

# Nonprofit Advertising and Persuasive Messages

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**Abstract** Nonprofit organizations (NPOs) that cannot rely on public (i.e. government) funds are dependent on donations and volunteers to remain operational. Most rely on persuasive messages to inform, educate, and convince message recipients to donate. However, the effectiveness of these efforts to affect philanthropy, gift-giving, and fundraising is a gap in the cause marketing literature (Dunn et al. 2007).

Because researchers and practitioners need to understand the various underlying processes in order to develop campaigns and programs that translate into long-term behavioral changes (Smith et al. 1994), two studies were conducted to determine what messages resonate with potential donors. First a qualitative review and content analysis of existing NPO ads determined two key components: (1) most commonly used format; and (2) most commonly used phrasing of messages asking for contributions. The second study relied on the results of Study 1 to develop nonprofit ads that implemented, and manipulated, the messages identified to determine if some are more effective than others.

A total of 125 ads from a variety of nonprofit organizations were sampled, and their content analyzed for length, use of imagery, use of text, music, spokespeople, voice over, and appeal messages related to donating. It was discovered that most NPO ads (70.4 %) do not include contribution requests, but when they did, a variety of messages were used. The phraseology that appeared more often was a temporal framing “for less than *X amount over X time period*,” which has been leveraged by nonprofit organizations making donation requests in this analysis 54.1 % of the time. Specifically, the phrase “for less than a dollar a day” was used in 13.5 % of the donation messages.

As Study 1 found no one dominant format, a combination of still image photography and text on the screen accompanied by music was used in Study 2 because pictorial display is often used in nonprofit advertising to create effects of vividness (Barnett and Hammond 1999; Isen and Noonberg 1979; Perrine and Heather 2000; Thornton et al. 1991). A key step in developing effective messages is comparing the desired message with a no-message control or alternative messages (Rucker and Petty 2006). Therefore, Study 2 evaluated normative and minimal giving messages in this way.

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Data were collected online ( $n=235$ ) and analyzed using a one-way ANOVA, finding a significant difference ( $F(1, 80)=5.168, p=.026$ ) between high ( $M=4.40$ ) and low ( $M=3.68$ ) injunctive normative messages, but no significance between high and low descriptive norms ( $p=.740$ ). Analysis also showed significance ( $F(1,51)=6.211, p=.016$ ) between the “even a penny” minimal giving message ( $M=2.13$ ) and a control group ( $M=3.26$ ), as well as “even a dollar” ( $F(1, 57), p=.020, M=2.28$ ) and the control group ( $M=3.33$ ). There was no significance ( $p=.167$ ) between “for less than a dollar a day” and the control group, meaning the message NPOs use most does not appear to resonate with audiences. Research shows if behavioral influence techniques are overused, consumers may turn against entities that use them (Mowen and Minor 2006). Also interesting is that “even a dollar” was significant, as it was not in the initial research (Cialdini and Schroeder 1976). The time between studies is a potential cause as today’s audiences may view a dollar as a minimum donation.

**Keywords** NPO • Nonprofit Advertising • Persuasive Messages • Nonprofit Promotion

## References

References Available Upon Request