

Stimulating Giving by Challenging Social Norms

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At Cause4, we are aware that social norms play a crucial role in determining how people behave and how they give. Studies have shown that giving behaviour is strongly influenced by perceptions of how much others give. For example, people who are told that the average donation to a charity nearly always tend to give that amount – and those told about an above average gift are far more likely to donate more.[1][2] Similarly if your friend becomes obese or starts smoking, you are far more likely to follow suit (57% and 36% more likely, respectively).[3][4]

If the power of social norms can make people fat and make them smoke, surely it can be harnessed to get them to give more?

First, there are a few barriers to overcome.

People tend to significantly over-estimate how self-interested others are. This is reinforced by the fact that people often explain their actions in self-interest

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terms, including their charitable giving.

This tendency to over-estimate self-interest in others is particularly problematic when coupled with the “bystander effect”: research has shown that people are much less likely to help someone in need if others present are failing to help. This is understandable: nobody wants to feel like they are the “sucker” giving more than their fair share. On the other hand, if people see others helping, they are more likely to follow suit.[5][6][7]

It is therefore important to

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avoid the vicious cycle in which people assume that others are less altruistic than they really are, and so give less themselves. The fact that our culture strongly discourages people from talking about how much they give only makes things worse, as generosity goes unnoticed and people are inclined to give less.

Of course, we have examples such as Bill Gates and Warren Buffet to inspire us, but what we need as donors is people we can identify with, who give, and who talk about it- because people tend to match the behaviour of those that they identify with.

Challenging social norms

If we can challenge the social norms that a) people are generally self-interested and b) it's not ok to talk about your giving, then we can begin to make giving generously the social norm.

One way that donors can do this is by publicly pledging a percentage of their income to charity. Warren Buffet's Giving Pledge is a famous example of this- but there are many other organisations that exist for ordinary people like Giving What We Can (10% pledge), The Life You Can Save (1-5% pledge) and Bolder Giving (any amount, with many giving 20% or more). These organisations foster a sense of community, which encourages people to keep giving

by showing them that there are many others giving generously. There are other tricks that can be used- for example CAF found that companies including a photo of an employee who gives on a company appeal doubled how many people gave.

In the spirit of disclosure, I'm giving 5% of my income to the Against Malaria Foundation this year, to hopefully protect c.600 people against Malaria. ■