

Donors running out of puff?

Donor fatigue. It's a term you hear bandied about but what is it and does it really exist? F&P asked some leading fundraisers to share their inner-most thoughts on the subject.



An Excuse for Poor Technique

Sarah Lawson is the National Donor Relations Manager at the Heart Foundation

When I started writing this piece I sought an 'official' definition of donor fatigue and turned to trusty Google. This is what I found.

Donor Fatigue: A state in which donors no longer contribute to a cause because they have become tired of receiving appeals for donations.

It got me thinking two things. Firstly does it really matter if some donors stop giving to you? Secondly maybe our poor donors are just sick of receiving bad appeals.

I had a look at the number of donors that have given to us in the last 12 months. They're decreasing slightly. From the definition above this would indicate that our donors are apparently fatigued.

But are they really? Most fundraisers believe that every charity experiences a level of natural attrition and we stem this by recruiting more each year. Well what happens when you change your recruitment strategy? Over the past three years we've been focused on acquiring new regular givers and not single-gift cash donors.

So in reality the attrition rate of cash donors is no worse than it has been for years and the decrease in numbers simply reflects a change in strategy and not donor fatigue.

But does any of this even matter?

Most boards measure fundraising success by income raised. Over the past four years our non-bequest net income has increased by 59%. The average gift has increased, with 41% of our active donors increasing their giving level.

Looking at these figures any thoughts of donor fatigue fly out the window.

My second thought was maybe donors stop giving because we're communicating with them poorly.

I don't believe people get tired of donating to a cause that they're a) passionate about; and b) can see the impact their gifts are making.

But there are charities who ask for money in ways that aren't compelling. And there are charities that fail to tell donors the good work their gifts are doing. If I was a donor giving to these charities I would become 'fatigued' as well and stop giving.

So charities who think donor fatigue exists and blame it for a failing program are pointing their fingers in the wrong direction. If you're building sustainable income streams, fewer donors giving doesn't always result in less income.

And finally, if you're no longer showing donors that your charity can make a real difference in the world, then who can blame them for stopping their giving?



Mutiny on the Bounty

Kathy John is the Managing Director of Robe John

Here in Australia we have a positive and buoyant climate for giving - a strong economy, low unemployment, and long-term stability. We're on a safe ship and we're experienced sailors, watching out for reefs, pirates and other threats.

Australia is a great country to live in and give in, so why then are some causes failing to engage their donors in long-term relationships?

If donors are 'fatigued' you would expect to see a decline in giving, however evidence, in the form of national research initiatives in recent years (e.g. Giving Australia Report, 2005) suggests the opposite.

Over many years I've been measuring and predicting donor performance and growth factors for major nonprofits. In the past financial year we measured strong increases in average gifts and annual cumulative giving by donors across the spectrum of donor levels, i.e. single-gift donors, recurring gift donors, and major gift donors.

Strong growth was achieved in all database analysis groups, well in excess of previous years' performances. Acquisition programs are also attracting a higher first-time value giver, which augers well for lifetime value.

However, donors are disengaging at the 18-24 month period after their first gift.

I believe our donors are committed to giving, but they're not staying on board for the long journey.

Which raises questions - why are many good causes failing to realize the full potential of their committed donors? Is there a lack of interest in building high-level giving through long-term donor relationships and a desperate scurry to lock-in donors to 'safe' mid-level recurring gift programs?

Fatigued Fundraisers

Stretched and burnt-out by unrealistic expectations, limited resources and little recognition for results, today's fundraising professionals are fatigued. In a growth market their skills and expertise are in high demand.

Tempted to jump ship, many do, worn down by the rigours of non-profit life. Consequently, the potential to realise lasting donor commitments is often lost; broken relationships, broken communication strategies, lack of continuity etc.

Donor relationships are critical; their potential can only be realized through well-managed, diligent fundraising by passionate experts.

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A good charity needs to be led and staffed by people who have deep knowledge and experience on the fundraising seas. We need professionals who understand mission, values, and brand, and can predict the needs and wants of donors and identify opportunities to build long-term, high-level donor commitments.

Let's stop the mutiny and keep our donors giving!

Direct Donor Dialogue

Jo-Anne Reeves is the Funding Development Manager and **James Nevein** is the i-access Capital Campaign Manager at Vision Australia



In this information age we are bombarded with messages asking us to buy and also to give. More nonprofits are asking more people, more often, to give more.

But is there actually such a thing as donor fatigue?

There is no real evidence to suggest that donors who have a strong loyalty to an organisation, and who have been properly nurtured drop away due to fatigue. In fact Sargeant and Jay (2004) in Building Donor Loyalty suggest that "although nonprofits may be able to do little to facilitate the retention of donors who genuinely experience a change in their financial circumstances, they can do much to deal with many

of the other common causes of lapse."

Having said that, is the term "donor fatigue" an excuse used by organisations that have not fully engaged their supporters?

Poor customer service in the retail industry means consumers go elsewhere. It is likewise in the charity sector. If we make it hard to give, don't reply promptly, don't thank and don't invest in building donor relationships, then someone else will.

Maybe some donors are growing tired – not of our causes but the way in which we ask, and in turn, thank them. They are asking for more accountability about how we spend their donation. They want RESPECT.

A good way to keep donors engaged is through dialogue. Everyone wants to give their opinion, so ask and value their feedback and make changes accordingly.


In the last 12 months at Vision Australia we have concentrated on getting to know our donors. We asked our lapsed donors why they no longer give and asked our long-term loyal donors about their expectations.

The lapsed survey group predominantly gave to at least five charities, purchased raffle or lottery tickets, gave via mail, and 1 in 5 supported through telephone donations.

Their main reasons for ceasing support were:

- receipt of too many requests from charities (41%); and
- a change in economic circumstances (38%).

Interestingly our lapsed donors didn't think of themselves as no longer supporting us. So maybe their timeframe for giving is just different to ours?

Our real challenge for the future is to communicate effectively to meet our supporter expectations. With an economic downturn possibly around corner, it is imperative as never before that nonprofits invest in one-on-one nurturing as the lynch pin to fatigue prevention. 

Connecting with the wrong people?

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