

The Joy of Giving

By Larry Matthews

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Drawing by JOHN OVERMYER

Everybody seems to have his hand out at this time of year, but giving selectively can be truly rewarding.

- Ask fearlessly. Give generously. Leave guilt behind.

National Philanthropy Day has much to say to us as donors and volunteers. But there is also an important message for charities.



It's easy to be cynical about fundraising, especially at this time of the year. Christmas and the December 31 charitable tax donation deadline are just weeks away, and mailing houses are bracing for the annual deluge of seasonal mail.

Among the catalogues and offers will be appeals from thousands of Canada's 80,000-plus registered charitable organizations. What helps the bottom line for Canada Post may be profoundly wearying to its letter carriers, and likely to most of the people receiving the appeals.

It's not just the mail. Telephone calls, face-to-face meetings, door-to-door solicitations and charity events are all tools commonly used to ask people to support worthy causes.

And we do. In 2000, according to tax returns, 91 per cent of Canadians made financial or in-kind donations to charities and nonprofits, an increase of three per cent since 1997. The average annual donation was \$259, which is \$20 more than was indicated in 1997.

Yet even as we give, we all sometimes feel besieged. Faced with competing claims on our cash, we might be forgiven if we conclude that nothing matters more to a charity than our money.

Yet we would be wrong, by an enormous margin of error. Because behind every appeal from a legitimate charity is someone's vision for how the world can be better.

It may sound sappy, but the remarkable constant in our work with charities and other not-for-profit organizations is how many compassionate, visionary and committed people are attempting to do something valuable. The definitions of "good" and "better" vary as widely as Canada itself, but the common thread is the desire to improve peoples' lives and even the world itself.

Today is National Philanthropy Day. It was created to draw attention to the importance of charitable giving and volunteerism, and to highlight accountability and ethical standards for charities and fundraisers.

Yet that's only half the equation. As professionals who are often in the middle of the donor-charity relationship, we think there are important messages for both sides.



To those charged with raising funds, we say: "Ask!" -- fearlessly and unapologetically - as long as you rigidly adhere to four principles.

- First, tell the truth about your cause and the use of the money.
- Then, treat your donors as you would your friends. Learn about them, understand what they value about your organization, and make your case without coercion.
- Further, set high standards of accountability. Give people lots of reasons to be confident.
- Finally, respect each individual's right to say "No." Charitable giving thrives when people get the pleasure out of doing something good for others, because it is good, and because they want to do it. A grudging gift is a short-term gain at best.

To those who receive such appeals, we say "Give!" Again, some principles for personal giving can greatly reduce your frustration and enhance your satisfaction.

- First, set aside general scepticism. Be wise. Be diligent. Put some effort into getting whatever background you need. But avoid assuming that every appeal is a scam, that your gift will be wasted, or that the needs are not legitimate. Most of Canada's charities are worthy causes to their constituents. Most charities are doing what they claim to do.
- Second, be generous. Generosity is good for your mental health, and you get tremendous value for your money. Just think about what our communities would be like without the charitable and not-for-profit sector. Every aspect of our lives would be enormously diminished.
- Third, be selective. Focus your giving on needs that move your heart or stir your imagination. Follow your instincts about what's important, and give to causes who reflect your own vision and values.
- Finally, if you are being generous, and intentional in your giving, then refuse to feel guilty about not responding to every appeal. No one can.



in the news

Helping non-profits succeed.

Canada's charities deserve our support. We'd be impoverished as communities and as a nation without them. And charities will get more support, from happier donors, if the dreams of visionaries are matched with people who share the dreams and choose to help make them reality.

So go ahead, choose a trustworthy, visionary charity and give them a gift. Ask them for their annual report while you're at it - and read it!

That would be a fitting celebration for National Philanthropy Day, for everyone.

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