

Why Are Americans So Generous?

By Mal Warwick

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All too often, we fundraisers focus on techniques and procedures. Sometimes, we lose sight of the fact that all our success—indeed, our very existence—is grounded in the willingness of donors to give.

In fact, we have to look far afield to find answers to those questions that are fundamental to our profession: Why are there so many donors? Why are donors so generous? And why do Americans appear to be especially generous? In our search for understanding donor motivation, we'll need to delve into the realms of religion, psychology, marketing history, and culture. Let's venture first of all into the realm of religion.

Every one of the world's great religious traditions teaches us about the oneness of life on earth . . . the interconnectedness of things . . . the true path to fulfillment . . . the ways of virtue.

In every faith tradition, we learn that the key to our salvation lies not solely within ourselves, but in the character of our relationships with the world around us.

In Buddhism, generosity is one of the “seven treasures” toward which man must aspire.

Generosity is one of the basic tenets of the Hindu faith, a virtue that helps define the path of dharma, the way of loving service.

Christianity teaches us the virtue of charity. Christians believe that your gift will return to you in full and overflowing measure.

Jews are raised to perform “mitzvahs” or good deeds . . . to practice “tzedakah,” charity . . . to do all in their power to heal the ills of the earth.

The Qur'an instructs man to be generous. In Islam, generosity is to love helping others, sharing with those who are in need—a sign of human perfection.

And so it is that each of the great religions, each in its own unique way, encourages philanthropy, the love of humankind.

Still, there are those among us who would explain human motivation in much baser terms. To descend from the sublime to the profane, we might take a quick look at the motives of humankind as viewed through the lens of an advertising copywriter.

Fear. Exclusivity. Guilt. Anger. Greed. In the advertiser's creed, these base emotions are the keys to success. Hundreds of billions of dollars of goods and services have been sold by triggering one or another of these feelings.

The hucksters among us would thus have us believe that these are the true reasons we might also respond to appeals for funds. If you believe this, then surely you are just as naïve as anyone who would explain human behavior strictly in terms of religion and the spirit.

In truth, human motivation is profoundly complex. When I sat down some years ago to compile an extensive list of the factors that might explain why people respond to charitable appeals, I came up with 24 reasons (included in the second edition of my book, *How to Write Successful Fundraising Letters*).

1. Because you ask them to.
2. Because they have money available to give away.
3. Because they're in the habit of giving away money.
4. Because they support organizations like yours.
5. Because their gifts will make a difference.
6. Because gifts will accomplish something right now.
7. Because you recognize them for their gifts.
8. Because you give them something tangible in return.
9. Because you enable them to "do something" about a critical problem—if only to protest or take a stand.
10. Because you give them a chance to associate with a famous or worthy person.
11. Because you allow them to get back at the corrupt or the unjust.
12. Because you give them the opportunity to "belong"—as a member, friend, or supporter—and thus you help them fight loneliness.
13. Because you enable them to offer their opinions.
14. Because you provide them with access to inside information.
15. Because you help them learn about a complex and interesting problem or issue.
16. Because you help them preserve their worldview, by validating cherished values and beliefs.
17. Because you allow them to gain personal connections with other individuals who are passionately involved in some meaningful dimension of life.
18. Because you give them the chance to release emotional tension caused by a life-threatening situation, a critical emergency, or an ethical dilemma.
19. Because they are afraid.
20. Because you allow them to relieve their guilt about an ethical, political, or personal transgression, whether real or imagined.
21. Because you give them tax benefits.
22. Because they feel it's their duty.
23. Because they believe it's a blessing to do so.
24. Because they want to "give something back."

Long as it is, this list is far from complete, since any individual's motivation for giving a particular gift may be influenced by countless factors. Yet a list this long begs the questions we started with.

Why are there so many donors? And why are donors so generous?

The work of the pioneering psychologist, Abraham Maslow, helps to cast light on these matters. Maslow wrote about the hierarchy of human needs, describing our emotional development through life as following an upward progression from the most basic to the most refined.

At the base of Maslow's hierarchy lie our *physiological* needs—for food, sex, and shelter. Next up the ladder is our need for *safety*. Then comes *belonging*, which is only possible if our more basic needs have first been met. Esteem lies higher on the ladder. The final stage in our emotional development is the need for *self-actualization*, that state of fulfillment at which we truly encompass our interdependence with the world around us.

As you can see, charitable giving isn't likely at any of the most basic levels of Maslow's hierarchy, which are concerned with the needs of the self. Giving can be—and sometimes is—one way in which we display our craving for esteem. But true philanthropy, the love of humankind, becomes habitual only once we have achieved emotional maturity.

However, if that's the case, the United States must be blessed with an extraordinarily high proportion of emotionally mature adults. Because, in any given year, more than three out of every four Americans contributes to charity.

Why?

We can start with the recognition that the USA is the wealthiest nation on earth. A huge proportion of our population has long since satisfied its survival needs. But there are other nations with far lower concentration of wealth and an even greater proportion of their citizens struggling at the bottom of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Clearly, this is not a satisfactory explanation.

Claire Gaudiani, in her insightful book, *The Greater Good*, explains that generosity is deeply embedded in our history and our culture:

“Most people think Americans are generous because we are rich. However, the truth is that we are rich, in significant part, because we are generous. Generosity is not a luxury in this country. It is a cultural norm.”

In fact, from the earliest days of European settlement in America, the tradition of philanthropy became well established. Benjamin Franklin, in many ways the greatest of our Founding Fathers, exemplified this spirit and helped inject the habit of giving into the American character.

Throughout our history, a whole series of cultural and historical factors have contributed to the growth of the nonprofit sector in the USA and of the philanthropic spirit that sustains it:

- Our do-it-yourself, frontier mentality
- Our emphasis on community self-reliance

- Our deep distrust of government
- The widespread acceptance of religion in America
- Our consistent rejection of socialism and social democracy
- Our tax structure, which favors givers and giving

Every one of these factors helps explain why so many Americans contribute generously to charity. Our do-it-yourself culture and an abiding belief in community self-reliance help account for the continuing growth of our nonprofit sector, now reportedly encompassing 1.6 million tax-exempt organizations and nearly a tenth of our economy. Our distrust of government, and our collective rejection of socialism and social democracy, lead Americans to accept much lower levels of social service from government agencies and a belief that the nonprofit sector can fill the gap. Our church-going nature reinforces our charitable impulses, as studies of givers and giving repeatedly confirm that those who are observant of religious traditions and rituals tend to be the most generous donors. And our tax structure favors individual giving and the creation of philanthropic foundations to an extent that may not be seen anywhere else in the world.

In the final analysis, anyone and everyone in the USA can be a donor—and probably is. But, even after our journey through the realms of religion, psychology, marketing, history, and culture, are we any closer to understanding why so many people are donors, and why they're so generous?

Probably not.