Golden 2007). If the goal of a particular fund-raising attempt is primarily to engage new donors, donor-related appeals should be emphasized.

There are other contexts besides maximizing solicitation response rates in which our results suggest that emphasizing donor-related information would be ideal. For instance, organizations hosting events (a major source of engagement and fund-raising for many groups; Hughes 2013) may be able to

drive choice decisions (e.g., event attendance) by presenting donor-related information in their marketing materials. Relatedly, organizations attempting to influence individuals to sign up for a mailing list or to follow them on social media may want to focus on donor-related appeals because these decisions emphasize choice rather than valuation.

When to emphasize org-related information. In contrast, if the goal is to increase average donation amounts, even at the potential expense of participation rate, org-related appeals should be emphasized. In many cases, nonprofits collect data on their prospective donor base (Weir and Hibbert 2000), which may be leveraged to more effectively target donors. If the targets of a particular appeal have been identified as having high levels of disposable income, org-related information may be worthwhile if high donation amounts can make up for lower response rates. Likewise, if a particular audience already feels connected to an organization and has consistently given in the past, participation may be assumed and the goal should be to motivate larger donation amounts. In this instance, org-related information should be emphasized. Indeed, generally speaking, if a nonprofit suspects that a group of donors has already made some type of choice decision or commitment, org-related information should be utilized.

How to leverage both donor- and org-related information in solicitations. Of course, the preceding discussion is not intended to suggest that donor- and org-related information must be presented in complete isolation. While our results suggest that the simultaneous presentation of donor- and org-related information may have a negative effect on overall solicitation effectiveness, this can be mitigated using our recommended split-match solicitation strategy.

Admittedly, the success of such a two-wave campaign may depend on whether the campaign is run online (e.g., email, banner ad) or offline (e.g., paper, telephone). When soliciting donations online, it is easy for the nonprofit to match the initial donation request with donor-related information (e.g., in the initial email/banner ad/sponsored post/web page) and then subsequently present org-related information before donors indicate a donation amount (e.g., on the subsequent landing page). Offline, it is plausible that one could split the decisions across multiple solicitations (e.g., seek donation pledge from first solicitation, then solicit actual contribution in follow-up letter or call) or even within the same solicitation (e.g., across two pages within the same letter). In fact, such a strategy mimics the well-known foot-in-the-door persuasion technique (Cialdini and Schroeder 1976). However, these strategies may be less effective than their online counterparts if they lead to donor confusion. Moreover, if multiple letters/calls are planned, the risk of annoying donors (Van Diepen, Donkers, and Franses 2009) and the associated increase in fund-raising costs must be considered.

Even for organizations unable to utilize a two-stage request process within a single solicitation attempt, our findings regarding mixed appeals and the effectiveness of a split-match solicitation strategy have important implications for donor engagement in the long term. Donors, like all consumers, have a lifetime value; an organization will solicit the same donor numerous times (Reinartz and Kumar 2000; Venkatesan and

Kumar 2004). In that sense, there should be a distinction between first-time donors and repeat donors. For first-time donors, the primary aim should be to elicit some contribution, regardless of amount, in order to maximize donor base. Thus, solicitations to first-time donors should emphasize donor-related information. Once an initial contribution has been made, the donor will be more likely to make additional contributions in the future. Indeed, repeat donors are about three times more likely than nondonors to respond to a solicitation attempt (Fundraising Effectiveness Project 2015). Given this, a solicitation to repeat donors should emphasize org-related information in an effort to maximize donation amount. Although not explicitly examined in our studies, this strategy of matching appeal type to donor type (nondonor versus repeat donor) mimics the split-match solicitation strategy advocated in Study 2 and is likely to maximize the effectiveness of an organization's fund-raising attempts, regardless of the solicitation platform used.

Limitations and Future Research

Overall, the studies reported herein present a robust case for our predictions; we have shown similar results in a variety of field experiments. Nevertheless, we note some limitations and opportunities for future research. Importantly, additional work is needed to test the processes underlining our effects. We suggest that choice decisions are a form of self-expression and that donor-related information has a stronger influence on perceptions of self-relevance than org-related information. As a result, donor-related information should have a stronger influence on donation choice than org-related information. We also suggest that amount decisions are concerned with decision outcome and that, in a donation context, decision outcome is most closely associated with donation impact. Since org-related information is perceived to have a stronger influence on perceptions of donation impact than donor-related information, org-related information should have a stronger influence on donation amount than donor-related information. We offer preliminary support for the first part of each of these assumptions in our pilot study: that donor-related (org-related) information influences perceptions of self-relevance (donation impact) whereas org-related (donor-related) information does not. However, future work could corroborate this as well as examine *why* donor-related (org-related) information has a significant influence on perceived donation self-relevance (impact) but not on donation impact (self-relevance). Doing so will help identify boundary conditions not considered herein.

One important consideration in this regard may be the sequential nature of the choice and amount decisions. It has been argued that donation choice and amount decisions are generally made sequentially, with choice occurring first and amount considered afterward (Dickert, Sagara, and Slovic 2011). This implies that donors typically decide how much to give only after confirming their sense of self through choice. If consumer's need for self-expression can be satisfied early in the donation decision-making process through donation choice, it is unsurprising that information related to the perceived self-relevance of a donation will be less relevant in later stages of this decision-making process when donation amount is determined.

Within the context examined herein, in which consumers were approached by an organization, presented with an unsolicited donation appeal, and asked to make an unplanned contribution, we believe it is likely that consumers followed this sequential decision process, first determining whether a contribution should be made and then considering how much should be given. However, the donation decision process may not always strictly follow this sequence. Consider, for example, someone seeking to donate a predetermined portion of their annual income at the end of the year or someone receiving an unexpected bonus and deciding to actively seek out an organization with which to share this windfall. In these circumstances, where a donation amount decision might precede or be otherwise decoupled from the donation choice decision, it is possible our results do not hold. Organizations can also disrupt the natural order of the decision-making process by asking for a particular amount upfront (e.g., “Five dollars a day saves a life”) or highlighting a particular amount (e.g., “Platinum donors give \$25,000 or more). Again, in these circumstances, our results may not hold.

Across studies, we consider two types of information shown to be donor-related but not org-related (e.g., moral identity and self-proximity) and two types shown to be org-related but not donor-related (e.g., severity of victimization and effectiveness of organization). We believe these are good examples of each type, but there are alternative ways to operationalize these concepts. This raises the question of whether our results would hold across all operationalizations or how the strength of the effects from each might compare to one another. Indeed, some differences across operationalizations of donor- and org-related information are to be expected. However, it is likely that the existence and/or strength of these differences depend on the soliciting organization, cause, and/or donor-specific traits not

considered herein. As such, we leave this exploration to future researchers.

Notably, our studies focus on donation behavior cross-sectionally, as if a single donor can only be approached once. As alluded to in our discussion of managerial implications, taking a lifetime value perspective on consumer donation behavior forces one to think about the interactions between nonprofits and donors in a longitudinal way. Future research should test how the effectiveness of solicitations changes over repeated exposures, over stages of the donor–organization relationship, and with the emergence of rival nonprofits. This investigation in particular would be worthwhile given that the sequential nature of the donation decision-making process discussed earlier may change as a consumer becomes more engaged with an organization. Recent work in marketing using longitudinal growth modeling (e.g., Ahearn et al. 2010; Bolander, Dugan, and Jones 2017) may be helpful in this regard.

Finally, future research should more closely examine the effect of mixed appeals on solicitation effectiveness. While our results are not consistent across all studies, there is enough evidence to suggest that a mixed-appeal strategy might not optimize donation behavior. Nevertheless, future research is needed to validate our conclusion about the negative effect of mixed appeals on solicitation effectiveness and to more definitively identify the process underlining this effect, whether it be information overload, information complexity, inferences of manipulative intent, or something else.

In conclusion, we believe our findings may help several different audiences. In particular, we hope they are useful to nonprofit managers interested in improving solicitation efforts and marketing researchers trying to understand and further investigate fundamental mechanisms responsible for people’s decision-making and donation behavior.

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