How to Thank a Donor - A Qualitative Investigation of Thank-You Letters

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Introduction

Thank you letters can be the first step toward turning a one-time donor into a recurrent one. Thank you letters are a way of building relationships (Algoe 2020). They motivate positive behavior (Grant & Gino 2010) and communicate a positive outcome, giving credit (feedback) to the benefactor (Chaudhry & Loewenstein 2019).

However, there are many ways to say thank you and literature focusing specifically on different manners of thanking donors is rather limited. Different ways of expressing gratitude are bound to affect receivers differently. It is important to first understand how organizations thank donors to then think about how they might be affecting them.

How do charitable organizations express gratitude in Austria?

The goal of the analysis is to identify common themes in how non-profits thank donors. These themes are then mapped into the framework from Bekkers and Wiepking (2011) - exploring whether thank you letters address donors’ motivations to donate and how they could affect donors.

What we find is that many of the themes used in thank-you letters fit the framework perfectly (e.g. giving information fits to need recognition). However, there is more to it. We plan on extending the framework and connecting our findings from the letters with other psychological theories (e.g. psychological ownership).

Need recognition

- Organizations have different ways of trying to make the need recognition salient for donors. It is important to keep in mind that donors already have a certain awareness of the need, after all, they already donated before. The transmission of information is usually done in two more salient ways that vary in regard to the construal level. Some organizations use stories from beneficiaries to make the need very concrete and identifiable, others use rather statistical information, giving a general picture of the problem (Jenni and Loewenstein 1997).

Solicitation

- Not many organizations will solicit help directly in a thank you letter, especially the first letter after the donation. However, there are organizations that might ask donors to support in a different way, either through answering a few questions or keeping in touch.

Costs and Benefits

- In a thank you letter, mostly one would expect to hear about benefits that donors might get. Famously, organizations send small gifts as thank you to donors. Interestingly, some organizations have a very cost-centred language in their communication (e.g. “Thank you for your financial support”).

Reputation

- By definition a thank you letter gives donors recognition for their donations. More specifically it is possible to see different ways in which organizations try to praise donors (e.g. adding exaggerated adjectives, adding messages directly from affected people, reinforcing their specialness with phrases like “because of people like you” and more).

Psychological Benefits

- Several emerging themes relate to psychological benefits. Many were not involved in the initial framework, but can be related to the theory of donation motivations. Some examples are belonging/finding connection (e.g. “we are all in this together”, “our community”), ownership (e.g. “every smile is now also yours”), deservingsness, pride and more.

Efficacy

- This is one of the most common approaches to thanking donors - alluding to the impact they made. This, however, can be done in many ways. By having direct messages from specific beneficiaries, impact becomes more salient (Jenni and Loewenstein 1997), storytelling is also used to reduce the distance between benefactor/beneficiary and increase feelings of impact. One very interesting factor regarding efficacy is to which actor it is attributed. Often phrases it is to the donor or the donation (e.g. “you are enabling...”, “your support is directly helping...”) however, many times it is to the organization (e.g. “with your support ABC will continue to respond to...”).

Altruism & Values

- These are concepts that are harder to involve in a letter. To a certain extent giving the idea of belonging to a group is also associating donors with values of the specific group.

If you are interested in this research, follow the QR code to download the poster and stay in touch.