

To Give or Not to Give – Anonymously, That Is...

03.27.18 | Linda J. Rosenthal, JD



An age-old question in philanthropy is whether to give publicly – with thanks and, perhaps, fanfare – or to make an anonymous donation. For the wealthy person with millions to give or for an average person who can spare only small amounts, it's a dilemma with no right or wrong answer.

Recalling the wisdom of that famous 19th-century Jewish philosopher, Tevye (*Fiddler on the Roof*): “On the one hand, there's ..., but on the other hand, maybe”

Generally, there are valid, defensible reasons for a choice either way and it's not uncommon for a person to decide to make one or more contributions anonymously while openly announcing or acknowledging several other charitable gifts.

What goes into a donor's decision on any particular occasion? Fundraising and other philanthropy experts report that they have asked donors about their thoughts on this subject. There are certain common responses that are mentioned over and over again.

Why Donors Give Publicly

Far more donations are made out in the open than in secret. For many charity supporters, it has never occurred to them to do it any other way. Some are entirely unaware that other generous people intentionally choose to keep quiet about their charitable activities.

Recognition

People feel good about the act of giving. Most also appreciate the recognition; that's just human nature. There's more to it, though: If it feels good to donate once – and perhaps be thanked publicly – it will feel just as good the second or third time. From a community's standpoint, that's behavior that should be encouraged.

Charitable-giving campaigns also create opportunities for donors to enhance their community reputations and improve their chances for future roles of leadership and influence. The charities and their beneficiaries win; the donors also win. That's a good result.

Credibility and Inspiration

An important "... by-product of organized public philanthropy" is that the donor's activities may inspire others to be more involved in community and volunteer activities" and to speak up in support of important causes.

Charities and causes – especially newer ones – need all the public exposure they can get.

If a donor is well-known and highly regarded, that person's widely publicized gift may be a critical endorsement needed to push a fundraising campaign over the top. "When a famous person makes a contribution, their neighbors and friends, their peers, decide to help out also." The effect is even greater when the celebrity offers a matching-grant challenge.

Sometimes, charities have used this ripple-effect argument to persuade shy donor prospects to change their minds about giving anonymously and to agree to donate publicly.

Why Donors Give Anonymously

"While giving anonymously is less common than giving publicly, the rationale for it can be equally compelling."

From time to time, researchers conduct studies or surveys to discover why certain donors choose to give secretly or – at least – not to reveal their names in public. One survey in 1991 of over 500 senior development professionals shows fairly typical patterns that fundraisers see over time; these results hold up to the present day.

Some donors want the focus of their generosity to be on the charitable institutions or worthy causes *instead* of on themselves; others avoid the limelight in any and all situations. Sometimes, donors want to support organizations that are doing important work but the cause may be viewed as controversial or partisan by neighbors and colleagues. And there are, of course, any number of one-off, unique responses like: "I have my own reasons for wanting to be anonymous."

The two most frequently cited reasons for staying under the radar are: (a) strongly held religious beliefs or personal values; and (b) the worry of being hounded by fundraisers for other causes.

The more popular response – by a huge margin – is *not* what most people might guess; that is, the "values" motive. Only about 5% of respondents gave that answer. The top-cited reason for anonymous giving – in a landslide – "is to avoid getting badgered by fundraising requests."

The Dreaded Donor-Prospect Lists

Just over 50% of donors favoring anonymity report they do it "to minimize solicitations from other organizations." They fear opening the door to a deluge of donation-seekers. They want to "lower [their] wealth profile" generally, shielding themselves not only from worthy charitable organizations, but also from family, friends, old high-school classmates, and everyone else who ever knew them

and now want to hit them up for money. There is also a legitimate fear for personal safety; kidnappings and extortion threats, for instance.

In the case of celebrities, there are additional concerns. A Hollywood agent revealed to a *Los Angeles Times* reporter years ago (doing a story on anonymous giving) that many of his high-profile clients make major gifts anonymously for fear of having their motives questioned. “They want to do it (give anonymously) because they want to do it,” the agent said. “They are afraid that people might misinterpret their giving as a publicity device. They want to have the satisfaction of not having their charity negated.”

That reporter wrote about another common problem for celebrity donors; whatever the *amount* they donate, however generous, there are gripes it isn’t enough: “Well, he earns *that* in an hour.”

Faith and Personal Beliefs

Many people – (though not as many, apparently, as is commonly thought) – make private donations because of strongly held religious convictions or personal beliefs. “It fits with [the donor’s] beliefs. Whether it’s due to ... religion or personal values, [these donors] simply believe that it is better to give anonymously.”

“Jesus’ Apostle Matthew in the Bible and Maimonides, a 12th-Century Jewish rabbi and philosopher, exhort both Christians and Jews to maintain the dignity of the poor, especially by remaining anonymous.” According to *Matthew (6:3)*, “[w]hen thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth.” In *Acts 20:35*, the believer is told that “[i]t is more blessed to give than to receive.”

Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon (aka Maimonides), one of the leading scholars in all of Jewish history, had quite a bit to say on the matter of charity for the poor and, in particular, about the virtues of giving anonymously. “When philanthropists talk about the spiritual aspects of giving anonymously, they often cite the 12th-century Jewish wise man Maimonides.” The sage ranked anonymous giving as the second-highest level of charity. He emphasized that a rich donor “shouldn’t feel superior for giving and the poor person shouldn’t feel inferior.”

His *magnum opus* is the *Mishneh Torah*, the 14-volume codification of all existing Jewish law to that date. The 7th volume includes a large subpart titled *Gifts to the Poor*. Beginning with the well-known law of Leviticus 23:22 (on leaving a portion of grain in the field for the poor), Maimonides works his way through an astonishing set of mandates for helping the poor as well as “the stranger” and even the “illegal alien.”

At Chapter 10:7-14, Maimonides describes his now-famous “8-rung ladder of charitable giving.” The worthiest deeds are included at the top (eighth) rung; the unworthiest deeds are placed on the first rung. “Anonymous giving” is described and extolled at the seventh rung – where neither side knows the identity of the other – and at the sixth rung – where the donor knows the identity of the beneficiary, but not the other way around.

In case you’re wondering, rung eight includes giving meaningful and long-term assistance to a needy person; for instance, providing a job. “According to Maimonides,” explains a former executive vice president of the Jewish Federation Council of Los Angeles, “the highest level is that in which the gift

makes self-sufficiency possible for the recipient – you can give a fish but it’s better to give a fish pole.”

The least laudable types of charitable giving are at and near the bottom: Rung 2 on the ladder is giving the needy person “less than one should but with kindness”; rung 1 is giving “begrudgingly.”

By the way, nowhere in Maimonides’s *Gifts to the Poor* is there anything like: “Unveil a gilded plaque on a building you name for the wealthy man” or “Throw a fancy gala in the wealthy man’s honor at a posh downtown hotel.”

Conclusion

Courtesy of [Bridgespan's helpful advice](#) on the pros and cons of public vs. anonymous giving – (a source we’ve cited liberally throughout this post) – there is yet another tidbit of relevant philosophical thought; this time, from the 21st century.

In an [episode of *Curb Your Enthusiasm*](#), Larry David attends a gala “where he is being celebrated for donating a museum wing. There, he finds out his arch nemesis, Ted Danson, has also donated a museum wing,” but Ted’s gift is marked as “anonymous.” The attendees, including Larry’s own wife, heap “praise on Ted for donating anonymously.” Larry is “furious” [and] exclaims, ‘No one told me I could be anonymous and tell people!’ As Larry discovered too late, [giving publicly or anonymously](#) isn’t black or white.”

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